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What have we been thinking about? Higher education as a knowledge field in the SAJS

Significance:

This article reviews work published in the *South African Journal of Science (SAJS)* over the past 10 years. The aim is to explore the interests of contributors who mostly are not experts in higher education but whose disciplinary backgrounds and experiences of universities lead them to research, think and write about higher education. The article begins with an outline of changes in higher education globally and in South Africa before moving on to a review of work published by the SAJS, identified as the result of a content analysis.

Introduction

The development of higher education as a field of research can be related to changes in higher education systems across the world in the last 80 years or so. From the end of World War II onwards, higher education systems in countries in the Global North began to ‘massify’, a process which began with nations such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom opening up their universities to those returning from service in World War II. As Trow¹ points out in his seminal report for the Carnegie Commission on growth in higher education systems, massification has enormous implications for universities themselves. The larger the higher education system, the greater the demands on the public purse. As this happens, universities come under the scrutiny of a larger number of people, both in government and society more generally, who ask questions about where, and how, money is being spent. The relationship to the state shifts when increased funding for universities comes from the public coffers and, as a result, challenges to institutional autonomy and academic freedom become increasingly common.

The dominance of neo-liberal discourses has also had important consequences for higher education across the world^{2,3}, especially when associated with the construction of knowledge as a commodity to be bought and sold. The idea that universities can earn income from the production of knowledge and that students will earn increased incomes as a result of the knowledge they carry into the workplace has allowed governments across the world to justify decreases in funding for universities and increases in tuition fees – a phenomenon which resulted in the #FeesMustFall protests of 2015 and 2016 in South Africa. Neo-liberalism along with massification then impacts on the way universities are run. Historically, academics were once expected to play a number of different roles in order to ensure sound governance and administration of the university at which they were employed by, for example, serving a period as dean of a faculty, or even as registrar. As institutions have grown in size and complexity, the functions previously performed by academics have been taken over by professional ‘managers’, a process hastened by the introduction of ‘New Public Management’ to higher education. The concept of ‘New Public Management’, which gained traction from the late 1970s onwards thanks to the support of politicians such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, argues that public service can be made more efficient and cost-effective by drawing on models of management from commerce and industry, an observation that speaks to concerns about the increasing sum of taxpayers’ money needed to fund the universities. Practices associated with New Public Management generally involve the identification of goals, strategies and key performance indicators in every area of academic life. Discursively, this has involved a shift from the idea that universities need to be ‘administered’ by academics taking up senior roles, to their need to be ‘managed’ by ‘professionals’ who may have very little experience of academic life and who might not have the respect of their colleagues as intellectuals and researchers. At a practical level, it has also resulted in the introduction of a new level of management taking the form of, for example, quality assurance offices and institutional planning units. This has not only increased the number of administrative staff working in universities but has also edged academics out of the governance and management of the institutions in which they work. Ironically, the sums spent on ‘managing’ a university then stretches institutional resources to the limit, leading to resentment from academics who feel that teaching, research and other activities contributing to the academic project are underfunded.^{4,5}

However, it is not only on governance and administration that growth in a higher education system has an impact. Trow¹ points out that growth also affects the way ‘newcomers’ are socialised into university life. As new academics are recruited to teach ever-increasing numbers of students, they come to shape academic life and values within departments and faculties. Growth in the number of postgraduate students means that traditional one-on-one supervision shifts to group models with the result that student culture becomes the “chief socializing force of the new postgraduate students with consequences for the intellectual and academic life of the institution”^{1(p.2)}.

Students in massified higher education systems also come to see enrolment in a university differently, according to Trow^{1(p.7)}. In elite systems, where only a small proportion of 18 year olds enter a university, higher education tends to be seen as a privilege. As the proportion of young people in higher education grows, access is increasingly seen as a right and, eventually, as an obligation, as finding employment without a qualification becomes ever more difficult. Once this happens, understandings of the functions of universities themselves shift with a higher education becoming less about developing the mind and more about training for employment. The curriculum is then impacted. Whereas traditional curricula tended to draw on the disciplines, they are now often modular in structure and draw on organising principles such as learning outcomes, with Wheelahan⁶ pointing to the ‘knowledge poverty’ that results. In a traditional curriculum, disciplinary knowledge is built cumulatively. In a modular outcomes- or problem-based curriculum, only the knowledge needed to perform the outcomes is included, with the result that understanding of the overall knowledge structure is incomplete. This has implications for the way universities are structured as, in some cases, traditional departments based on the disciplines disappear to be replaced by schools

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or other arrangements to suit the offering of programmes drawing on knowledge from a range of disciplines, with concomitant effects on the intellectual lives of those employed in them.

