Key challenges facing student affairs: An international perspective

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Summary

This paper attempts to describe student affairs in the developed and the developing world\(^1\), to review some of the challenges and opportunities emerging from globalisation and internationalisation, and to describe the trend of professionalisation which has swept over international student affairs since the benchmark was set by the USA. The paper concludes with a key lesson learnt from the international perspective, which is the urgent need in South Africa to develop a normative meta-framework, based on theory and grounded in the fluid reality of higher education in South Africa.

Introduction

Even before the liberation of 1994, South African universities had entered the international community of higher education. The dramatic changes in the global arena have significantly impacted on South African higher education, on its organisational structures, its models and frameworks, its curricula and pedagogic approaches, its discourses and its conceptualisation of, and responsiveness to, community. The changes, internationally and nationally, have challenged higher education’s historically dualistic notions around student affairs, and has compelled an engagement with pluralist constructions of our reality, and in the process called into question higher education’s very *raison d’être* (Buroway 2010; Hirt 2006).
Being part of a global consciousness promotes a shared understanding of the complexities of equality, human rights and social justice (Nussbaum 1995). Gunderson (2005) argues that internationalisation is ‘at the heart of liberal education’, which promotes a global consciousness and is a key concern for student affairs nationally and internationally (Gunderson 2005: 246). South Africa, much like other countries, ‘now partakes, albeit unequally, both in the local and the global’ (Cloete & Muller, 1998: 19), and hence, understanding ourselves within the context of internationalisation and globalisation is imperative for South African Student affairs, not only to benefit from a shared system of ethics, but also to contribute towards this global consciousness.

It is essential that student affairs is familiar with international trends, shifts and policies and other events which occur in the macro context and might impact on higher education and student affairs. An example which illustrates the importance of this is the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education: Vision and Action in 1998, which culminated in a declaration directly related to the domain of student affairs (UNESCO 1998). Another example is the Bologna Process in Europe which had implications for internationalisation of student affairs (Urbanski 2009). Yet another is the Dearing Report, which initiated performance-related funding in England and impacted on monitoring and evaluation practices across Europe (UKCISA 1999). Perhaps the Spelling Commission in the USA was one of the most important events in the international student affairs landscape. It demanded clear accountability measures in student affairs in the USA and this new development significantly influenced the international benchmark (USDE 2006).

International shifts do not only affect pragmatic issues but also discourses, constructions of reality and epistemologies. This shift towards pluralist epistemologies emerges from the increase in diversity of heterogeneous student populations, from the internationalised campus realities impacting on culture and processes, and the national as well as global commitment to massification and transformation of higher education. Student affairs needs to embrace these emerging fluid and pluralist weltanschauungen which result from being part of a global international education context.

Harper (1996) and Mandew (2003), in reviewing South African student services, present some key challenges for South African student affairs, and this paper on the international perspective aims to engage with some of these challenges. To this end, the international perspectives presented in this paper attempt to describe student affairs in the developed and the developing world, to review some of the challenges and opportunities emerging from globalisation and internationalisation, and to describe the trend of professionalisation which has
swept over international student affairs since the benchmark was set by the USA. The paper concludes with a key lesson learnt from the international perspective, which is the urgent need in South Africa to develop a normative meta-framework, based on theory and grounded in the fluid reality of higher education in South Africa.

Student affairs in South Africa ‘has at very critical and [...] opportune moments not always risen to the challenges of change’ (Mandew 2003: 1). Through reviewing formative influences in the macro context this paper aims to galvanise the national student affairs community towards engaging with these ‘challenges of change’.

Understanding student affairs in developed and developing regions

Higher education institutions worldwide are under pressure to address issues related to massification, such as access and equity, quality assurance and standardisations (Dalton 1999; Gupta 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; UNESCO 1998). Issues of efficiency, of student success and of employability beyond graduation are crucial concerns for student affairs worldwide (Gupta 2006; UNESCO 2004). These issues affect the developed and the developing world, albeit in different ways, and student affairs is uniquely positioned to contribute towards the engagement with these issues.

The International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) describes the aim of student affairs as follows: ‘to assist students in navigating their journey through the tertiary education landscape and add to their repertoire of educational and lifetime learning experiences’5. Moreover, enabling epistemological access to higher education discourses and facilitating qualitative changes in cognitive and affective development remains a central concern of student affairs.

