GUEST EDITORIAL

Transdisciplinarity and ubuntu ethics as principles for responsive, engaged, and student-centred African universities

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The idea that responsive, engaged, and student-centred African universities must aspire and contribute to the development of critical human capabilities and sustainable socio-economic development within their locales and beyond is reflective of a broader philosophy in higher education and student affairs that demands a more dynamic and transformative role of universities as critical social institutions in societies (Keet & Muthwa, 2021; Luescher et al., 2023). Examples of African universities that practise various kinds of community engagement as integral parts of their functioning illustrate the extent to which they can realize that aspiration and become inseparably connected to the emancipatory, decolonial and indigenization agenda of African higher education as a "powerful transformative force" (Goddard, 2018; Fongwa et al., 2022).

Across the wide range of its domains, student affairs in Africa has the potential to contribute to the broad transformative purpose of African universities by:

- collaborating with external, community-based partners (e.g. through community service and service learning, volunteering programmes, providing public information, academic advising and publicly accessible career centres, and partnering with local residents and businesses in the provision of residential and other services), and;
- developing students' transformative capabilities through co-curricular skills development training, extra-curricular offerings and support for student-run activities, and other interventions, to help them navigate a complex and interconnected campus, and world, with strong values and a well-rounded and adaptable, transferable skill set.

Addressing real-world challenges requires responsive universities that are principled in their engagement to effectively contribute solutions to multifaceted problems. In addition to the guiding principles of transformation,[3] we want to suggest here that a principled approach to engagement must involve *transdisciplinarity* and a consideration and commitment to a relevant *African ethic* and *philosophy of education* in their

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3 Key transformation principles elaborated in South African higher education policy include academic freedom and autonomy, accountability, democratisation, effectiveness and efficiency, equity, development, and quality (cf. Luescher et al., 2023).

research, teaching and learning, community engagement and impact beyond the university.

Knowledge(s) of transformation and transdisciplinarity

Transformation requires a diversity of relevant knowledges; knowledges of transformation and for transformation (Lange, 2014). By embracing transdisciplinarity, African universities acknowledge the importance and validity of multiple relevant knowledges. This includes Africa's many knowledge libraries (Zeleza, 2021), that go beyond codified academic and professional knowledge, on transformation in the university, the local environment and multiple communities, and broader society. Knowledge relevant for transformation within and outside the university does not only reside among disciplinary experts and professionals but also with non-academic stakeholders (e.g. community members, community-based and non-governmental organisations, local craftspersons and businesses, policymakers, local authorities and government). To address real-world problems, a holistic understanding is required that incorporates global and local, universal and particular, abstract and grounded knowledges and perspectives.

An ethical approach to engagement between academic and non-academic communities is another dimension of a principled approach. Responsive and engaged African universities can play a vital role in addressing the pressing issues of our time, from economic, social, and political problems of poverty and inequality, weak governance and political instability, conflict and human rights violations, healthcare challenges, migration and displacement, to climate change and environment-friendly transitions. For instance, student affairs professionals in the Global South in general, and Africa in particular, are leading in conceptualising and integrating a student affairs response to the Sustainable Development Goals (Schreiber et al., 2023). Yet, in order to have the moral standing to be invited to conversations seeking to address such issues, and be seen as legitimate actors to even create and facilitate platforms for such conversations, explicit commitments to shared rules of engagement must be made and adhered to, and humility and reverence between members of different (knowledge-) communities must be maintained and reciprocated.

Ubuntu ethics and an African philosophy of education

The recognition and incorporation of an African philosophy of education (Waghid, 2004), particularly centred on communalism and humanism, is part of an emerging ethical approach to education and engagement in Africa. In the South African, and increasingly also in the broader African context, the philosophy of ubuntu is fast gaining traction as a touchstone of a relevant indigenous African ethics (Ramose, 2021; Chemhuru, 2016; Higgs, 2011). Respect, responsiveness and relational engagement are qualities that are fundamental to ubuntu ethics, which emphasise the interconnectedness of all human beings within the human community, as implied in the assertion that *umntu ngumntu ngabantu* – 'a person is a person through people'. Ubuntu fundamentally involves an ethic that one's humanity is inextricably bound to the humanity and well-being of others, thus promoting a sense of shared responsibility and cooperation. It also translates into a holistic understanding of education that goes beyond individual achievement.

