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Editorial

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This is a special issue of *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* (JHEA). Its title was the theme of the 6th International Colloquium on Sustainable Rural Learning Ecologies (SuRLEC)/Sustainable Learning Environment (SuLE) research team which was held from 29–31 October 2014 at the University of the Free State's QwaQwa campus, South Africa. The aim of the colloquium was to stimulate debates on how to develop an interdisciplinary, inter-institutional and international research rigour and culture. This aim was realized through the creation of an intellectual space where students, academics, theorists, researchers and practitioners of education and beyond came together for intellectual engagement. Scholarly pieces were presented by postgraduate students and academics to share their research work from different universities in South Africa (for example University of Venda, Tshwane University of Technology, University of South Africa, University of Johannesburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal), and international scholars came from Lesotho, Senegal, Zimbabwe, Australia and Jamaica. There were scholarly pieces presented by practitioners, for example by colleagues from the National Research Foundation.

Focus and discourse at the colloquium was on rurality and rural education which have, in many societies across the world, been perceived from a deficit frame of reference. The purpose of the colloquium was to achieve two goals. The first goal was to profile rural learning ecologies as sustainable spaces that require the reciprocal assistance of social justice, resilience, sustainability and development, to encourage discourses around rurality and rural education and encourage research in this focus area. The second goal of the colloquium was to unleash positive and powerful untold stories about rurality and rural education.

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The summary below gives the international and local flavour of the scholarly pieces that were part of the colloquium's proceedings. These are peer reviewed selected articles. Ato Kwamena Onoma in his paper 'Surpassing the Spectre of Impossibility: Ideational Impoverishment and the Quest for Sustainable Rural Learning Ecologies in Africa' makes an argument about the idea of sustainable rural learning ecologies in Africa which seems to constitute a contradiction in terms. His argument is that rural Africa seems to represent the opposite of the ideal setting for sustainable learning ecologies, which cultivate open, questioning and investigative spirits while fostering the acquisition of knowledge and skills. This paper shows that the deliberate creation of sustainable rural learning ecologies is warranted by peculiarities that position rural spheres as ideal domains for cutting edge learning on some of the most important questions in an Africa undergoing rapid transformation.

This line of argument was supported by Tshele John Moloi in his paper titled 'Using Indigenous Games to Teach Problem-solving in Mathematics in Rural Learning Ecologies' which explores the use of *morabaraba*, a board game, as an example of indigenous games which can be used to teach problem-solving in mathematics. This study is informed by a theory of community cultural wealth that posits community members as experts in finding their own solutions to local issues and the existence of knowledge which learners possess but is not used in the teaching and learning of mathematics. This article taps into the marginalized knowledge of subaltern communities to teach problem solving.

Milton M. Nkoane in his piece 'Sustainable Rural Learning Ecologies: A Pathway to Acknowledging African Knowledge Systems in the Arena of Mainstream of Knowledge Production?' proposes an idea of African scholarship and rural learning ecologies as a transformational agenda for knowledge construction. The paper conceptualizes sustainable learning ecologies as acknowledgement of knowledge construction within rural contexts embedded in African value systems. This article emphasizes the celebration of knowledge construction in these contexts as having comparative and competitive advantage on the global discourse. The paper concludes by dismissing views that any one pyramid of knowledge is by its nature superior to others.

Cias T. Tsoetsi and Sechaba Mahlomaholo's article titled 'Exploring Strategies to Strengthen Continuing Professional Development for Teachers in Rural South Africa' makes an argument about the professional development of teachers as a cornerstone for the provision of quality teaching and learning. Focus is on the competencies of teachers in South Africa which seem not to have improved as envisaged. This scholarly piece addresses this challenge by developing a strategy that could be employed to implement professional development programmes, drawing from a study conducted in two rural secondary schools in the Free State province. Findings from this study that used partici-

patory action research show distinct components of a strategy: establishment of a team comprising of stakeholders, creation of a common vision, drawing up a strategic plan, monitoring procedures, suggesting possible ways of improving on weaker spots.

Sylvia M. Ramaligela, Ugorji I. Ogbonnaya and Andile Mji in their article titled ‘An Investigation into the Effectiveness of the University Curriculum in Preparing Pre-service Technology Teachers’ look closely at the effectiveness of the university curriculum in preparing pre-service technology teachers. They examine the course guide of technology education course against the backdrop of the Grade 7–9 (senior-phase) technology policy document in South Africa. Their finding is that the university technology curriculum places emphasis on both content breadth and content strands. They argue for students to be given an opportunity to explore both content breadth and content depth as well as how content strands can be used to develop a deeper understanding.