The South African system

South Africa, of course, has not been immune from the enormous change that has affected higher education systems across the world, although the history of the country means that imperatives have been, and remain, different. As South Africa shifted to democracy in the early 1990s, the idea that growth in the higher education system would lead to greater equity was dominant in policy documents^{7,8} of the time.

Trow argues that higher education systems appear to be able to expand without changing fundamentally when enrolments are below 15% of the age cohort. Once a participation rate of 15% is achieved, change occurs. The Council on Higher Education⁹ (CHE) reports the overall participation rate as 24% for 2021, the latest year for which data are available, although participation continues to be skewed across social groups, with 48% of white young people entering universities in comparison to 23% of their black peers. Not only does South Africa have a skewed participation rate, it also has a much lower rate than countries in the Global North. In the United Kingdom, for example, the participation rate peaked at 38.2% in 2021 and is now standing at about 35.8%.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the South African system has more or less doubled in size since the early 1990s in terms of gross student enrolments, although increases in enrolments have not necessarily brought the benefits initially envisaged. While some small improvements have been achieved in recent years, analyses (in the form of the CHE's *VitalStats* series published annually) consistently show that, regardless of the university at which they are registered, the subject area or the study or the qualification for which they are enrolled, black South African students fare less well than their white peers.

In 2001, the National Plan for Higher Education¹¹ attempted to address disparities in the system in the form of the distinction between historically black and historically white institutions and between technikons and universities, as well as differences in the language of instruction, by instituting a series of mergers and incorporations. The institutional type of the 'university of technology' emerged at this point, reflecting the construction of higher education as involving preparation for the world of work. As some point out (see for example Dwayi¹²), historically white universities such as Rhodes University and the University of Cape Town were spared in this process, while institutions such as the University of the Transkei were forced to merge with and incorporate disparate institutions located over wide areas, leaving the new institution very difficult to manage. Cooper's¹³ observation that historically black rural universities such as the University of Zululand and the University of Venda continue to enrol mainly the black rural poor is arguably still true today, with Dwayi^{12,13} pointing out that Walter Sisulu University is the only destination possible for most young people from rural areas in the former Transkei. What would appear to be the case, therefore, and a point also noted by Cooper¹³, is that the majority of black students entering historically elite institutions are from middle-class, educated backgrounds.

This point is born out globally, with observers^{5,14,15} noting that the greatest single indicator of a young person's ability to gain access to and succeed in a university is the educational level of the home of origin. A wealth of ethnographic research^{3,16-18}, spanning many decades of study, shows why this is the case. The observation that the educational background of the home of origin has enormous impact on a young person's ability to access and succeed in higher education explains data showing that black South Africans fare less well in the universities noted above. That black families were historically denied access to quality education because of apartheid and dysfunction since 1994, means that the school system continues to fail them. As a result, there is little "educational capital" to support black learners in preparing them for schooling and then supporting them in it.¹⁹

Goals in the National Development Plan 2030²⁰, linked to changes at a global level associated with the so-called 'knowledge economy', also have implications for the university. The National Development Plan targets an increase in the number of doctoral graduates to 5000 per year, up from 1256 in 2012, the year it was published. By and large,

universities have responded to incentives to produce more doctoral graduates, with CHE reporting a total enrolment of 24 725 doctoral candidates in the system in 2021 – up from 9573 in 2016. As many readers of this Journal who supervise at this level will have already noted, for many candidates, the doctorate is a route to employment, an observation that impacts on the way doctoral students may approach their studies.

