

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Mapping African Student Affairs Research during the Past Interlude (2008-2019) through Bronfenbrenner's Lens

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### Abstract

*The research question we pursued was: What are the variations in the themes of research in the African higher education context that will enable researchers to promote student development? This contribution addresses three aspects of student affairs research in the African higher education context. First, it commences with tracing the African position with a document analysis of 121 student affairs research articles published in 34 peer-reviewed journals over the 2008-2019 interval. Second, it uses the thematic categorization of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS, 2019) to determine international publication trends as derived from this document analysis. Third, it applies Bronfenbrenner's person-process-context-time (PPCT) model as an appropriate umbrella research design and guiding framework to review the mapping of African student affairs research. A comparison of the international CAS categorization and the African categorization led to the conclusion that the CAS mapping was largely confirmed by the African analysis, with nine main themes as the foci. Additionally, it found that four first-hand African themes are not represented in the CAS categorization, and that significantly limited research has been conducted into postgraduate programmes and services (hereafter referred to as PGP&S), despite the demands for increased enrolments. The findings suggest that more accurate and continuous mapping of the field can assist policymakers, managers and student affairs practitioners in making more informed choices in their efforts to support growth and development in African higher education, with special emphasis on postgraduate students.*

### Keywords

*African student affairs, Bronfenbrenner's person-process-context-time (PPCT) model, Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), postgraduate research and studies, African higher education research*

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## ***Introduction***

Global trends have demonstrated an increase in and emphasis on African student affairs research (Pansiri & Sinkamba, 2017; MacMaster, 2014; Moja et al., 2014) within a transforming higher education (HE) context (Tumubweinee & Luescher, 2019). Although there exists a holistic approach to produce well-rounded students, limited research has been conducted on African student affairs regardless of demands for increased postgraduate enrolments (McCarthy, 2019; Le Roux et al., 2019; Cloete et al., 2015). Thus, the current body of knowledge on African student affairs research remains relatively inadequate. In view of that, this article elucidates the process of locating and interrogating studies on student affairs within an African HE context, reported between 2008 and 2019 (referred to as Bronfenbrenner's chrono system).

We proceed by discussing the method of the stipulated student affairs research in Africa that was applied in this qualitative case study. This is followed by a brief explanation of the conceptual framework, Bronfenbrenner's person-process-context-time (PPCT) model, and how the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education's (CAS, 2019) mapping of student affairs research in Africa was applied for the analysis. Thereafter, the findings of this CAS thematic research are presented and discussed, and we conclude that the 47 foundational functional areas were largely confirmed by the African student affairs research. Additionally, in the article nine major African student affairs research focus areas, identified during the analysis, are elucidated, and four new, local themes are highlighted. We also recommend postgraduate programmes and services as areas for further research.

## ***Methods: A Case Study on Student Affairs Research in African Higher Education***

This qualitative, multi-focus case study used the 47 functional areas of the CAS's (2019) professional standards as premise for the document analysis to determine international publication trends. These international trends were established in student affairs research in the African HE context through searches in the following operating databases: Academic Search Ultimate, Africa-Wide Information, Education Source, ERIC, and Humanities Source Ultimate. We then analysed the 121 articles in 34 selected academic journals for the chrono system period 2008-2019. We chose CAS (2019) as the grounding for our analysis as it represents a 40-year history of research, which served as a sound professional basis (41 US members and Canadian associations, and 115 000 practitioners), culminating in the research findings of the decade under study. In addition, Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model was applied as an appropriate research design and guiding framework to map African student affairs research.

## ***Theorising CAS Mapping of Student Affairs Research in Africa through the Lens of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT Model***

Bronfenbrenner is a prominent psychologist whose work hinges on the premise that a person's development is holistically influenced by his or her immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). He conceives of the environment as comprising five

different levels: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. The process of interaction between the person (with unique characteristics) and these different layers of the context over a time period collectively combine to form the bioecological systems theory.

The bioecological systems theory (i.e. theory of human development) articulates the process of human socialization – which is key to understanding education. In the context of this article, Bronfenbrenner’s work was imperative in understanding a systematic approach to human and social development within the higher education context. Therefore, this theory offers an appropriate, practical theory for higher education and student affairs practitioners to gain clearer understanding of students’ learning environments, to build fundamental relationships and to establish quality learning environments.