The call for responsive and engaged African universities thus coincides with a shift towards an ubuntu ethics as African philosophy of education and reflects a growing awareness of the importance of culturally-relevant and context-specific relational approaches to learning. By centering education on communal values and relational humanism, African higher education institutions seek to become more rooted within the cultural values operative in African communities. This also resonates with the call that higher education in 21st-century Africa must break with inherited colonial Eurocentric knowledge structures and organisation, decolonise its knowledge libraries, institutional cultures, and ways of operating, and re-orientate itself boldly towards the cultural, socio-political and economic realities and aspirations of Africa, and particularly African youth and students.

The meanings of student-centredness

Student-centredness offers a third principle in the re-orientation of the core functions of African universities towards becoming responsive and engaged – with particular respect to curricular and co-curricular teaching, learning and skills development, community engagement, and the holistic development and concern for the well-being and education of all students. While student-centredness has some grounding in education models (Blackie et al., 2010), the concept is not deeply conceptualised in African universities even though it is increasingly used in planning and policy documents (Xulu-Gama et al., 2018). Its evocation in relation to student affairs and services internationally also remains rather shallow to date and rarely goes beyond assertions that student affairs should be tailored to "meet the personal needs, demands, and expectations of an increasingly diverse and complex student population" (Rubly, 2017, p. 4).

Referencing Amartya Sen's work (1999), we argue here that student-centredness is fundamentally about realizing student freedoms. Student-centred higher education and student affairs must focus attention on developing the navigational capacities and capabilities that students value and will need to successfully navigate personal transitions and life stages, their transitions into the world of work and development of sustainable livelihoods, and their emerging place as critically constructive and active community members and citizens.

At the 2021 Universities South Africa (USAf) conference (2021, p. 73), Luthando Jack argued that

> *student-centredness cannot be insulated from the role of higher education in a society like South Africa, a continent like Africa, and a world so unequal. [It] cannot be divorced from the purposes of higher education, particularly in a changing society.*

Furthermore, students today came from very diverse backgrounds, and "universities' systems, processes and orientation were not in sync with today's student". Student-centredness rather is about knowing the students, "partnership between students and the university"; "co-learning and the recognition of cultural assets", including students' "aspirational, social, familial and navigational capitals"; and "instead of disorientation, there ought to be continuity between the lives students live with their families and communities, and their lives in the university" (Jack in USAf 2021, p. 73)

Luthando Jack's argument has wide-ranging implications for universities and student affairs in Africa, for the role of higher education in society, its orientation and organisation, and institutional cultures, and even the way universities are run. For instance, the proposition that student-centredness involves a partnership between students with their university asserts students' right to participate in decision-making and co-determine the learning processes, relationships, and living arrangements that affect them; they must be part of co-creating new structures, processes, and practices that affect their learning (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Ashwin & Mcvitty, 2015).

Thus, student-centredness has implications for the conception of what constitutes learning environments and what are appropriate methods of teaching and learning; the place of students in decisions about the university and about their living and learning; and the recognition of diversity, the need for equity, and support for different ablenesses in the student body (Holtzhausen & Wahl, 2022). It will have implications for the manner and kinds of programmes, interventions, and services offered by student affairs and services (Rubly, 2017); and it will require reorientation in the way student affairs and academic development staff are developed (Blackie et al., 2010).

The acknowledgement and embrace of an African philosophy of education, particularly centred on communalism and humanism (ubuntu), signals a positive shift towards a more culturally relevant and socially conscious approach to higher education in Africa. This transformation has the potential to shape the future of education on the continent, fostering a sense of community, interconnectedness, and shared responsibility among students, educators, and communities. It is therefore not unexpected that responsiveness through community engagement is regarded as fundamental for the transformation and decolonisation of higher education. Some scholars (Mugabi, 2014; Raditloaneng 2013; Saidi 2023) even propose that the notion of community engagement as a 'third mission' of universities needs to be revisited in the context of Africa as the main priority or mission. Understanding how these complex demands involved in notions of engagement and student-centredness interact with the leadership and management of universities, student affairs, and student development and success is yet another crucial conversation to be had in higher education and student affairs in Africa.