IASAS, although dominated by Western presence and participation, has acknowledged the tension between the ‘developed’ and the ‘developing’ student affairs and cautions that perhaps there has been a rush to ‘adopt/adapt Western forms of higher education, sometimes without regard for the cultural appropriateness of these models’6. Challenges emerge when engaging with the ‘developed’ countries which have ‘professional’ student affairs domains, from a ‘non-professional’ position within a ‘developing’ country such as South Africa.

Each region has challenges and each region emerges with different solutions to its local context and its relationship to the global arena.
Student affairs in developed regions

Student affairs has a long history, emerging primarily from the universities of the UK and the USA. Although the higher education institutions in the USA, Australia, the UK and the European continent have historically fairly different constellations and structures, the emerging student affairs models and practices are beginning to look rather similar (Buroway 2010; ESU 2008; ISAP 2009; Sidhu 2006; Singh, Kenway & Apple 2005; Urbanski 2009).

The different historical trajectories of higher education are important for an understanding of student affairs and are described by Du Toit (2007), who identifies the Anglo-Saxon, the Continental-Roman (strongly influenced by the German tradition), and the Anglo-American models of higher education. In essence, the Continental-Roman model is centrally managed by state bureaucracies. The Anglo-Saxon model, which later informed the Anglo-American, is premised on strong faculty association and ‘rather than expressing the rational order of the public sector or the administrative state, universities were rooted in local communities, served regional needs, and reflected local communal identities’ (Du Toit 2007: 54). These models form the basis to higher education in which student affairs is embedded in different ways. This is illustrated in the section below, which describes the emergence of student affairs within these models in various developed countries.

United States of America, Australia and the UK

In the USA, the student affairs divisions emerged from within the Anglo-American model of strong faculty affiliation of higher education, and have advanced from a narrow in loco parentis model, which primarily concerned itself with student discipline, conduct, student social and moral development, to a theoretical discipline which informs a normative meta-framework supported by rigorous research and prolific publications (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005). In a review on the trends of student affairs in the USA, Fang and Wu (2006: 6) commented that

[t]he relationship between student affairs and academic affairs in the US higher education institutions has undergone the spiral evolution from original natural unification to conscious differentiation and independence, and later moving towards collaborative and integrating educational partnership. Such a development course reflects not only the inner logical demands for continuous professional and academic growth of student affairs in American universities, but also the profound changes in its basic aim, conception, concrete mission and role orientation.
Student affairs practitioners in the USA today are professionals, typically with masters and doctoral level qualifications in educational leadership, and part of an education faculty of a university (Keeling 2004; Nuss 2003; Schuh 2003). The American student affairs practitioner takes part in the core business of higher education by ‘working effectively with faculty to create a coherent curriculum’ (Schuh 2003: 73).

In the USA, as the higher education focus shifted from educating the elite to ‘building a nation’, student affairs divisions were positioned as key role-players in contributing to the core mission, by producing rigorous research and demonstrating their impact (Nuss 2003: 67). While positivistic demonstrations of outcome and impact present ideological challenges, perhaps emulating the USA is a trajectory South African student affairs might follow.

Australian and UK student affairs divisions are similar to the USA model of viewing student affairs as a profession which significantly contributes to institutional goals through holistic student development and has ‘much to contribute to maintaining and improving student retention’ (Burke 1997; Trainor 2002: 4). Trainor (2002) notes the shift in the UK from perceptions of student affairs as a welfare service, a ‘reactive support department’ which is the ‘last resort for students with problems’ to the perception that student affairs is the ‘first port of call involved in supporting all students’, which is ‘fundamental to the work of the HEI as a whole’ (Trainor 2002: 11). The professionalisation of student affairs has contributed much to the perception of student affairs as key contributor to the work of higher education as a whole.

Europe

Mainland Europe, reflecting the Roman-Continental higher education model, has a rather young student affairs history (Du Toit 2007). Mainland Europe only began addressing student life, student development, student services and student support as part of university life in earnest during the 1950s (Nuss 2003). During the 19th century, German universities in particular promoted an exclusively academic focus in the university, based on the highly contested notion of the ‘value-free academic ethos’ (Dalton 1999: 5).