Concerns about the quality of doctoral degrees resulted in a national review of doctoral programmes conducted by the CHE from 2020 to 2021.¹⁹ The review raised a number of problems, one of which is related to the use of the concept of 'graduate attributes' in a standard setting. The CHE is currently producing 'standards' for all South African qualifications drawing on this notion. The principle is that universities should use the standards, and therefore the attributes they list, to design programmes leading to the qualifications they describe. The National Review, however, identified "a surprising lack of awareness, or depth of understanding among many academic role players of the attributes that a doctoral graduate should attain"²¹. Attributes describe the 'doctor' and can thus be linked to Trafford and Lesham's²² concept of 'doctorateness'. Their use in the qualification standard has implications for supervision as the focus needs to be on the development of the person. It is at this point that the incentivised funding formula²³ has an impact because of the emphasis in many universities for completion in "minimum time" to gain maximum financial benefits. As many experienced supervisors will note, it is often easier to focus on the completion of the thesis than the development of the person, which takes time, leaving open the question of whether graduates are demonstrating the "doctorateness" captured in the standard.²¹ A second point related to the use of graduate attributes involves assessment, because attributes arguably require more than the use of a thesis to demonstrate. Increasingly, universities require graduates to publish their work as evidence of their original and innovative thinking and contribution to knowledge, although this is not necessarily evidence of their intellectual growth and depth.²¹ For some²⁴, the requirement to publish can be seen as "milking" the subsidy system. Others²⁵ point to the implications of the requirement to publish on supervision, because it is unfair to expect a postgraduate student to publish unless they have been supported to do so.

Another comment on the South African system relates to changes to governance and management occasioned by the introduction of New Public Management. Quality assurance was introduced to the system in the early 2000s²⁶, and the CHE has just completed its second cycle of institutional audits. In spite of attempts to manage universities in a more "business-like" manner and assure quality, dysfunction continues to haunt the system, as evidenced by the Minister placing various universities 'under administration'. For Jansen²⁷, corruption and other dysfunctional activities, including student protests, are related to the lack of a strong academic project and a failure on the part of all involved to understand an institution's academic project and appreciate its importance.

As this brief review of the South African system, in the context of growth in higher education systems across the globe, draws to a close, one issue remains outstanding: the student protests of 2015, 2016 and 2017. The #FeesMustFall protests resulted in important changes to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). As a result of the announcement of free higher education for students with a family income below ZAR350 000 in 2017, a total of ZAR37.11 billion was disbursed to students studying at universities in 2022.²⁸ As the allocation to NSFAS comes from the total amount provided to the system overall, this has implications for the subsidy that universities receive to operate – a situation which has potentially grave implications for the future of the system itself.

A second issue raised by the #RhodesMustFall protests related to claims made by students that they felt alienated in the universities. These then resulted in calls for the decolonisation of the curriculum and of institutional cultures. Jansen²⁹ argues that "decolonisation emerged as a political keyword in the language of student protests to replace what had been the official reference post to change in the post-apartheid period: transformation" and that one of the problems that resulted was that, in contrast to other African countries, "there was no intellectual and political tradition of decolonisation on South African soil". For Jansen, this accounts for the fact that intellectual leaders in

the discussions^{30,31} following the protests came from other countries on the continent. The lack of knowledge and debate in South Africa prior to 2015 also meant that South African scholars were “over reliant” on Latin American theorists³²⁻³⁴ for meanings of the term ‘decolonisation’. Nonetheless, the decolonisation of universities has prompted a great deal of work often completed by young black scholars (see for example Hlatshwayo and Shawa³⁵).

Research on higher education in South Africa

South Africa has three journals dedicated to higher education: the *South African Journal of Higher Education (SAJHE)*, *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning (CriStal)* and *Transformation in Higher Education*, although a number of other journals, including the *South African Journal of Science (SAJS)*, also publish work on higher education. At an international level, journals such as *Studies in Higher Education*, *Higher Education*, *Teaching in Higher Education (TinHE)* and *Higher Education Research and Development* are also possible sites of publication for South African work. Tight³⁶ based his analysis of research globally on 15 international journals focused on higher education. Important to note at this point, is that a great deal of work produced in the field of higher education studies is focused on teaching and learning, an observation which is not surprising given the enormous changes to student bodies and to understandings of the purpose of higher education that have taken place over the last 50 or so years. Some journals, such as *CriStal* and *TinHE*, focus almost exclusively on this type of work. In addition, discipline-focused journals are increasingly publishing work on teaching in higher education.

In the context of this 120-year celebratory issue of the *SAJS*, I look at work published by the Journal related to higher education and draw on a broad content analysis to categorise and discuss submissions and, eventually, analyse the contribution of the Journal to the field of study. In order to do this, I draw on an analysis of all work published in the Journal since 2014 (Volume 110 onwards).