This bioecological theory inspired Bronfenbrenner as a developmental psychologist to introduce a theory of development with **four components**, namely the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This model was a relevant guiding framework for this study, as we wished to establish “how and why” CAS’s student affairs foundational functional areas “occur as they do” in an African context (Evans et al., 2010, p. 161; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This implies a particular interest in the processes underpinning these foundational functional areas of CAS within a given context, and not necessarily in the outcomes they produced.

As already stipulated, Bronfenbrenner’s original research themes continue to provide a sound basis for such an analysis. Bronfenbrenner’s original research themes continue to provide a sound basis for such an analysis. Therefore the social and historical *context*, the active student affairs practitioner/student, and the impossibility of considering individual developmental *processes* in isolation are themes that provide helpful theoretical lenses to analyse the body of literature focusing on student affairs in Africa.

The student affairs practitioner is nested within and among these principal components of the PPCT model (Evans et al., 2010; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), which are primarily responsible for development. In the nucleus of the model, multiple personal and interpersonal interactions and engagement *processes* (fundamental to Bronfenbrenner’s bioecology theory and constantly changing) between the student affairs practitioner and other stakeholders are transforming the African HE *context*.

In light of these interpersonal student affairs engagements in African HE, the CAS foundational functional area categorization (mostly identified in the American *context*), proved to be most appropriate to establishing these research mappings, as CAS concurs with UNESCO’s student affairs/service functions in HE (UNESCO, 2002), and with the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ (AAC&U) Inquiry and Analysis VALUE Rubrics (Rhodes, 2009). Moreover, this historic *time* was best represented by CAS’s (2019) 40-year research and professional base (associations and practitioners) as a sound basis, as was largely confirmed by this study.

Findings of this CAS thematic study on the chronosystem *time* 2008–2019 indicated that the 47 functional areas were largely confirmed by the African student affairs research. However, the following nine main African student affairs research focus areas were

identified: learning-assistance programmes; master's level and student affairs professional preparation programmes; academic advising programmes; leadership education and development; postgraduate and professional student programmes and services; housing and residential life programmes; college unions/*governance*; international student programmes and services, and internship programmes and assessment services. This finding is meaningful because it not only confirmed that these functional areas, that had been established internationally, are relevant in African student affairs, but stressed their prominence in African HE. An elaboration on the importance of these nine themes in African HE follows.

### *Principal Themes in African Student Affairs Research*

#### **Learning-assistance programmes**

Most of the 121 articles from CAS confirmed that African student affairs practitioners are primarily involved in learning-assistance programmes. This task is indispensable to student success (De Klerk et al., 2017; Scott, 2018; Strydom et al., 2017) and retention (Mkonto, 2018), especially in terms of first-year student engagement (Faroa, 2017; Mkonto, 2018; Schreiber & Yu, 2016). In addition, learning-assistance programmes also place emphasis on mathematics (Jacobs & Pretorius, 2016), generic skills in the medical curriculum (Jama, 2016), and at-risk students (Mayet, 2016). Learning-assistance programmes also provide rewarding interactions and individualized instruction within a digital, multilingual mentoring and tutoring space (Arend et al., 2017; Du Buisson, 2017; Faroa, 2017; McKay et al., 2018; Seeto, 2016; Spark et al., 2017). Student learning requires co-curricular involvement (Naik et al., 2017), inclusive education (Moswela, 2011), high impact practices, and peer leadership (Keup, 2016).

Peer-assisted learning is applicable in high-risk subjects such as mechanical engineering (Makola, 2017), but also is an appropriate teaching and learning method in higher education in general (Bugaj et al., 2019; Makola, 2017). Adult learning (see Hutchings, 2014) should be included to create comprehensive learning-assistance programmes that support students from their first academic year up to postgraduate/professional studies. This aspect is not widely addressed in the African HE context, but needs urgent attention with the current demand for increased postgraduate outputs. Research verified supplemental instruction, mobile technology, and a humanising philosophy (respecting individual identity) as crucial for diverse student populations and large classes to make learning accessible to students, when they are implemented more effectively in learning-assistance programmes (Boughey, 2015; Erasmus, 2017; Madambi & Mangena, 2016; Robbins et al., 2019; Schreiber & Aartun, 2011; Sedibe & Sedibe, 2009). Additionally, academic partnerships with key campus and community partners resulted in steering resources and policies (Berger et al., 2019).