Currently, European student affairs are explicit about their values and principles and include a focus on services such as counselling, disability, childcare, career development, accommodation support, sports and others (UNESCO 2004). Some student affairs are separate from the core business of the university and located in local government or municipal services, where funding and accountability lines are shared between the institution and the local or national government, or public social services. This has been increasingly overshadowed by a shift towards
internationalisation of higher education, promoting and enabling student mobility and exchanges, not only across the European Higher Education Area, but also with institutions abroad (Figel 2009). The Bologna Process, the UK Ministerial Initiative (PMI) and the ERASMUS agreement (European Community Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) assist in dissolving cultural boundaries and political borders and promote large-scale student mobility precipitating a focus on the role of student affairs in facilitating this mobility (Dalton 1999; Figel 2009).

The challenges for student affairs in the developed world centre around student affairs’ relationship with the community within which it defines itself and to which it relates. There appear trends around utilising student affairs as a tool towards enhancing the overall student experience of students, particularly exchange and ‘mobile’ students, often with a focus on enhancing the competitive edge of universities. This might overshadow student affairs’ contract with society, with community and with the larger social good. According to Kezar (2004), student affairs may not lose this focus on developing students which have a keen awareness of the systemic social ‘embeddedness’ and their relationship with local communities, while at the same time engaging with global issues. This tension remains a challenge for student affairs in the Bologna Zone but also extends beyond it.

**Student affairs in developing regions**

Countries with developing democracies and developing economies share many issues, particularly around higher education. Student affairs divisions within developing countries and economies are not as professionalised and explicitly articulated as student affairs in the developed world.

**Brazil, India and China**

In a similar way to South Africa, higher education in Brazil was designed to support the economic and political elite and was tightly controlled by a military regime (Sidhu 2006). Today, Brazil is facing similar challenges to South Africa: the need to produce ‘equity, quality and efficiency’ (Sidhu 2006: 283). Like South Africa, Brazil’s dilemma is to produce research which attracts international interest while finding solutions to local problems (Buroway 2010; Carnoy 2002; Cloete & Muller 1998; Sidhu 2006). Brazil, like India, is focused on promoting international student mobility along North–South and South–South lines, and student affairs in these contexts are frequently geared towards supporting these goals.

India’s educational system, owing to its colonial roots, is much like South Africa’s. The Anglo-Saxon system of higher education informed the basic
structure of the institutions and student affairs within it (Chitnis 2000; Du Toit 2007). India, like most of the rest of the developing world, is engaged in improving access and equity across higher education to become an ‘economic powerhouse’ (Punwani, cited in Gupta 2006: 2). India is struggling with a deeply entrenched caste system and, like South Africa, is trying to redress the injurious effects of its colonial and political history. Of great interest is India’s attempt to improve access of the different ‘castes’ to higher education (Gupta 2006).

While there are pockets of excellence, such as the All India Institute for Medical Science, largely supported by specific federal funding, corporate interest and ‘educational entrepreneurs of a new breed’, it seems that, overall, the Indian higher education sector is burdened by inequities, challenges around implementation, poor accountability, under-funding, dated pedagogical practices, student unrest, migration of students to first-world universities, and other factors deeply rooted in the historical, cultural and social norms (George & Raman 2009: 3).

Despite much reference to the interpersonal and social difficulties, such as racism and discrimination, integration and social cohesion, first-generation student epistemological access challenges to higher education, and mainstream student tolerance to students on ‘reserved seats’, student affairs seems to not feature on the Indian higher education landscape (George & Raman 2009; Thornton, Bricheno, Iyer, Reid, Wankhede & Green 2010). It seems that offices which facilitate ‘training and placement’ for career purposes are largely private and outside the institutional structures. Some student affairs-type services appear on websites and brochures, but remain isolated examples restricted to flagship institutions. Student governance seems to have a presence at some university websites (e.g., the University of Hyderabad and Rajiv Gandhi University), as do international mobility, cultural festivities and sports activities, such as cricket and basketball.

During the 1970s, China adopted a new stance towards education, with a move away from the Maoist centralist model to decentralisation, which gave local authority the autonomy and flexibility to create more opportunities for access and to respond to societal needs, while improving relations with Western higher education institutions (Liu, Rhoads & Wang 2007). By the 1980s, formal agreements on educational exchange and collaboration with the West were quite common for higher education institutions in China (Liu et al. 2007; Loeftstedt & Shangwu 2002).