Approach

The approach to developing the exploration of published work that appears below drew on a broad content analysis. Titles of contributions to each issue were perused for a possible link to higher education. Where any doubt existed, the abstract or even the entire piece was then read. Details of each contribution were entered into an MS Excel spreadsheet and an initial category assigned to each contribution. A total of 143 articles in 52 issues were identified to relate to higher education and then read.

In order to identify categories, I drew on my own experience and expertise in the field of higher education studies. I then worked through the initial categorisation and repeatedly referred to the original publications until a final set of categories was developed. The categories identified focused on:

- the university as an institution and how it has changed in relation to shifts in the broader context;
- higher education as a system;
- higher education management;
- the academic workplace; and
- teaching and learning.

Types of contributions

SAJS publishes a number of types of contributions. Research Articles, Research Letters and Review Articles are all peer reviewed following international norms. Contributions to what is termed the ‘front section’ of the Journal encompass Commentaries, Book Reviews and a number of other types including News and Perspectives. Contributions to the front section are not subject to formal peer review, although they are reviewed by the Editor-in-Chief who may also assign them to other experts for additional opinions, and are not eligible for the South African Department of Higher Education’s subsidy. The 143 contributions identified as related to higher education fell into a broad range of article types (see Table 1).

Table 1: Types and numbers of *SAJS* articles related to higher education, 2014–2023

Journal section	Contribution type	Number
Front section	Book Review	37
	Commentary	39
	Scientific Correspondence	2
	News & Views	4
	Perspective	1
	Structured Conversation	1
	Leader	17
Back section	Research Articles	30
	Review Articles	7
	Research Letters	5
TOTAL		143

Discussion

One of the most interesting observations to be made on the basis of the analysis relates to the number of Leaders related to higher education. Over the 10 years of the review period, 17 Leaders, of which only one was written by a contributor other than the Editor-in-Chief and one was co-written with another contributor, focused on higher education. In many cases, Leaders reflected on significant events impacting on the South African system more generally, such as the zero fee increase announcement made by President Jacob Zuma³⁷ or what really matters for students following calls for free higher education and the decolonisation of curricula and institutional cultures.³⁸ Significantly, Leaders take what could be seen as a controversial stance³⁹ by taking aim at protestors’ demands, their implications for society at large and values taught in the universities more generally.

This interest in events, including the publication of policy and other documents, impacting on the higher education system and the university as an institution evidenced in Leaders, is mirrored in contributions by other authors. Tomaselli’s⁴⁰ Commentary on the implications of the Copyright Amendment Bill, approved by the National Assembly in February 2024, is but one example of the critiques of events offered by authors. The Commentary, ‘Who pays for someone else to consume for ‘free?’’, notes the impact of the Bill on universities paying the salaries of researchers who produce the work which this piece of legislation allows to be reproduced without permission or compensation.

Also notable are the 37 Book Reviews published by the Journal in the period under review with the result that, arguably, every major book published in South Africa on topics related to higher education has received attention. These include reviews on Jansen’s *Corrupted*⁴¹ and *As by Fire*⁴², Jansen and Walter’s *The Decolonisation of Knowledge*^{43,44}, Higgins’ *Academic Freedom*⁴⁵, Brink’s *The Responsive University and the Crisis in South Africa*⁴⁶ and *The Soul of a University*⁴⁷. The majority of the reviews noted here are of work focused on the university as an institution, a topic which also occupies the minds of authors of other types of contributions.

The university as an institution

As an institution, the university has come under enormous pressure in recent years for the reasons outlined in the introduction to this article and, also, because of the global economic system that draws heavily on innovation and the use of knowledge to ‘reinvent’ existing goods and

