

## REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

# Joining hands across the seas: The genesis of IASAS

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### *Keywords*

*Student affairs, international collaboration, professionalisation, globalisation, organisational history, life story.*

### *Introduction*

This paper will outline the journey, personal and organisational, taken by me with many friends of student affairs and services around the world to envision and then create a new global professional association – the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS). It has been a rather long journey, one that was not without bumps and barriers. While it took over 20 years to get IASAS from the germ of an idea to its current successes, it has proven to be well worth the struggle. IASAS serves as a platform that promotes and allows discussion of issues and best practices in our field: higher education student affairs and services. No matter that there are great differences in delivery methods, breadth of service, views of the student, and sometimes conceptual underpinnings, when focusing on the student, all these differences are celebrated in the context of common values, and make for interesting discussions by practitioners coming from over 30 countries.

I have been privileged to be at the centre of most of the efforts to form IASAS, a process not unlike the birthing and raising of a child (of which I have four). The reader will quickly see the parallels that bring the disappointments on one hand that are easily overshadowed by the joys of seeing your children grow and develop into adolescents and, eventually, adults. So goes the following personal and reflexive account of the genesis of IASAS.

### *Beginnings*

Ever since I discovered in 1993 that the practice of serving students exists in every country, albeit done differently (and admittedly challenging my monocultural bent at the time), I wondered about ways to connect practitioners and scholars for the purposes of sharing and assisting each other in this worthwhile of endeavours. Fulbright experiences in Germany, Japan and South Africa had sharply opened my eyes to what I thought was a real need.

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In 1994, while speaking to an audience of French and German student services providers at their annual conference in Bordeaux, I proposed the creation of a global virtual network of student affairs and services providers that would encourage sharing, cooperation, joint study tours and research, exchanges, and attendance at each other's conferences. Much to my surprise, the response was very positive and almost immediately new alliances were formed among the German Deutsches Studentenwerk (DSW), French Centre National Des Œuvres Universitaires et Scolaires (CNOUS), and the United States National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA).

### *International collaborations began to set the stage*

In the intervening years, and from 1995 to 2000 in particular, visits were arranged for teams from DSW, CNOUS and NASPA to gather in Europe to discuss possible collaboration. Exchanges were developed involving France, Germany and the United States. The NASPA International Symposium was launched in 1996 with over 125 attendees representing 21 countries. Individual members of these associations began to arrange mutual campus visits and study tours that crossed borders. For example, NASPA now has over ten exchange agreements with associations outside of the USA. This activity illustrated the need for sharing and collaboration among both practitioners and scholars in our field.

A number of factors contributed to this newfound interest in sharing across borders. The world generally was getting smaller. Corporations became multinational and needed a more global workforce. Governments around the world increasingly called for universities and colleges to meet the demand for increased international activity in government, business, non-governmental organisations, etc.

Higher education institutions were beginning to see international markets as ways to bolster enrolments and to add a cosmopolitan element to their campuses. Undergraduate and graduate students were increasingly studying outside their own countries. They also began looking for academic programmes at the graduate level and expressed interest in pursuing careers within the international education sphere. They wanted to become study abroad advisors, international student advisors, and/or faculty members who could teach and do research in some aspect of international education. To meet these new needs effectively, graduate education programmes, particularly in North America and soon in Europe, found that they needed to make changes to their programmes in order to meet this new surge in interest on the part of prospective students. In other words, a major shift towards internationalisation and globalisation was happening in both the private and public sectors and at all levels of society.

### *Cooperation was now becoming formalised*

In Europe, the Erasmus programme, which had started in 1987, evolved into the Socrates programme in 1994 with several other initiatives since then, and now what has become the Bologna Process, creating a European Higher Education Area in which students from participating countries can study anywhere within the European Union with common credit equivalencies and reciprocal fees. Paralleling this effort was the creation in 1999 of

the European Committee (now Council) on Student Affairs (ECStA) that has worked to assist students with the social welfare and infrastructure issues that were created by the open and “free” study across borders throughout the European Union.