The development of student affairs in higher education in China ‘does not seem to represent the result of systemic or strategic planning at the highest level’ (Wang 2004: 9). Initially, a division named Student Residences and Career Services was introduced, which later morphed into student affairs. China’s academic disciplines
seem to engender a sense of belonging (Wang 2004), reminiscent of the original student affairs model of *in loco parentis*, where academic staff were entrusted with moral and professional caretaking of their protégés.

While some high-ranking flagship universities, such as Peking University and Beijing Normal University, offer a range of student services, student societies, student volunteering and counselling and health care, little literature is available on Chinese student affairs models and theories (UNESDOC 2002; Wang 2004). It appears that ‘little attention is being paid to either the theoretical or practical aspects of facilitating student development through student affairs programs and services’ (Wang 2004: 11).

**The African continent**

African universities are as young as Africa’s independence from colonial powers, bar the few established by the ex-patriot communities and colonialists. As Mamdani states, Africa ‘became independent with no more than a handful of university graduates in the population’ (Mamdani, cited in Du Toit 2007: 56). To promote African independence and African nation-building, the ‘university functioned as an integral part of the post-independence African nationalist movement’ (Mamdani, cited in Du Toit 2007: 56).

Higher education institutions across Africa grapple with issues similar to South African universities. Throughout Africa, as in South Africa, the university is considered a key contributor to national development and is reflected in student enrolment which has increased five-fold in the late 20th century across the African continent (Za’rour 1998).

In general, African student affairs divisions follow the USA model of a student affairs domain with a focus on student development, student support and student services for holistic student development aligned with the institutional goals, such as Strathmore University in Kenya and the University of Zambia. African student affairs domains are staffed by a dean of students with a complement of staff focusing on ‘planning, coordinating and implementing a variety of programmes and services which are designed to assist and support students in achieving academic and personal success’. Some universities embrace models of integrated student development and speak of developing ‘a conducive learning and living environment’. Younger universities, such as the University of The Gambia, seem to have international offices addressing issues of student mobility. Overall, the influence of the USA on African student affairs as comprehensive and integrated, and aimed at holistic student development, with a pronounced focus on internationalisation, is evident across the African continent.

In addition to the focus, among others, on promoting internationalisation,
student affairs practitioners in Africa also address urgent and compelling social concerns resulting from injurious social-political practices within and beyond higher education. The African Student Affairs Conference (ASAC 2009, 2010, 2011) hosted university deans and student affairs professionals of African universities, and the papers which were presented revealed that the student affairs domains focus on issues around campus conflicts, race and gender violence, and basic problems of living, such as food and housing. However, the conference papers do not shed much light on the scope, role and function of African student affairs, on frameworks and theories, and conceptual issues around student affairs philosophy (ASAC 2009, 2010, 2011).

Literature and research concerning student affairs issues in Africa appear sparse and appear only rarely in international journals. The only Africa-wide journal in which student affairs is also covered is the *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, published irregularly by CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, located in Senegal). Some African universities (e.g. Makerere University, Kenya) publish frequent education faculty-based in-house journals. More recently, online Nigerian journals have appeared, such as the *International Journal of Educational Research*, but without a clear continental focus. Recently the first edition of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* has been published, which aims to fill this gap.

The review of student affairs in the developing world reveals that there is little coherent collective framework for student affairs either at national level or across the developing world. The need for a theoretical framework informing student affairs structural integration and concrete engagements seems pronounced.

**Lessons learnt from developed and developing regions**

In summary, the USA sets the benchmark for student affairs internationally, and has developed a coherent epistemological community. Based on rigorous research, it conceptualises student affairs as ‘working effectively with faculty in creating a coherent curriculum in which specified learning outcomes are achieved through collaboration’ (Schuh 2003: 73). It is characterised by the integration of student affairs into the organisational structure and academic experience at faculty level (Kuh *et al*. 2010; Kuh 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005). European models of student affairs locate student affairs within Bernstein’s ‘official recontextualising field’ of higher education, where it contributes to administrative service delivery, which is beyond the boundaries of the academic domain (Bernstein 2000).

The review of the international student affairs reveals a medley of structures and frameworks, and this diversity reflects the myriad of contexts into which student affairs is embedded. The articulation of student affairs to its immediate context is
essential and this is expressed succinctly by Manning, Kinzie and Schuh’s book on student affairs organisational structures and innovative models entitled *One Size Does Not Fit All* (2006). The importance of the role of student affairs in preserving the relationship with its context remains a key challenge and objective for student affairs within the developed and the developing world.