#### **Master's level and student affairs professional preparation programmes**

In fourteen articles student affairs preparation programmes were addressed (although the master's level was indicated in the title of this functional area, no recognized articles were found, despite the current demands for postgraduate outputs). This is supported by Dunn

and Dunkel's (2013) viewpoint that in African HE professional competency development is executed via associations rather than institutions offering formal qualifications. Selznick (2013) asserts that continued professionalization of African student affairs is essential for conceptualization and expansion of the knowledge base (for promotion and self-advancement purposes), including the integration of library referencing and instruction (Love, 2009). This profession, with evolving focus on innovation (Boaykye-Yiadam, 2015), research and scholarship (Carpenter & Haber-Curran, 2013), social justice (Schreiber, 2013), democratic engagement (Johnson, 2019), social identity and professional role transitions (Robbins et al., 2019), and collaboration between student and academic affairs (O'Halloran, 2019), requires theory-driven practices with high-quality assessment outcomes (Pope et al., 2019). Additionally, the growth in diverse student bodies prompted areas such as student learning and development theory, programme development and cultural competency. These professional programmes (accommodating online and social media, but also newer delivery modes) are necessary to render well-prepared student affairs educators for the world of work. Dialogues on advocating for standards in Student Affairs Departments in African institutions (Pansiri & Sinkamba, 2017) and inter-association, which are crucial to stipulate "anchors guiding with a strong foundation", whilst adjusting to developing areas in the field (CAS, 2019, p.1354) are required. Finally, student affairs leadership appears to be multidimensional and complex. New student affairs professional programmes should include areas such as transactional peer leadership (Keup, 2016), new university leadership models (Walters, 2018) and an ecological framework (Taylor, 2019).

### **Academic advising programmes**

Academic advice and guidance are not only fundamental to the success of first-year students (Jama, 2016; De Klerk et al., 2017), but also in large classes (Boughey, 2015). Equally important is tracking the impact of student affairs professionals on student performance (Masehela & Mabika, 2017) through student engagement (Strydom & Mentz, 2010; Strydom, et al., 2017). Academic advisors work with students to enable them to construct knowledge (Schreiber, 2013), be innovative (Boakye-Yiadam, 2015), and to enhance their academic development (Shange, 2015). Academic advisors must be ready to meet challenges (Yakaboski & Birnbaum, 2013), and to pursue a collaborative partnership with academic affairs (Berger et al., 2019; O'Halloran, 2019) to support the complexity and diversity of current students.

### **Leadership education and development**

Leadership learning is pivotal in African student affairs and HE fields, not only in offering comprehensive development programmes, but also to enrich and integrate student learning opportunities. Lately, student affairs leadership educators critically reflect on existing leadership models, theories and practices to reconstruct more inclusive, equitable and just approaches. Examples, such as peer leadership (Frade & Tiroyabone, 2017) and high-impact practice (Keup, 2016), as well as women leadership (Person et al., 2014) are present in the

African HE context. The Ecological Framework (Taylor, 2019) helps student affairs leaders understand their roles, as well as challenges they may face in their roles (Murage et al., 2019; Nel, 2016; Yakaboski & Birnbaum, 2013). This is essential for student affairs practitioners to steer the multiple ways in which students learn effectively in a transforming HE context (Lumadi & Mampuru, 2010). It is also imperative for student affairs divisions to prepare students for citizenship (Kgosithebe & Luescher, 2015), democratic engagement (Johnson, 2019; Robiadek et al., 2019), and mentorship (Paterson & Hutchinson, 2019).

### **Postgraduate and professional student programmes and services**

The rising cognisance of the distinctive needs of postgraduate and professional student affairs students led to advocacy for support services, tailored to the more diverse and complex African student profile (McCarthy, 2019). Mentorship outcomes (Paterson & Hutchinson, 2019) and peer mentoring assessment, evaluation and research competencies (Baumgartner et al., 2019) are important in the professional preparation of student affairs practitioners (Ardoin et al., 2019). Knowledge communities drive student performance (Masehela & Mabika, 2017) and mentorship programmes. However, specific challenges impact the development of outcomes assessment standards (Finney & Horst, 2019), and guidelines for graduate and professional programmes and services, namely

- variety of types of degrees and reporting structures,
- diverse student populations served,
- establishing sound collaboration with other institutional units providing student and academic support services,
- demands for online programmes and virtual support (Cain, 2015), and
- lack/shortage of professional administrators and/or services for graduate and professional students (CAS, 2019, pp.1039-1040).