Lebusa Monyooe in his scholarly piece ‘From Cradle to Grave: Transforming South Africa’s Learning Ecologies’ examines key organisational principles that underpin responsive transformation strategies that have potential to create spaces for critical engagement with basic education post the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa. This paper focuses on the deeper elements for transforming schools into sustainable learning ecologies. The paper concludes with plausible interventions that a country may deploy to improve education quality and system efficacy.

Thabiso Nyabanyaba in his article ‘Improving the Quality of Education Among Rural Learners Through the Use of Open and Flexible Approaches in Lesotho’s Secondary Schools’ shows how Lesotho’s learners continue to suffer from high dropout rates at primary level and poor access rates at secondary level particularly in rural areas. This paper highlights interruptions to schooling caused by poverty and the HIV/AIDS pandemic among learners in rural areas in Lesotho. The article demonstrates the sustainability of affordable initiatives in terms of improving quality of education among rural learners through the creation of circles of support.

Willy Nel in his article ‘Transformative Autonomy: Mixed Notes from Teachers to Higher Education’ makes an argument that transformative autonomy is ‘the form of autonomy in which school role players, have the urge to be involved with fellow role players in education development initiatives towards social transformation which contributes to democracy’. Here focus is on narrowing the gap between teaching practice and societal concerns since it recognizes that teachers do have a certain degree of autonomy over their professional practice but also a responsibility towards the evolving South African democracy. A key finding of this study is that participants generally acknowledged their control over curriculum aspects and some degree of control over matters of discipline.

The main conclusion is that participants display an intuitive understanding of their autonomy as teachers but still do not have a clear idea of how to link their expertise to societal transformation.

Maleho Letloenyane and Loyiso Jita through their paper titled “School-university Partnerships for Professional Development of Teachers: A Case of Lesson Study Intervention in Mathematics” show how school-university partnerships for professional development of teachers continues to be used extensively in South Africa to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, especially in mathematics. Their paper assesses the impact of partnership, which resulted in perceived changes in teachers’ instructional practices and curriculum decisions after intervention. The findings provide some empirical evidence that partnerships of this nature, between schools and universities, may prove valuable in attempts to improve the teaching of school mathematics, especially in the South African context.

Dipane Hlalele, Desiree Manicom, Julia Preece and Cias T. Tsotetsi, through their paper titled “Strategies and Outcomes of Involving University Students in Community Engagement: An Adaptive Leadership Perspective” compare how students and community members learned and applied their knowledge in four small scale university-community engagement projects. This paper draws on the concept of adaptive leadership as an approach and analytical tool. The findings suggested that the adaptive leadership approach contributed to stimulating shared ownership of learning.

Molaodi Tshelane and Secheba Mahlomaholo in their article titled “Creating Sustainable Learning Environments for Professional Curriculum Leadership Through Information and Communication Technologies” demonstrate how diverse school community members constructed a framework for the integration of ICT in the development of its professional curriculum leadership practices. This paper concludes by showing that performance reflected through professional curriculum practices, and strategies could contribute towards the creation of a sustainable learning environments.

Makeresemese R. Qhosola in her paper titled “Accounting Teacher Preparation: A Critical Accounting Perspective” provides an analysis of how the preparation of accounting teachers from the perspective of critical accounting as a theoretical framework. This paper argues that there are challenges in the FET school accounting classrooms and it seems that teachers struggle with content and pedagogical knowledge. This paper concludes by arguing that critical accounting is a means of reflecting or interacting with accounting information in order to challenge hegemonic and counter-discourse that disempower and marginalise the subaltern communities.

Sechaba Mahlomaholo in his scholarly piece “Creating Effective Postgraduate Learning Environment: An Analysis of an Intervention from Realist Social Theory” makes an analysis of two illustrative reports of the external examiners on some manuscripts of postgraduate students. The analysis in this article shows how sustainable postgraduate learning environments facilitate good academic performance. Prominence is placed on working together of the actors’ emotional and cognitive aspects. The reports indicate how academic performance is influenced by validation through a caring learning environment and the opposite of poor performance could be a mirror image of problems in this interaction. The paper concludes by arguing that agency and structure can and should not be collapsed into each other, even though the two co-constitute each other.

This special issue and the 6th SuRLEC/SuLE colloquium would not have been a success had it not been for the selfless intellectual contributions of scholars, researchers and practitioners who demonstrated an interest by troubling the discourses that communities are battling with around the globe. In this case the special focus is on the African context.