It appears essential that student affairs organises itself into a coherent discipline and focuses on local theory development which can inform an integrated, comprehensive, locally-relevant conceptual framework so that it can articulate effectively with the academic domain in creating a ‘coherent curriculum’.

**Influences of internationalisation on student affairs**

Traditional boundaries of student affairs are expanding and internationalisation is described as the ‘new frontier for student affairs’ (Dalton 1999: 3). Quiang (2003) describes various aspects of internationalisation which affect student affairs:

a) internationalisation as an aim in itself, with special focus on multiculturalism as a value in student development; b) internationalisation as a vehicle to achieve broader goals, such as improved employability; c) reshaping student affairs to accommodate international students; and d) internationalisation as a culture and ethos beyond student affairs to enable engagement in the global arena and to compete on the global market. These aspects of internationalisation affect student affairs differently.

In Europe, the Bologna Process has had a huge impact with its emphasis on mobility, employability and competitiveness. The ‘social dimension’ is increasingly becoming a ‘necessary condition for the attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA’ (Eurostat 2009). This directly impacts on student affairs as it is considered to contribute towards an institution’s attractiveness and competitive advantage rather than, perhaps, focusing on its ‘contract with society’.

Internationalisation is viewed as an enriching experience for students (Cloete 2009), and countries recognise the economic value of higher education internationalisation as a revenue-producing industry (Dalton 1999; Merrick 2007). Dalton (1999) pointed out that international discourse on student mobility is expressed not only in actual international student numbers but also in the revenue these students generate (Dalton 1999). Perhaps a risk in defining international students in economic terms is the resulting image of the international student as a ‘cash cow’, being offered special services and privileges, thus potentially compromising student affairs’ ethical principles. It appears that ethics, values, and social implications of internationalisation are neglected and
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Consumer-related discourses overwhelm the domain (Kelly 2009).

The UK Council on International Student Affairs (UKCISA) has identified a list of key deliverables for student affairs in order to enhance the international student experience (Merrick 2007; UKCISA 1999). This is an illustrative example of the shift in thinking about student affairs: student affairs is involved in making the higher education experience more attractive to improve mobility, and in this way contributes to its economic viability. Student affairs is called upon to deliver on factors which increase student satisfaction, as a marketing strategy (Garci’a-Aracil 2009; Merrick 2007; UKCISA 1999). For instance, the I-Graduate Student Barometer is used as a tool to measure student satisfaction, and the results are used to inform student affairs within some institutions with the purpose of attracting more students to the university (Merrick 2007).

Lessons learnt from internationalisation

Internationalisation and the dissolution of educational borders will continue to increase and, for instance, student affairs in the Bologna Zone has harnessed the opportunities emerging from the increased student mobility. International student affairs will need to go beyond the focus on mobility and contribute to the emerging discourse on globalisation, including ubiquitously used but loosely defined terms such as ‘global citizenship’ and in that way overcome the ‘parochial’ dualism of global and local (Cloete & Muller 1998).

Internationalisation is also about a change in culture and ethos of student affairs (Quaing 2003). This might take the form of engaging in formal relations with international associations of student affairs. North–South and South–South collaborations might assist in engaging indigenous knowledge which might be more or differently relevant to the South African context, especially given the ubiquitous readiness to embrace well-developed American theories and models. Moreover, in terms of alignment and framework, the associations in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), such as the European Council for Student Affairs, offer insight into student affairs structural alignments and constellations involving the state. This refers to the different trajectories of student affairs constellations in the Anglo-Saxon and Continental-Roman education models and the post-colonial discourse on the instrumentalist university and its role in the African nationalist movement. This might be an opportunity to move the student affairs lens beyond the nation-state towards a globalised sense of ethics and morals (Nussbaum 1997). The engagements with international associations around a shared discourse on ethics and morals might facilitate South African student affairs’ explicit articulation of its position in this regard.
The quest for a normative framework

The review of international student affairs suggests that student affairs in developing regions has not developed a locally relevant conceptual framework for student affairs. South African as much as other developing and some developed countries, might benefit from developing a normative framework which can maintain central vision and reduce the random mushrooming of often privatised student affairs functions. Detached and fragmented student affairs, as is found in developing and some developed international regions, might risk derailment of vision and neglect theory and best-practice principles or might pose high risk to the institution and side-step accountability. This needs to hold the tension with potentially rigid centralist control, encumbered by bloated bureaucracies which prevent flexible responsiveness to faculty needs.