Higher education student services leaders in countries of the Asia Pacific region created the Asia Pacific Student Services Association (APSSA) in 1988. That organisation has effectively served the needs of that region through conferences, institutes, student leadership experiences and written documents, all designed to keep practitioners abreast of the new trends in serving students. Both of these initiatives in Europe and the Asia Pacific region have been spectacularly successful.

One area of the globe that has not received the attention of most of us has been Central and South America. In 2005, the World Bank commissioned a study of higher education in Latin America, describing the lack of attention tertiary education was getting in this region from its own governments and from the rest of the world, and why it was important for these countries in the South to focus on this sector (De Wit *et al.*, 2005). More recently, the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education produced a communiqué calling for an African Higher Education and Research Area (UNESCO, 2009). Teferra and Hahn (2012) subsequently wrote in support of this concept.

Language barriers are often cited as the main issue in the struggle to improve international cooperation in Latin America. The other issue is the seemingly slow to no progress being made by Latin American governments in encouraging both study and research abroad as well as in attracting partners from the rest of the world. Recently, UNESCO and others have been focusing efforts in Latin America. The UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) is devoted to the development and transformation of tertiary education through the support of management of change. Its ultimate goal is to see that higher education in the region becomes an effective promoter of a culture of peace and human sustainable development based on principles of justice, equity, freedom, solidarity, democracy and respect of human rights (UNESCO website).

IASAS has made contacts in Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Peru and Ecuador and found that, while student services existed in every institution, very little was being done to organise or develop the staff, most of whom have no professional training in the field. There was interest in Ecuador in forming a national student affairs organisation, and IASAS pledged to support that effort as well as to develop basic online courses that may lead to a certificate of proficiency. In order for that to be effective it must take into account the local traditions and the context in which such services and programmes would be delivered at the university level.

### *A partnership with UNESCO*

In 2000, a staff member of UNESCO was addressing NASPA International Symposium participants and remarked,

“I am an academic and I have no idea what you people do. You should inform those of us in the academy about what it is that student affairs and services practitioners do, how you work with students and what that would look like if it were being done well.” (Personal recollection)

That was the challenge that started the movement to create somehow an image of our field as one that, on the one hand, meets local needs, culture and conditions, and on the other, belongs to a global family of practitioners working with tertiary education students in ways based on a common core of ideas and principles. Acting locally, yet thinking globally. Diverse in delivery, yet united in principle. And, in the final analysis, students are our common bond and purpose, providing the glue that holds us together across borders.

This may sound simple, an idea that should be relatively easy to carry out. In some sense it is quite easy to conceptualise, yet quite difficult to implement. I decided on two strategies: First, there was a need for a publication that described higher education student affairs and services and its theoretical base. Second, there seemed to be a need for a global organisation for our field of practice including those academics who teach and carry out research in this area. Let me take these one at a time.

First, let me address the process used to create the publication. Since UNESCO had expressed an interest in the idea of telling the academy what student affairs and services people do, I proposed that such a publication be published by the UNESCO Higher Education Division. The fact that the first World Conference on Higher Education was sponsored by UNESCO in 1998 certainly did help. It was during that conference, while there was no mention of the role of student affairs and services, that several familiar principles aimed at improving higher education were laid out by the conference participants from nearly 180 nations. I selected those principles that applied directly to the work of student affairs and services and used them to guide the new publication. It described our day-to-day work and those principles we value, including: students being at the centre of our work; valuing diversity; designing higher education to meet societal needs; teaching citizenship and leadership; valuing service to the community; the importance of career development and employability education; lifelong learning; and international cooperation. Once we established the fact that we hold many values in common with the rest of the academy, it seemed to lend credence to what we do.

The writing team needed to focus on ideas universally held by student affairs and services: those that are essential to our work. Therefore, we included chapters on student development theory, professional development, assessment and evaluation, and general management of student affairs and services. Following those sections we included a general description of the types of student services and programmes that fall within the rubric of student affairs and services and how they are carried out (Ludeman, 2002). The closing chapter of the first edition of the “manual” consisted of a resource directory of student affairs and related higher education agencies, organisations and associations around the world. This edition was published by UNESCO in 2002.