produce and market them across the globe. Contributors to *SAJS* are clearly interested in these shifts and employ their minds to thinking about what they mean for the South African higher education system. Walwyn and Cloete's⁴⁸ analysis of expenditure on research and development in South Africa, for example, identifies a growing role for universities in the National System of Innovation, reflecting changes in the way the state has steered the creation of knowledge. This position is echoed in a Commentary written by Marivate, Aghoghovwia, Ismail, Mahomed-Asmail and Steenhuisen⁴⁹, all scholars on the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET's) Future Professors Programme. The piece sees universities as key to the development and adoption of technologies associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The Journal has also published a number of analyses of the contributions made by universities to the South African economy. Bawa and Pouris⁵⁰, for example, provide a follow-up, 10 years later, to Pouris and Inglesi-Lotz's⁵¹ 2014 article on this subject, challenging criticisms of the cost of a higher education system characterised by poor levels of student performance as they do so. Critiques of the construction of the role of universities as primarily serving advances in the economic system are not lacking. Overton-de Klerk and Sienaert⁵², for example, provide an antidote to the thinking of constructing universities as "brands" by arguing that, although a university's reputation tends to be built globally on "research excellence", there is a case to be made for "brand relevance" allowing institutions to carve unique niches for themselves by drawing on their historical and contemporary contexts.

Unsurprisingly, calls for the transformation of higher education, heightened by the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests of 2015 and 2016, have elicited interest from contributors to the Journal because of their implications for the institution of the university as a whole. Archer's two-part Commentary^{53,54}, for example, published in 2017, argues that universities "function in specific ways in the world" and relate to society as "unique institutions" (p.1). Both parts of the Commentary then proceed to argue for the need to protect what are termed "first-order functions" from claims made by second-order functions such as equality or redress. Taking up a very different position, Adelle⁵⁵ argues for the need for "knowledge democracy" and "cognitive justice" achieved by university-based researchers working with a variety of actors "from across the knowledge-policy-practice interface" (p.2). Another Commentary provided by Long et al.⁵⁶ offers an argument for the need for the decolonisation of geography curricula not least because of "territorial demarcations on the global map, borders that at times seem to follow little more than natural boundaries chosen to divide territories between competing powers" (p.1).

Although other work on decolonisation appeared in the Journal, a Structured Conversation between Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Crain Soudien⁵⁷ in a special edition on 'Radical Reason' published in 2022, is worthy of mention. This contribution sees de Sousa Santos arguing that the university has been turned into "a capitalist enterprise" because "it has become a business corporation producing a commodity whose market value derives from its capacity to create other market values (e.g. diplomas that give access to highly paid jobs)" (p.2) with Ndlovu-Gatsheni then noting "the problem of an alienated African educated elite arises – people who are alienated from their history, their cultures, their languages" (p.3). Significantly, the contribution makes the point that South African universities will not be the same after the protests as they were "pushed into a ferment, which is still going on, even if there is silence from the students themselves".

Higher education systems

A second category in the classification of contributions to the Journal was "higher education systems", with several contributions in this group focusing on the funding and efficiency of the South African system. In the context of the #FeesMustFall protests and the establishment of a commission to explore the possibility of free higher education and training, for example, Shay⁵⁸ offers four scenarios, mapped on a Cartesian plane with axes denoting "financial aid" and "educational investment". Scenario one involves high levels of financial investment on the part of the state to support students financially, and thus promote access, as well as the educational investment necessary to support the teaching and learning of

diverse groups of students. This is termed an 'ideal' future. The second scenario, the 'elite' future, involves low levels of financial aid and high levels of educational investment in that students admitted to the system draw on the capital they have accrued from attendance at high quality private or good public schooling. The final two quadrants, 'waste' and 'high waste' futures, both involve low levels of investment in support for teaching and learning. In the case of the 'waste' future, funding is available for financial aid but teaching and learning conditions in the universities mean that students cannot benefit from the financial security of having fees and living costs paid. In the final quadrant, low levels of investment in education and student funding mean that fewer students can afford a higher education and their experiences of success within the universities are diminished because of the lack of support for teaching and learning. Shay's estimate in 2017 was that the South African system sat in scenario three, a 'waste' future given that, although access had widened and looked to widen further thanks to the provision of financial aid, a lack of financial support for change in teaching and learning would still result in poor outcomes in terms of throughput and graduation rates. This is arguably still true today, although a move towards a 'high waste' future could be argued given decreases in funding in the form of the University Capacity Development Grant thanks to the need for fiscal stringency in the current economic climate.