We suggest here that the notion of responsive, engaged and student-centred African universities creates the opportunity for re-orientating transformation and decolonisation initiatives towards student-needs and community-needs, and thus adopting and adapting relevant interventions and experiences. This conversation is crucial for advancing higher education in Africa and preparing students for the challenges of the 21st century.

Towards responsive, engaged and student-centred African universities

This guest-edited issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA) originates in conversations during the build-up to the National Higher Education Conference entitled 'The Engaged University', which was organised by USAf in partnership with the South African Council on Higher Education and held from 6 to 8 October 2021 (USAf, 2022). The special JSAA issue was originally proposed jointly by Dr Bernadette Johnson (USAf and University of the Witwatersrand) and Dr Amani Saidi (Council on Higher Education).

Eventually, support for the special issue moved under the auspices of USAf and its Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) programme, and to the responsibility of Dr Oliver Seale, Prof. André Keet, and Dr Johnson, who asked Prof. Thierry Luescher and Dr Somarie Holtzhausen to act as guest editors of the issue.

In response to the JSAA call for papers published in 2022, almost 20 abstract proposals were received. After a ten-month process of drafting, two rounds of editorial vetting and commenting, revisions, a double-blind peer review process, and a final set of revisions, this special issue publishes eight articles directly submitted for the special issue as well as an on-campus report about HELM's Student Affairs and Student Success programme. As always, these articles are augmented by others from the open submission process and scholarly contributions, including two book reviews and two editorials.

The original call for papers invited articles to focus on theory development and practice-relevant knowledge of student affairs in Africa in relation to a diversity of issues: student-centredness and student-centred environments and practices; community engagement, volunteering and community-orientated student groups; student engagement; student associations and student affairs practices promoting care; student health and well-being; care for first-year students; ubuntu philosophy or capability; and student transitions and graduate support. In an astounding way, most of these topics are reflected in this issue's articles and in a way that we are sure will generate much thinking, debate and further research in the sector.

Ubuntu in the practices of African graduates and students

A strong theme in this issue's articles relates to learning relationships among students, relationships between graduates and wider society, and the conception of these relations in terms of ubuntu. With the article '"Giving back is typical African culture": Narratives of giveback from young African graduates', the research team led by Alude Mahali-Bhengu at the Human Sciences Research Council makes a critical intervention in our understanding of African graduates' social consciousness and the kinds of interventions that foster commitments to transformative leadership, community engagement, and giving back to society even after students have left university. Drawing on a wide dataset from across several African countries, they show how African graduates' practices of giving back to family, community, and society, change over time, and how their conceptions of give-back are evidence of a strong sense of ubuntu.

Mikateko Mathebula and Carmen Martinez-Vargas place ubuntu front and centre in their conception of a capabilities-based framework for assessing the performance of higher education in terms of supporting student well-being. Analysing data from two longitudinal research projects with undergraduate students in South African universities, they infer that ubuntu underpins the ways students tend to relate to each other – as interdependent partners of a learning community – while at university. Considering the deeply relational ways of being of African students at university, Mathebula and Martinez-Vargas advocate for embracing an African indigenous worldview and the creation of conditions for students to be able to achieve the capability of ubuntu.

The articles by Mahali et al. and Mathebula and Martinez-Vargas strongly relate to each other: the former shows the results of deliberately fostering an ethic of give-back and transformative leadership among students and the latter, articulating ubuntu as capability, illustrates how students ways of relating on a daily basis already evidence an ubuntu ethic. These two articles are followed by a third in which an ubuntu ethic is evident. Dumile Gumede and Maureen Sibiya analyse the self-care practices of first-year students in managing stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic. They use digital storytelling as data collection method. Their findings show that first-year students engaged in a range of self-care practices across all the six domains of self-care whereby relational self-care was the most fundamental domain that underpinned first-year students' well-being. They therefore recommend a student affairs self-care programme design to prevent harm and support adequate self-care which should include social involvement and relational engagement as fundamental principles.

Technology and support for enhanced student engagement and success
Following the special COVID-19 issue of JSAA in 2021, the experience of the pandemic continues to inspire research that gives new insights into students' adaptation and resilience to fast changes in the culture of teaching and learning and the place of technologically enhanced teaching and learning in African universities. Sonja Loots, Francois Strydom and Hanlé Posthumus have analysed a large set of qualitative data from the South African Survey of Student Engagement collected during the pandemic. They explore factors that support student learning and development and how these factors may be translated to enhance student engagement in blended learning spaces. Loots and her colleagues find that relational engagement (between students and their peers, students and lecturers, students and support staff and administrative staff, and even students and the learning content) is central to the student learning experience. Learning technologies may enhance relational engagement if these platforms are used to create blended learning environments that support learning and development.