Also, beginning in 2000 there was an effort to begin designing a global organisation for student affairs and services. I created a group called I-Seven to begin looking at how such an organisation might be structured and presented to the global student affairs community for consideration. Members of the group came from Germany, France, South Africa, Mexico, Spain, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States. The first proposal was based on an organisation or association membership approach with provision for individual

membership for those countries where no organisation existed. From 2000 to 2005 members of the I-Seven group presented the proposal to various national and regional groups around the world. The response was mixed at best. Some support was evident in Europe and Africa, and there was little support from Asia and North America. The resistance involved two main objections. First, some groups felt that they were doing their own international work and didn't see a need for another layer at the global level with accompanying costs. Others felt that it was needless competition for their national groups. While several of us understood the rationale for resistance to a new kind of group at the global level, frankly, we also felt it a bit provincial to view it as a threat, one that could potentially drain badly needed resources from national or regional groups. I must admit this was very frustrating because I believed in globalisation so much I couldn't imagine there would be any real serious resistance to forming a group at that level. So go the best of intentions ...

### *South African diversions, departures and delights*

All this was happening as I was retiring from my regular job as senior student affairs officer at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and, much to my delight, beginning a year-long Fulbright grant to teach and do research in student affairs at the University of Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal) in Durban, South Africa. My focus naturally shifted to getting to know the people there and assisting in any way I could. My project focused mainly on doing consultations in Durban and across South Africa on such topics as the first-year experience, leadership and service learning, student retention, evaluation, assessment, professional development, research on knowing your students, and creating an academic option in the higher education studies programme for student affairs staff (in 2002 this masters level programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal was the only programme of its kind in all of Africa).

I also consulted with Cecil Bodibe on the formation of the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP) and Doc Nahasengo and Eric Sebokedi of NASDEV, the National Association of Student Development Practitioners, delivering papers at several of their conferences.

Later on in the decade I directed a Kellogg Foundation grant on research and student retention in South African tertiary education during which our South African institutional teams, made up of people from institutional research, academic affairs and student affairs, developed a model that allowed each institution to use baseline institutional student data to profile students who leave versus those who are retained. A CD-ROM was provided to all institutions and included a framework that, upon entry of institutional data on students, would give them the demographic and other factors that were significantly different between students who left and those who were retained. Our principal investigator was Amanda Lourens, Vice Rector for Research and Planning at the Potchefstroom Campus of North-West University in South Africa. Dr Lourens was and still is respected as one of South Africa's leading institutional researchers.

Furthermore, I suppose I am most proud of efforts to assist in establishing the Financial Aid Practitioners of South Africa (FAPSA) and the South Africa Chapter of the Association of College and University Housing Officers - International (ACUHO-

I). I worked with South African financial aid leaders like James Ngomane and Michael Davids of the University of KwaZulu-Natal and put them in touch with the US-based National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) who provided organisational assistance to FAPSA to get that organisation afloat. Eric Sebokedi of Tshwane University of Technology and I had known each other since my first days in South Africa. He wanted to form a national association for residence life and student housing staff. The Association of College and University Housing Officers – International gladly worked with South Africa to get organised. The final result was a South Africa chapter of ACUHO-I. In both cases described above I gave credit to the informal network I called IASAS with the notion of keeping alive the concept of this kind of organisation.

Thus, I also continued to promote a global student affairs organisation and had created an informal name: IASAS – the International Association of Student Affairs and Services. From 2000 to 2009 I promoted IASAS by providing services whenever I could. I edited the UNESCO/IASAS Manual and assisted potential graduate students in finding programmes that included international components. I connected newer staff who wanted to work in another country with potential employers around the world, a relatively new phenomenon at the time. I delivered lectures in over ten countries on the globalisation of student affairs and services and the need to organise worldwide. I also gave conference presentations on the potential partnership that should be forged between student affairs staff and the staff in study abroad and international student offices.

### *The partnership with UNESCO continues*

Eventually, in 2007, I contacted UNESCO to ask them to support the publication of the second edition of the UNESCO/IASAS book. Over the next two years we put together a multinational editorial team, and revamped the earlier manual into a book that we titled *Student Affairs and Services in Higher Education: Global Foundations, Issues and Best Practices* that was published in 2009 (Ludeman, Osfield, Oste, Wang, & Iglesias, 2009). It turned out to be much more complete than the 2002 edition and included new sections on student affairs and post-conflict countries, legal issues, professional ethics, and an entire section of individual country reports from 52 countries showcasing how student affairs and services are delivered in each of those countries. The new book was distributed widely, including a copy given to each participant at the Second World Conference on Higher Education in Paris in 2009. This gave us considerable visibility around the world.