This tension between the generic and central, on the one hand, and the specific and narrow, on the other, needs to be explicitly negotiated in order to preserve the underlying values and principles of student affairs. A principle- and value-based framework located within a theoretical paradigm can provide guidance for Student affairs domains which look towards professionalisation.

A key lesson which a review of the international research on student affairs provides is the integration of student affairs into the institutional life. Based on research primarily emerging on the international, mainly USA, landscape, but increasingly also from South Africa, is the widely accepted assertion that student affairs’ contribution to higher education is predicated on its integration into the core business of the institution (King & Baxter-Magolda 1996; Kuh et al. 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Perry 1970; Davidowitz & Schreiber 2008; SAACDHE 2007; Schuh 2003).

Theory which underpins student affairs asserts that ‘cognitive and affective dimensions of development are related parts of one process’ (Astin 1977; Baxter-Magolda 1992; Feldman Smart & Ethington 2004; King & Baxter-Magolda 1996: 163; Kuh & Hu 2001; Kuh et al. 2010; Nuss 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Tinto 1997). The construction and use of knowledge is related to the student’s sense of self and self-authorship in the higher education institution. This is also expressed by King and Baxter-Magolda (1996: 165) who assert that ‘the known is inextricably connected to the knower’. Epistemological access is grounded in the active construction of knowledge (Bernstein 2000), that is, the active interpretation of experience.

These theoretical principles of student affairs suggest a re-definition of learning as a broad process across cognitive, affective, and social domains. Learning is synergistic, not segmented (Nuss 2003; Weideman 1989). Hence student affairs’ theoretical and structural articulation is vital.
Professionalising an emerging discipline

The challenges for student affairs nationally and internationally, especially in developing countries, are not only about how to develop well-defined and relevant interventions with explicit outcomes, aligned with institutional and national educational imperatives, but also about how to establish itself as a discipline and a profession and articulate a coherent meta-framework.

The USA student affairs domain has generated a significant and rigorous body of research, has developed seminal theories, established a recognised discipline, managed to professionalise itself and form broad and inclusive associations which reflect the texture and depth of student affairs in the USA (Dean 2006; Keeling 2004; Nuss 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Schuh 2003; Strayhorn 2006). This might be a trajectory South African student affairs might follow.

The move towards a professionalised discipline for countries which need to harness divergent voices into a coherent epistemological community, might require the support of organised associations. These might take on the form of ‘issue networks’, which share knowledge about particular issues or problems, or ‘epistemic communities’, which form a network of experts who can exert influence on the basis of knowledge and research, or ‘advocacy coalitions’, which exert pressure over a period of time through co-ordinated activity (Bailey 2010: 14). Along with student affairs associations, it is especially non-governmental organisations such as the Centre for Higher Education Transformation which may be able to play a key role in this regard.

For student affairs in developing countries, it appears imperative to engage in local theory development and critically engage with established theoretical frameworks. Student affairs in South Africa, as in other developing countries, requires a normative meta-framework that accommodates multiple indigenous realities which need to flourish in a global context. The capabilities approach (Sen 1995, 2001) and the principles of the ethics of care (Gilligan 1981, 1982; Nussbaum 1995, 1997, 2000) seem particularly useful in enabling contextual, constructivist and narrative thinking in a pluralist context such as South African higher education.

Influences of globalisation on student affairs

Buroway (2010: 1) referred to South African universities burdened by apartheid inequities and those that need to compete in a global reality as ‘under-resourced at one end and subject to global competition on the other’ and ‘caught between the disabling legacies of the past and the structural pressures of the present’
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(Buroway 2010: 1). Perhaps Buroway’s distinction is artificial and the burden of an exploitative and injurious past and the need to compete globally reflects a reality into which many national and international universities are embedded.

Castells (2001) describes globalisation as the paramount social phenomenon of recent times. This echoes Chomsky (1999), who states that ‘neoliberalism is the defining political economic paradigm of our time’ (Chomsky, 1999: 7). Globalisation, and its economic neo-liberal influences, has a defining impact on higher education and hence also on student affairs (Castells 2001; Kezar 2004; Lange 2010). The ‘discourse of globalisation positions higher education institutions as key agents in the development of graduates with the expertise and high-level skills for a high growth path of economic development and global competitiveness’ (CHE 2010: 49). The eco-political changes have a particular impact on funding and resource distribution, directly affecting student affairs.