Addressing these challenges is essential for student affairs to foster theory-based practices and outcomes-based assessments (Pope et al., 2019).

### **Housing and residential life programmes**

Operational involvement in housing and residential life has been transformed; not only the *in loco parentis* role of student affairs, but also the legal and education practice, which led to the historical progression of residence-life training programmes (McCluskey-Titus et al., 2019) and competency development of housing staff (Dunn & Dunkel, 2013). With the recognition of diversity (Smorenburg & Dunn, 2014), equity, disability (Vaccaro & Kimball, 2019), and politics (Mugume & Luescher, 2015), the inclusion of the residential environment became a tool not only to complement the formal classroom context, but also to assist learning outside the classroom for personal and social well-being, civic participation, cross-cultural responsiveness and academic identity (Alcock, 2017). This is in line with the student-centred approach found in African HE. Additionally, Dunn-Coetzee and Fourie-Malherbe (2017) provided an example where social changes within a senior

housing programme were addressed by incorporating increased levels of interaction among students that led to reduced stereotyping and diminished bias.

### **College unions/governance**

In the African HE context, the term “governance” is used to refer to a university’s operations. In African higher education research, democratic engagement in student affairs is emphasised (Johnson, 2019). This occurs through the representation of student organisations on committees at higher education institutions (Macharia, 2015; Robiadek et al., 2019), where students are involved in voting, decision-making, and leadership (Hester, 2019; Oni & Adetoro, 2015) to address challenges (Murage et al., 2019), past and present (Moja et al., 2014).

### **International student programmes and services and internship programmes**

International students enjoy benefits such as service learning and social change (Gaines-Hanks & Grayman, 2009), student engagement (McFarlane, 2015) and co-curricular involvement (Naik et al., 2017), and share in high-quality and diverse academic opportunities, while the host university gains the benefit of cultural modification and diverse perspectives. Within a diverse socio-demographic context, studying is stressful in terms of structural, linguistic, and internal and external dimensions, and sometimes, political and social instability in the home country. Therefore, mastering coping styles is important for international students, but the student affairs practitioners should also adapt their roles to provide culturally relevant postgraduate and peer-led services for student success (Akhtar & Kröner-Hewig, 2015; Frade & Tiroyabone, 2017; Martinez & Colaner, 2017; McFarlane, 2015; Onyenekwe et al., 2017; Rasmussen, 2015). Although the CAS categorization makes provision for internships, this was not evident in the African HE context.

### **Assessment services**

Student assessment is the foundation for student learning, development, and success. Assessment services are driven internally for evidence to improve service, and externally for accountability purposes, despite the constant changes in technology and student demographics. For example, supplemental instruction for large-class first-year students (Erasmus, 2017) has been found to improve student understanding. The professionalization of student affairs through assessment (Gansemer-Topf, 2013) is essential, but also requires mapping standards for outcomes assessment practice (Finney & Horst, 2019), and fostering theory-driven practice (Pope et al., 2019), as well as the utilization of institutional administrative and student affairs assessment resources (Groover et al., 2019).

In brief, these nine CAS functional areas appear to be prominent in the African HE student affairs context. The similarities in the CAS framework and the body of literature about student affairs in Africa are important, because they underline those functional areas perceived to be essential for the contextualisation of student affairs praxis in an African context. In general, scholars study different student affairs functional areas in Africa, making

it surprising that these research outputs emerged within definite clusters during the past decade. Furthermore, four new themes, not presently listed among the CAS functional areas, emerged unexpectedly from this study.

### *Newly Identified Student Affairs Research Themes*

Four new themes, not listed in the CAS categorization, emerged through this research based on African higher education journals, namely:

(i) *Professionalization associations* result from voluntary student affairs leadership. In the African HE context, professionalization organisations, such as the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) (Ludeman, 2014), support the professional development (Li & Fang, 2017) and identity (Clarke, 2016) of student affairs practitioners to address challenges towards a more effective administrative pathway. The dedication, collaborative efforts, and collective expertise support student affairs staff as reflective practitioners to keep up with current African HE trends and the needs of students in preparation (Ardoin et al., 2019; McCarthy, 2019) for the world of work.

