Editorial

When the idea for a new journal focused on critical conrtributions to knowledge about higher education studies was floated in 2012, we had no idea that it would grow into the space it has become for both established and emerging scholars to share and debate ideas, critique aspects of the current status quo, and engage in conversation across institutional and national contexts and borders. It has been an immense privilege to guide the first 8 years of *CriSTaL*'s growth as managing editor, and it is with a heavy heart that I step aside with this final issue of 2019.

In the life of all organisations, and *CriSTaL* is no different, there is a time and place for new ideas, new energy and a new direction in leadership, and I feel for this journal that time is now. Higher education as a field and as a policy and practice space is changing, both in South Africa and globally. The last decade has seen a notable increase in appetite amongst university libraries and scholars for open access, and we are so proud to be a leading journal in South Africa in terms of publishing papers fully open access and online, making this knowledge free and accessible to readers all over the world. The last decade has also seen a growth in the volume and urgency in calls for 'business as usual' in university curricula, pedagogy, staffing diversity, and leadership to be seriously challenged, and in many places disrupted and changed. We have been able to publish important papers engaging with some of these issues and debates, and have more in the pipeline for 2020.

Critical, thoughtful, reflexive research that gives voice to diverse positions, arguments, evidence and contexts is more important in education, now more than ever in this complex and often frightening age of 'post-truth', fake news, threats to accountable democracy, expansive human rights, and social and political plurality. CriSTaL is committed to publishing research that takes up important issues in higher education, particularly with relevance to the global South, and we are proud of the work we have given voice to thus far. As the journal continues to grow, as does the diversity of scholars that submit their work for consideration, in terms of the contexts, issues, and debates they represent.

This issue is no different, presenting a collection of five papers and two book reviews, by both South African and internationallly-based scholars, focused on issues of academic staff development, conditions affecting and enabling student access and success, and curriculum change in response to external factors in the wider social and political context.

In the opening paper, 'The obstinate notion that higher education is a meritocracy', Simpiwe Sobuwa and Sioux McKenna consider the significant concerns across higher education regarding student success, particularly in light of the high drop-out rates in South African universities. While there is a a great deal of local and international research that seeks to explain these statistics, the common-sense understanding is that those who do well are in this position because they work hard, are motivated, and are the 'right' students for higher education. This belief shores up an notion of higher education as a meritocracy,

where those with the 'right stuff' (e.g. hard work, motivation, the ability to read, write and think 'critically' and so on) will always do well, and that those who do not do well will need to keep trying harder. This article argues that while pervasive, this notion of higher education is invalid given the effects of numerous other mechanisms at play in students' educational experiences. Drawing from literature to discuss the problems of the meritocratic explanation, the article shows the ways in which this explanation fails to sufficiently account for the centrality of agency and the ways in which this intersects with societal structures. Sobuwa and McKenna argue that more useful understandings of student success and failure require social theory that acknowledges the complexities underpinning student success or failure, and resists any recourse to simplistic or common-sense explanations.

In the following paper, 'Going beyond the official domain in the search for the culture of employee learning: The case of junior support staff at a South African university', George Mavunga argues that Human Capital Theory have enabled employee learning and the cultures associated with it in South Africa and globally to be researched from the perspective of normative government or employer-initiated policies and programmes. However, this approach leaves critical gaps in the consideration of how institutional cultures and structures influence the ways in which junior support staff especially are able to act within their professional contexts. Using Basil Bernstein's (2000) theory of the pedagogic device, this paper suggests the existence of different domains of learning with respect to junior support staff at a South African university. The paper borrows from critical realism to advocate for an approach that asks critical and important questions pertaining to how structure, culture and agency interact in the development of junior support staff members. The answers to these questions, Mavunga suggests, may help universities to characterise the culture of employee learning more holistically, and in a more nuanced and contextually connected way.

Lunga Xolisa Mantashe and Vuyisile Nkonki tackle the issue of recognition of prior learning, or RPL, in the third paper. This is a mechanism used by higher education to give access to students older than 23, or without prior university or schooling qualifications that would normally enable admission (such as a Grade 12 leaving certificate for undergraduate entry, or a prior degree for postgraduate study). In this paper, the authors look closely at the provisions for RPL in South Africa in the policy provisions of the Council on Higher Education (CHE). Using Margaret Archer's constructs, namely structure, culture, and agency, this paper argues that there are commendable structural changes in the CHE's RPL policy which accommodate marginalised and unstructured experiential knowledge, thus equating it with 'scientific' knowledge produced by the university. However, there remain subtle preservations of material interests of the corporate agent (CHE policymakers) and the ideas, beliefs, and theories the latter hold about the place of unstructured learning and knowledge in universities. To advance this argument, the authors focus on critiquing three accommodative sub-units of the CHE's RPL policy, namely: the notion of exemption, the residency clause, and the ten percent ceiling on the number of applicants admitted to universities through RPL mechanisms. The authors close with recommendations, based on

their analysis, for reconsideration of some of these provisions to enhance student access through RPL.

In the fourth paper, Piers Von Berg considers citizenship education in a British university law school, and the meaning this curriculum holds for young law students. In the legal education context, notably in the UK and Australia, external factors in the profession have pushed law schools to include modules on citizenship education in their undergraduate curriculum. But, the inclusion of these modules have raised critical questions about what this education actually means to students, and whether it is achieving its professional and civic learning goals. Von Berg uses a multidisciplinary theoretical approach to citizenship to understand individual students' attempts to negotiate meaning, along with a qualitative methodology that allowed students a voice in the data collection and analysis. The findings show that some of the most formative experiences in developing a civic identity stem from students' interactions with peers and friends in a diverse student community. There is also a strong influence of a culture of performativity and credentialism on students' attitudes to learning about citizenship, which is perhaps unsurprising considering the nature of assessment and certification in higher education. The paper shows how both of these findings combine into a 'synthetic civic identity', shaped by a mixed environment of more open-minded civic norms and an instrumental and individualist outlook towards studies. This hybrid form of civic identity stimulates and challenges current narratives of tension in higher education.

In the final paper, Emma Whitelaw, Samantha Filby and Tessa Dowling look at 'Leveraging Language: Preliminary evidence from a language-based intervention at the University of Cape Town'. This paper assesses the effectiveness of essay tutorials offered to first-year economics students at the University of Cape Town in their first language (L1). All students in the study are first-language speakers of an African language. Using a mixed-method approach to assessing the impact of these tutorials on students' academic success in writing in their Economics assignments in English, the authors assessed first the impact of these tutorials on students' essay marks. Although their sample size is small [n=220], the findings provide preliminary evidence of a positive impact of the tutorial intervention on a student's final essay mark. The analysis of marks was followed by online evaluations completed by students and focus groups with selected students who participated in the tutorials. Students suggested that the tutorials were effective not only in helping them to improve their writing, and thus their marks. They also appreciated that tutorials like these that allow for unmediated L1 use in tertiary education classrooms can foster inclusivity and promote participation in otherwise largely monolingual spaces.

In closing this editorial, I would like to thank the editor-in-chief, Vivienne Bozalek, and all of the associate editors I have worked with over the last 8 years. This has been an enormously rewarding learning experience, and it has been a pleasure to work with a group of scholars committed to socially just, socially inclusive, critically relevant higher education. I wish the journal continued success as it grows into the coming decade, and officially welcome

Daniela Gachago from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology as the new managing editor from 2020.

Sherran Clarence
Managing Editor, 2013-2019