Luescher-Mamashela (2008) described the ‘market-oriented university’, which is structured as a ‘commercial educational service provider that competes in the local (and global) higher education market’ (Luescher-Mamashela 2008: 63). Students are targeted as ‘clients’, passive, demanding and expecting future returns. The consumed commodity leads to gainful employment and student affairs-type student development is perceived as ‘distractions’ unless incentivised or branded as improving chances of employment (Luescher-Mamashela 2008: 63). In these kinds of contexts student affairs is conceptualised to buttress the promise of individualised notions of graduate success (Burke 1997).

This insidious global change needs to alert student affairs to its role in contributing not only to student and institutional success but also to the common social good (Harper 1996; Kezar 2004). This ‘contract with society’ is also described by Kezar (2004), who emphasised that student affairs has a tradition of serving the public good and needs to remain focused on this contract with society.

Lessons learnt from globalisation

The commercialisation of higher education, beginning in the 1980s, has led to ‘expanding industry-university collaborations’ (Buroway 2010: 3), with the consequence of reduced state funding. The reduction of state funding, globally, has led to changes in the higher education and in student affairs (Buroway 2010; Hirt 2006).

Reduced state funding has led to inflated tuition fees, which affects students directly and is incompatible with the emerging democracies’ claims of massification and broadening access (Schuh 2003). The higher education sector, including student affairs, is compelled to seek funding from private sources.

Commercialisation and market-driven curricula and outcomes of programmes pose some challenges to student affairs. Kezar (2004: 439) noted ‘that neoliberal
philosophy was one of the main forces driving the move away from the traditional charter between higher education and society, a tradition built on a communitarian philosophy of the public good’. She maintained that this tension might compromise some student affairs areas in that Student affairs survival is contingent on market-driven values (Kezar 2004). Narrow co-curricula and out-of-classroom experiences, aligned with market forces, neglect the contract with society around producing students who take part in public life and realise their social ‘embeddedness’, rather than just acquiring a career as a vehicle for self-promotion (Buroway 2010; ESU 2008; ISAP 2009; Kezar 2004; Sidhu 2006; Urbanski 2009).

International shifts in student affairs are evident in its increased focus on revenue-producing partnerships, for instance with bursary providers, sponsors, or ‘wealthy’ academic departments, its increase in programmes for international students as a client market, promoting certain brands on campus and using sports as marketing, its quasi-outsourced services, and its focus on generating lavish events to improve funders’ social responsibility indicators, and so on (Dalton 1999).

While student affairs was previously accountable to the institution’s goals, national goals, and society’s goals, it seems that student affairs has become increasingly aligned with sponsors’ goals rather than with student affairs’ goals per se. Furthermore, this kind of shift makes students ‘consumers’ and ‘clients’ rather than ‘participants’ in the higher education process (Buroway 2010; ESU 2008; Gupta 2006; ISAP 2009; Sidhu 2006; Urbanski 2009).

The relationship with corporate partners needs to be explicitly managed in order to prevent essentialising and commercialising student affairs functions within the institutions. The trend in the USA towards the privatisation of some student affairs functions (Schuh 2003) has left these Student affairs functions voiceless in participating equitably and reciprocally within the institution. This is a trend which challenges student affairs globally and South Africa can learn key lessons from the experiences of its peers in the international terrain.

**Conclusion**

The challenges discussed in this paper highlight the importance of a dynamic and reciprocal relationship of student affairs with its context. The fluid context of the international higher education landscape demands that student affairs engage with global realities in a reciprocal way, simultaneously being shaped while also shaping the international terrain.
The key challenges for student affairs, especially in the developing world, are to urgently address the results of injurious social and political practices within and beyond higher education affecting students’ cognitive and social-emotional functioning. Furthermore, key challenges include addressing issues of organisational and structural positioning, of framework and local theory development, engaging proactively and coherently with globalisation and internationalisation, and to professionalising and developing an epistemological community.

The professionalisation of the theoretical discipline and normative practice of student affairs is the key difference between the ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ world in terms of student affairs’ integration and function within higher education. South African student affairs, perhaps guided by its various associations and assisted by non-governmental organisations such as the Centre for Higher Education Transformation, or parastatals such as the Council on Higher Education, is at an opportune moment to articulate a normative meta-framework for student affairs.