Also focused on funding, Molotja and Ralphs⁵⁹ offer an analysis of expenditure on research and development in the social sciences and humanities, showing that most funding was focused on a few knowledge areas (finance, economics, education, accounting, public policy and political science) with other fields such as architecture, psychology and transportation studies receiving strikingly low levels of support to the extent that their decline is imminent. Molotja and Ralphs go on to argue that both national policymakers and those making decisions about research funding at institutional levels need to find a greater balance if the social sciences and humanities are to be leveraged for future needs. One last contribution looking at the impact of funding on system level issues is an analysis by Moyo and McKenna⁶⁰ of the way undifferentiated implementation in a highly differentiated system has limited the impact of earmarked funding intended to enhance student performance. Importantly, this study identifies the need for support for financial management, particularly in institutions where capacity to manage has not been built over the years.

Higher education management

Given the impact of neo-liberal discourses privileging 'New Public Management' in higher education, it is not surprising that a number of contributions to the Journal fell under the category 'higher education management'. Although the Journal published work which was highly critical of New Public Management^{61,62}, a number of contributions examined the management of both teaching and research outputs. One significant feature of the introduction of New Public Management to universities is the appointment of individuals responsible for maximising performance in both teaching and learning and research and the tasking of academics to produce outputs which often appear as key performance indicators in appraisal systems. Several contributions to the Journal analyse ways in which performance indicators can be improved. In the teaching and learning arena, Stoop^{63,64}, for example, provides a model accounting for variables leading to student throughput using an approach based on the number of students in any cohort who "survive" and graduate. In a similar vein, Zewotir et al.⁶⁵ use survival analysis to identify factors leading to successful conclusion of a master's programme, while Chetty⁶⁶ and Dennis et al.⁶⁷ analyse the impact of extended curriculum programmes on performance in physics and chemistry, respectively.

Contributors were also interested in research performance, with Murray⁶⁸, for example, developing a formula to predict research output at one South African university. Diko⁶⁹ offers a more critical perspective on the quest for outputs, given the rewards that accrue from the incentivised funding formula⁷⁰, by asking whether quality, as evidenced by a journal's impact factor, ranking or number of article non-self-citations should also be taken into account when subsidy is awarded.

Obviously, doing research is about much more than striving for outputs, regardless of how this might impact on a future career or potential

financial rewards, and awareness of this is evidenced in a number of contributions. Preiser and Preiser⁷¹ draw on experiences of publishing during the COVID-19 pandemic to note the responsibility of researchers to ensure that no harm accrues from work that is published hastily. In the pandemic, the need to combat the virus led to research being uploaded onto preprint servers which was then picked up by journalists who knew very little of scientific processes and who were disposed to ignore the tentative nature of preliminary findings. This then impacts on researchers because, as Preiser and Preiser point out, “it may be challenging to communicate nuance, uncertainty and complexity to non-scientific audiences, but not doing so causes harm” (p.2). A report on a joint ASSAf/SAJS webinar held in August 2021 discussing the impact and role of science and scientists in contemporary society⁷² furthers the discussion on the responsibility that accrues to scientists and others involved in the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge by stressing the importance of the relationship between science and society. Another important contribution to the discussion of research and publication appears in the form of a Leader by the Journal’s Editor-in-Chief and A-rated scientist, Leslie Swartz⁷³, who notes the challenges of editing a journal (SAJS) that is committed to multidisciplinary and to “publishing high quality original research from Africa or on African relevant issues” in a context where many do not have the linkages and connections that will allow them to get the support they need to produce a paper that will withstand rigorous peer review. Even more importantly, Swartz identifies consequences that accrue from the commodification of research and research outputs, noting that “publications may be viewed as products in themselves, items to be counted and ticked off, used as materials to give access to jobs, grants, promotions and other opportunities” (p. 1), with the result that the role of writing as a means of learning in the research process itself may be lost. In this context, another A-rated scientist, Brenda Wingfield’s, contributions to the Journal⁷⁴⁻⁷⁷ provide a reassuring voice in much of the negativity about publishing and becoming a researcher by drawing on her extensive experience to identify, amongst other things, the importance of mentoring as one of the conditions necessary to develop what she terms the “culture of innovation” necessary to achieve research excellence.