Just recently I requested that UNESCO work with IASAS to publish a third edition that, if funded, will be targeted for publication in 2016 or 2017. We hope to expand the number of countries represented to over 70 and to enhance the resource section to reflect the increase in international activity throughout the world. It will hopefully continue to serve as a valuable resource for those who choose to improve upon their current offerings in student services and/or for countries that want to embark on new approaches in the field. The book continues to represent our basic values and principles, the more universal concepts we all build upon in our work with our students no matter who they are or what cultures they represent.

Finally, after several years of being semi-dormant, I decided it was time to try once more to raise the subject of forming a global organisation in student affairs, and to do so in a different way. I identified 25 people from 19 countries to serve in an advisory capacity to begin discussions about creating a global organisation. Out of this group approximately 15 came to a two-day meeting held before the 2009 NASPA Conference in Seattle, Washington (USA), with the intention of developing a set of principles and purposes and a vision and mission for a new global association in student affairs and services. At the conclusion of this marathon weekend work session these central documents were drafted and, after considerable input from around the world, now serve as the initial section of a constitution for the International Association of Student Affairs and Services or IASAS, which is the only truly global organisation for higher education student affairs and services. Throughout the following year several theme-based subgroups met virtually to flesh out the dynamics and priorities of this new organisation. Finally, on 1 March 2010, the inaugural IASAS constitution was approved by 25 charter members. IASAS now had finally achieved a more formal status.

Since 2010, a board for IASAS has been elected with officers including regional coordinators for Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North America and the Caribbean, Oceania, and South America. In 2013 IASAS achieved official charter status from the European Union in Brussels, Belgium. IASAS office thus came to be located in Brussels in the suite of offices of the European University College Association (EUCA). From its beginnings with 25 members, IASAS has grown to nearly 1 200 members from over 71 countries.

In addition to the UNESCO publication, IASAS mainly provides a platform for sharing among its members and member organisations. In 2012 IASAS, along with NASPA, sponsored the first Global Summit on Student Affairs that brought together leaders from around the world to discuss issues and practices in student services. IASAS also serves as an incubator for countries wishing to establish a national association in student affairs and services. Contacts have been made with Ecuador, Lebanon, Lithuania and Peru to offer assistance in creating such an organisation. We have assisted several national organisations in the United States that wanted to “go global”, including ACUHO-I, NACA – National Association of Campus Activities and NIRSA – National Intramural, Recreation and Sports Association.

In 2010 I met with officials of the European University College Association (EUCA) to discuss common interests. This has resulted in EUCA assisting in securing the IASAS charter in Belgium and the sharing of their offices in Brussels. EUCA will also host the 2014 Global Summit on Student Affairs and Services to be held in Rome, Italy.

So it appears that, regardless of some resistance early on, IASAS is firmly established as a new global force in higher education. For example, the IASAS board recently initiated a comprehensive strategic planning process that will result in a plan for the future based on input from the membership about what they thought IASAS should be doing over the next few years. I am optimistic that we will see even more activity and increased interest in the globalisation of student affairs and services and how it translates into enhanced student learning and development of the students that IASAS members serve.

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## *Consulted organisational websites*

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- Association of College and University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I): [www.acuho-i.org](http://www.acuho-i.org)
- Centre National Des Œuvres Universitaires et Scolaires (CNOUS): [www.cnous.fr](http://www.cnous.fr)
- Deutsches Studentenwerk (DSW): [www.studentenwerke.de](http://www.studentenwerke.de)
- European Higher Education Area: [www.ehea.info](http://www.ehea.info)
- European Council on Student Affairs (ECStA): [www.ecsta.org](http://www.ecsta.org)
- European University College Association (EUCA): [www.euca.eu](http://www.euca.eu)
- International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS): [www.iasasonline.org](http://www.iasasonline.org)
- National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA): [www.naspa.org](http://www.naspa.org)
- United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO): [en.unesco.org](http://en.unesco.org)