One of the stages in the maturation process of student affairs in the USA is ‘differentiation and independence’ (Fang & Wu 2006: 6). South African student affairs seem to find itself at a similar stage and might follow the American trajectory of maturing into a coherent theoretical discipline which articulates its structural position and utilitarian function within higher education.

The discussion on internationalisation and globalisation reveals that South African student affairs is at an fortuitous moment in which to engage with a globalised sense of ethics and morals which may inform its conceptualisation within higher education (Nussbaum 1997).

Since the surge of research and literature from within and about the student affairs in higher education (Botha, Brand, Cilliers, Davidow, de Jager & Smith 2005; Hamrick, Evans & Schuh 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005) student affairs have increasingly become ‘self-conscious, confident and widely influential’ (Nuss 2003: 87). Student affairs in South Africa is beginning to carve an identity for itself, informed by theory and local research, and as a significant contributor to the core business of higher education.

Notes

1. The reference to the ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ world is a false dualism but is used here to cluster the themes.
2. The European Higher Education Area's Bologna Process literature has been prolific in debating pluralist values in a local context, acknowledging global values while remaining indigenous, and identifying the tensions emerging from this (www.ehea.info, accessed 10 August 2012). Cloete (1998) also raised these issues in his exploration of post-colonial discourses which might assist in
moving beyond parochial dualist notions towards pluralism anchored in globalised consciousness.

3. The reference to the ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ world is a false dualism but is used here to cluster the themes.

4. The changes for student affairs are not only systemic, but also include issues such as student profile changes, and embracing the e-medium for service delivery and engagement. Kretovics (2003) presents an interesting review in *The role of student affairs in distance education: Cyber-services or virtual communities*, which highlights that the changed context also includes migrating some Student Affairs roles and functions to the virtual and online media, given that talk-and-chalk didactics have been replaced by innovative pedagogies which include the idea that learning takes place in virtual spaces. New communications technologies have a ‘profound influence on the way students, professors, administrator and staff live, study, work and do their business on and off campus’ (Grant, 1999: 59).

7. The Continental-Roman model has nonetheless constitutionally protected academic freedom. But, as Du Toit pointed out, this is only of any value in so far as the state observes the constitution, which was not the case in, for instance, Nazi Germany (Du Toit 2007).
15. The student affairs discourse apparent at the ASAC revealed a ubiquitous use of ‘training’ and ‘skills’ which apparently is aimed to affect behaviour and attitudinal changes in students. The terms ‘training’ and ‘skills’ are premised on assumptions that access to higher education culture can be taught in discrete units, which is not supported by international research and reflects a simplistic and reductionist understanding of student affairs scope, role, function and practice.

16. Various international resources are useful to assist in the development of a South African normative framework. The *Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education* (Dean, 2006) is a particularly useful resource in this regard.
17. A ‘profession’ has to do with the scope of practice and behaviours associated with a profession, while ‘professionalism’ refers to the implicit or explicit code of conduct and norms associated with a profession.
18. Bailey (2010) discussed the policy-research nexus and explored the utilisation of research and its impact on policy and in particular the role ‘networks’ (such as associations) in terms of the interplay between research and policy.
19. The human capabilities approach was originally developed by Amartya Sen (1984, 1995, 2001) and has since been a leading paradigm for policy development around human development issues and was the basis for the United Nations Human Development Index.
20. South African higher education is governed by a policy context which constructs ‘Student Development and Support’ (the equivalent to student affairs) in a particular way, and any meta-framework needs to comply with national policy. The *National Commission on Higher Education: An overview of a new policy framework for higher education transformation* (DoE, 1996: 12) is particularly informative in this regard.
21. *Globalisation* means the global mobility and transnational circulation of information, education,
culture and economics, through the increase in exchange and the opening of borders by the reduction of barriers and the increase of open access to information via the internet and other virtual platforms.

22. The term neoliberalism was coined to describe the period after socio-economic liberalism, which dominated the first world with its emphasis on civil liberty and economic freedom, while protecting individual rights. The removal of the protective regulations sheltering economic monopolies is considered the onset of the neoliberal economic order.

23. Du Toit (2007) discusses the issues arising from considering, what he called, higher education’s ‘social contract’. He argued that the social contract safeguards academic freedom and self-determination, a key element for student affairs within the institutions.