(ii) *Legal responsibilities and ethical considerations* remain essential when interpersonal and process engagements are present. Holistically, this limits risks and liabilities for the institution. In the African HE environment, the *legal aspects* include human rights or norms, with emphasis on improving accountability and the quality of the provision of nutrition and health relief (Ali & Kabau, 2014). Student affairs staff can only perform duties within the scope of their position, training, expertise and competence (e.g. refer to proper administration if a matter is beyond one's own scope). Student affairs staff members comply with governmental laws, institutional policies and procedures, as well as standards for good professional practice. Finally, the main focus remains the well-being of students dealing with demands of political, social and economic development (OECD, 2019).

(iii) *Students and government* refer to nurturing cooperative relationships with local and regional governance structures, civic engagement, and the inclusion of multiple sources of expertise. Although strong leadership and government involvement or laws are not new to HE (CAS, 2019), it is extraordinary that they are not incorporated in the CAS functional areas. The history of student governance (May, 2010) in African higher education, as well as the love-hate relationship with governments (Makunike, 2015) has been stressed as relevant in African student affairs research.

(iv) Parallel with the ongoing demand for publications, *citation styles* are more noticeable in African student affairs research. Although a number of diverse citation styles exist and each journal has its own requirements, Nwadike (2018) proposed a scientific model, the Nsukka Multidisciplinary Citation Style (p.147). The value of this African scientific citation style lies in it being decolonised, as most other international citation styles are Western.

These four innovative student affairs research themes, and the proposed trends towards these themes serve well as potential, distinctly functional areas within a transforming African HE context. However, the inadequacies of the current body of literature on these promising functional areas need to be researched in-depth, and the consistency of these practices across multiple HE institutions needs to be assessed. In addition, it must be



determined whether professionals supporting these four new functional areas and related professional associations still need to be identified. This accentuates the complex role of student affairs professionals and practitioners in student development within African higher education. Their strategic positions assist with student engagement towards seamless in-class and out-of-class learning experiences, but also in the development of comprehensive graduates (MacMaster, 2014). This is crucial to develop a diverse and shared foundation for the student affairs profession from which multiple perspectives and theories may expand and evolve.

### *Conclusion*

This study entailed a research journey through two fields, student affairs and HE on the African continent. Through Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model, the learning curve towards holistic student development is found to not be linear, but rather a spiralling circle. During this chrono system interval (2008-2019), the majority of the 47 functional areas of CAS were apposite to African student affairs. Among them, learning-assistance programmes; master's level and student affairs professional preparation programmes; academic advising programmes; leadership, education and development; graduate and professional student programmes and services; housing and residential life programmes; college unions/*governance*; international student programmes and services, and internship programmes and assessment services were the nine functional areas that were found to be prominent trends in African student affairs research. From the analysis we deduced that mentoring, research and assessment competencies and demands drive the knowledge community to professional preparation of student affairs practitioners. For student success, both academic and student affairs complexities should be seamlessly integrated through democratic engagement, professional development, and leader-mentorship.

Four local themes, not found in CAS's functional areas, but present in African student affairs research, are professionalization associations, legal responsibilities and ethical considerations, students and government, and citation styles, which reflect African HE's diverse and complex demands for professional development, legal and government solutions, and publication. In the analysis of African student affairs research, CAS overlooked these four themes that are based on diverse cultural contexts, and their discovery also indicates limitations in the current body of literature about how the different functional areas in student affairs have been conceptualized to date. Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model provided critical insights into how and why student affairs manifest in African higher education – with special reference to the person and process within the African student affairs context in the period of 2008-2019. Finally, postgraduate programmes and services are a noteworthy issue requiring future exploration to extend and promote student affairs as a field of research and studies in the African context.

### *Ethics Statement*

This research has obtained ethical clearance from the ethics committee of the University of the Free State's Faculty of Education.

## *Conflict of Interest*

Since this research consists of document analysis, there is no conflict of interest involved in terms of content nor authorship.

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