

Editorial Comment

Newman Wadesango (PhD)

(Guest Editor)

South Africa celebrates twenty years of freedom and democracy in 2014. Its freedom brought about academic freedom to a space hitherto ring-fenced into racial blocks. The situation has gradually changed over the years with historically black institutions such as the University of Fort Hare benefiting from the new dispensation. This year, a department within the institution celebrates a unique academic freedom which is of global significance. The university of Fort Hare's academic development and support centre (The Teaching and Learning Centre or TLC) (est. 2004) marks 10 years of existence. It is prudent to take stock and celebrate its academic milestones and achievements and share its experiences with similar but well-meaning academic progressives in a higher education context. As part of its strategic plan, the first 5 years of the decade was largely characterised by the setting up of structures, systems, processes, tools, templates, and a focus on how these should work. The latter period was characterised by the consolidation and advancement of the strategic gains. Arising from institutional and departmental imperatives such as reviews, the need to restructure, refocus and redirect its academic and professional activities became the norm. This gave birth to the unique structure and model that was informed by strategic institutional priorities. From the lessons learned, Academic Development (AD) was legitimised and institutionalised. Our experiences within this unique academic development structure and model broaden our academic development perceptions and experiences which we seek to share with fellow Academic Development practitioners worldwide.

The TLC adopted the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) as the official academic philosophy. It is an approach that acts as both the organiser and the embodiment of an academic practice promoting the culture of reflective practice particularly among staff. The SoTL concept mandates AD practitioners to operate at a meta-level of thinking and reflecting about their own academic development activities; how they go about with their academic development work; why they approach academic development work in that manner; and how TLC work is perceived and experienced by others, that is, its clientele.

This special journal edition/issue is the right platform for theoretical reflections on Academic Development activities of the TLC over a period of 10 years. Some staffers, among other academics elsewhere, herein share their experiences with you. They reflect on, and disseminate, the TLC's own action research led educational/academic development practices and experiences spanning the decade. In essence, this special edition covers articles on a range of topics, including professional development of academic staff, academic development of students, technology enhanced learning, academic human rights and foundation provisioning support. It also features articles on the actualisation of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in a particular institutional context, the legitimisation and institutionalisation of the above, the enablement and constraints, and the lessons learned and the strategic trajectory of the TLC over the ten year period. It seeks to unravel scientific evidence to bear on the modes of some of the Academic Development interventions that work in this particular institutional context, and the perceived impact of some of these AD interventions.

There are challenges however in enhancing AD research productivity for academics due to a plethora of factors. Therefore, there is need to deliberately plan research activities and the participation of academic staff members in writing for publication lest they perish!. It was for this reason that two writing for publication retreat workshops for emerging researchers in the Teaching and Learning Centre at the University of Fort Hare were held. Most of the researchers in TLC are still novice and budding. An opportunity to showcase their budding research talents presented itself when I, in my role as Senior Researcher, organised the writing retreats fundamentally to empower them. The workshops were conducted in March and April, 2014 at two picturesque tourist resorts, Hogsback and the East London Golf Club respectively. From the two initiatives were borne some manuscripts for this special issue of *The Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* to be launched later in 2014 during Fort Hare's 3rd Teaching and Learning week. The issue focuses primarily on Academic Development (AD), particularly the professionalisation of university teaching, and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

The status of teaching as a profession in South Africa has remained a contested issue. It is imperative therefore that lecturers be acquainted with new pedagogies and materials that make their teaching more effective. This vision calls for a paradigm shift from the traditional 'pedagogies of the oppressed' to andragogies which treat learners as co-creators of knowledge. In summation, this special edition looked into the issue of professionalising teaching. Special focus is on dissemination of new knowledge, and how academics could engage critically with their teaching practice. It also looks

on how lecturers develop and evaluate their teaching practice, in order to improve not only student learning but throughput and retention rates, while assuring the quality of the teaching and courses and modules they provide. In doing so, they are reminded to uphold the academic human rights of the learners: an issue that is highlighted by an article that uses Lesotho as a case in point.

I am therefore, deeply honoured and humbled to have been accorded this rare opportunity to serve as a guest editor of this high impact publication. In addition, the call was also extended to Academic Development Consultants in other universities. The idea was also to learn how things are being done elsewhere, therefore, we received contributions from the following universities: University of South Africa, University of Free State, Zimbabwe Open University, Durban University of Technology, Central University of Technology and the University of Limpopo.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Director of the TLC, Dr. Noluthando Toni for supporting my efforts towards the preparation of the issue. She is a pillar in academic development and support. I am also grateful to our international reviewers: Prof. Cosmas Maphosa, Dr Severino Machingambi and Dr Nonceba Mabovula . They were selected on account of their vast academic expertise in the areas covered in this special edition. They provided encouraging, insightful and practical feedback to our authors. I sincerely express my profound gratitude to all contributors for their dedication to the goals of this special issue. I sincerely believe that the articles contained in this special edition will promote debate and development of the relatively new field of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South African higher education landscape. We thank members of the Editorial Board of the journal *The Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* for their assistance in ensuring the publication of this special issue. We could not have produced this special issue without the goodwill of all of these and other well-meaning people. Enjoy the issue!