Extended curriculum programmes (ECP) predate the pandemic and its ramifications on students' lives. Such programmes were developed to provide promising, yet underprepared students with the necessary foundations to achieve success in higher education. The question of how students in extended curriculum programmes can be better supported continues to concern student affairs practitioners like Lamese Chetty and Brigitta Kepkey. Their article explores students' interest in, awareness and utilisation of support services offered as part of an extended curriculum programme in health sciences. Their analysis of survey and qualitative responses of the first-year students showed that students were not as well informed as they should be, and that they accessed support services related to administrative, academic, and psychological/ emotional or support needs much more frequently than those services related to other health needs or security services. It also showed that there remained a stigma around access to and use of certain support services.

The article by Rishen Roopchund and Naadhira Seedat illustrates how a voluntary student organisation can promote student well-being and engagement, student-

centredness and student development. Their study focuses on a department-based chemical engineering student association and its relationships with departmental staff members and other university departments (such as community engagement) in organising a range of student development and community engagement activities. The authors propose an action plan for the association's future improvement and growth, which can serve as a template for other initiatives of this nature.

Equipping students for successful transitions into livelihoods

The article by Taurai Hungwe and colleagues, 'Diaries of establishing an entrepreneurship incubator at a health sciences university', recounts a range of challenges and experiences they documented in the process of establishing an entrepreneurship incubator to support student entrepreneurial development at a health sciences university in South Africa. They describe and critically reflect on matters such as the funding, staffing, planning and operation of the incubation centre during its inception and building phase, and they consider the critical milestones they have reached and offer recommendations to others interested in embarking on such a journey.

Entrepreneurship skills are often mentioned as increasingly important for students to navigate the current complex world of work and develop sustainable livelihoods. Nowhere is this more evident than in the article by Andrea Juan and her research colleagues. 'Graduate transitions in Africa: Understanding strategies of livelihood generation for universities to better support students' shows that the notion of a straightforward transition from university into full-time employment is not the typical experience of African university graduates. Indeed, Juan and her colleagues found that such a path is accessible to only a minority of African graduates. For the majority, their post-graduation livelihood pathways are multidimensional and complex, involving any combination of paid employment and unpaid work (such as internships or home care-giving), entrepreneurship ventures, further studies, and unemployment. They show how important it is for African universities to help graduates navigate the challenges of post-graduation income generation and diversification by developing key transferable skills and resources early, including entrepreneurship skills, and affording graduates continued access to career development support and other transition services on campus.

Chanaaz Charmain January's contribution deals with the role of student affairs in the transformation of higher education and student success. Against her development of a framework for higher education transformation that blends equity and excellence, January discusses how student affairs can best contribute to student success. In a mini-case study, she discusses successful collaborations in the student residence sector at the University of Cape Town. She also shows how the transformation framework may cascade down to a diverse set of graduate attributes called 'Student Learning Imperatives'.

Innovative methods in student affairs research

Our introductory comments on this issue of JSAA would not be complete without noting the methodological diversity that can be observed in the published articles. Research on student affairs in Africa is becoming characterised by the use of diverse

and innovative research methodologies! In this issue, they include digital storytelling, auto-ethnographic diarizing and reflexivity, multi-year student cohort interviewing, and longitudinal multi-country graduate tracer studies, to mention but a few.

There are also huge differences in scale and unit of analysis in the research projects: there are reflective practitioner studies of the activities of a single student organisation within a university and there are surveys and qualitative studies involving dozens of universities and NGO partners across the African continent, as well as in North and Central America, Europe and the Middle East. Finally, while some studies are predominantly theoretical in nature, others are decidedly empirical, including the reflective practitioner accounts that are specifically meant to describe and critically reflect on a particular student affairs practice or intervention.

With these brief comments and reflections, we hope to have made this issue more accessible and focused some attention to the many ways it contributes to the development of more responsive, engaged and student-centred African universities.

The guest-editors
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