The academic workplace

Unsurprisingly, given that the majority of readers of and contributors to the Journal are probably university employees, a large number of contributions fall under the category ‘academic workplace’. As a rating from the National Research Foundation (NRF) is now required for appointment or promotion in many universities, it is not surprising that the system used for ratings is an object of critique. Callaghan⁷⁸, for example, is critical of a system which leaves researchers open to bias because applications are not anonymised. For this author, a more fair system would draw on “technological advances” that offer “a host of objective measures of both research productivity and its impact” (p.7). Boschoff’s⁷⁹ rebuttal of Callaghan’s claims then opens the way for further debate by identifying questions to be answered about the principles underpinning the NRF system. This is then taken up by Coldwell⁸⁰, arguing from the perspective of an experienced reviewer of rating applications, who notes that, while the NRF’s distinctions between the ‘A’ and ‘C’ rating categories are relatively clear, the ‘B’ category, which requires reviewers to indicate that researchers enjoy “international acclaim”, is difficult to operationalise. McRobert and Stergianos⁸¹ add to the discussion by noting that, for engineers, using a journal paper to gauge impact is simplistic, as recognition by industry in the form of prizes, fellowships and invited lectures provides a more reliable measure of research standing. Regardless of the merits and demerits of each contribution, the debate in the pages of the Journal is indicative of an acute interest on the part of readers and contributors in an aspect of the academic workplace with the potential to impact on their careers and of their willingness to bring their intellectual acumen to its interrogation.

The theme of the ‘academic workplace’ also encompasses a number of contributions about gender inequalities. The precarity of women’s careers during the COVID-19 pandemic is addressed in a contribution by Walters et al.⁸² who note the impact of the pandemic on women in particular. Their survey showed that many women were employed on

temporary, soft-funded contracts which were threatened by lockdowns and, also, that the additional demands placed on women during lockdowns impacted on their prospects for promotion, especially as, in many cases, sabbaticals intended to be devoted to writing for publication were lost. However, gender imbalances in science were also taken up by Butler-Adam in a Leader⁸³ responding to Minister Naledi Pandor’s statement⁸⁴ that “[t]he challenge for Africa is to ensure that the gender imbalance in the practising of science, technology and innovation [STI] is addressed”, with the pronouncement that there can be “no more excuses” for the lack of advancement of women.

Teaching and learning

A final category in the analysis of contributions to SAJS was ‘teaching and learning’. Submissions in this area encompass Nyika’s⁸⁵ discussion of the use of the mother tongue as a language of learning and teaching, Mguni et al.’s⁸⁶ analysis of the visualisation skills required by biochemistry students as well as work focusing on postgraduate education. Grossman and Crowther⁸⁷, for example, address the topic of co-supervision and the need for a coordinated approach from both supervisors. By and large, however, contributions on teaching and learning are not a major focus in the Journal, an observation which is, perhaps, not surprising given the number of journals that specialise in publishing work of this nature.

Conclusion

As a knowledge field, higher education studies would be classified as a region⁸, in that it faces inwards towards the disciplines and outwards towards a field of practice. Looking inwards, higher education studies draw on a range of disciplines including sociology, history, politics, linguistics, and economics. Increasingly, the field is the domain of specialists who are often located in departments or centres and whose intellectual attention is focused on researching and teaching about it. However, the status of higher education studies as a region makes it accessible to many non-specialists who can bring their own disciplinary expertise and experience of teaching and working in universities to bear in its enquiry and analysis.

The existence of journals that specialise in publishing work on higher education has already been noted. As a multidisciplinary publication with a wide readership whose interests are located in a range of knowledge fields, SAJS clearly does not fit into this category in spite of the numerous contributions related to higher education that it has published over the past 10 years. However, contributions by experts in knowledge fields privileging quantitative analysis⁸⁸⁻⁷² who, for example, attempt to identify factors leading to, amongst other things, enhanced student throughput, and others^{45,47,49,50,61,66,67} from authors with backgrounds in the social sciences who bring their criticality to bear on the conditions in which they work in contemporary universities are evidence that the Journal offers a space for readers whose publications might otherwise reflect their disciplinary backgrounds more strongly but whose interest in higher education leads them to research, think and write about it.

There is, of course, another reason why contributions to higher education studies published in SAJS are important. Often work on higher education appears in the specialist journals noted earlier in this piece, which do not reach the more general academic readership of SAJS. The contributions to SAJS thus have the capacity to keep a wide range of disciplinary experts abreast of developments in higher education globally and nationally and, importantly, to be informed as they sit on bodies such as faculty boards and senates where developments that may impact on their lives may be discussed and where some criticality may need to be introduced.

Declarations

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