John Samuel (2013) teaches that democracy is the non-negotiable pillar of the South African nation because it is regarded as the most effective mechanism for ensuring that South Africans live in an equitable society, which is free and is marked by fairness, peace, hope and social justice. It is also through the operationalisation of and adherence to democracy and its principles that the whole movement towards the re-humanisation of this country was mounted. Higher education as the leader in all facets of people’s lives is thus consistently and constantly being called upon to disseminate and monitor proper implementation of this social arrangement.

This section of the South African Journal of Higher Education (SAJHE) explores, in the words of Samuel (2013), the critical relationship between higher education and the development of democracy in South Africa. This is considered to be central to the understanding of many complex challenges faced in public education today generally. Understanding the nature of this relationship and in particular how the state of democracy impacts on education is vital, if we are to address in a meaningful and sustainable way the deep and complex problems in South African education.
It is therefore the aim of the special issue to provide the impetus and space for the existing intellectual effort to make these issues the subject of enquiry and to explore the practice both at school and classroom level.

The key aim of the initiative is to develop a better and stronger understanding of the nature of the critical relationship between higher education and the development of democratic societies so that more effective advocacy and democratic educational practices can be explored and developed. The initiative has three central objectives, namely:

- **Scholarship and theoretical development**: The need to expand and extend our understanding, in a context of an emerging democracy, of this challenging relationship is vital. We have a unique opportunity in South Africa, given our past and our current possibilities to shape and contribute in significant ways to the global struggle of creating a just, equitable democratic education system.

- **Public policy engagement**: This objective seeks to understand how public policy either contributes to or frustrates the emergence of a stronger democratic society and its multi-variant impact on public education. It will also explore new and different ways to contribute to the process of public policy engagement, given the centrality of public participation in the strengthening of democratic culture.

- **Networking**: An important strategy for this project is to create a community of engaged scholars across a range of disciplines as this is deemed essential for the success of the initiative. Confronting complex and challenging issues requires not only the development of different paradigms but also a range of different disciplines and knowledge as well as innovative ways of working together to find deep and meaningful solutions.

The purpose is thus to trouble the notion of ‘public schools’ by way of capturing the initial intent and purposes of the new South Africa’s education system. The argument is that public schools (as stipulated in the policy directives of the democratic South Africa) are understood to be owned by, directed at and catering for the interests of the public where these schools are located. In this way schools become a public good, both literally and figuratively. Seemingly this meaning has shifted currently to imply schools which are not privately owned and are run almost exclusively by the state. The debate therefore is that the public no longer have direct control of their schools. They too have receded into the background and this has led to the estrangement between the public and their schools. There is lack of concerted effort between the two to synchronise their actions in order to provide quality education. The teachers are often demoralised as the curriculum is neither grounded in nor reinforced by the communities’ cultural wealth, to mention a few. Through this approach we take as a starting point the fact that the solutions to many of the problems afflicting the
South African education system and schools in particular lie in the communities where these schools are located. Thus, we take a position that ‘the public’, which is local, has the expertise to respond to the challenges faced by their schools, only if opportunities are created for them and demonstrated by the leadership of higher education.

The central question which all submissions to this special issue focus on is: how does higher education create sustainable learning environments (SuLE) in education generally and in schools in particular towards the cultivation of a democratic citizenry? Responses to this question grounded in both critical theorisation and empirical data are located in the areas of teaching, learning, curriculum and governance.

S. M. G. Mahlomaholo in his article, *Higher education and democracy: Analysing communicative action in the creation of sustainable learning environments*, initiates the discussion. He shows how the engagement of a university’s research team with the local school community facilitated democratic conversations and activities among its teachers, learners and parents towards the enhancement of learner performance in the study of Mathematics in a Grade 9 class. Given the above as basis, M. M. Nkoane in his article, *Revisiting pedagogic practices: A case for sustainable learning environments for postgraduate supervision studies*, makes a passionate plea for a critical emancipatory approach in the supervision of postgraduate research so that the privilege of higher education can directly and democratically benefit marginalised communities and their schools. D. Francis and M. Viljoen through their tightly argued article on *Learners’ perceptions and experience of the content and teaching of sexuality education: Implications for teacher education* build on this emerging argument. They demonstrate how gender differentials with regard to sexuality education are a reality which might scuttle all efforts towards democratisation of society if girls’ voices on this important matter are muffled. M. Tshelane concludes the argument being pursued in the above articles by writing that higher education can do much to advance and protect democracy through direct and meaningful engagement with the schools and the community as a whole. His article, *Democratic postgraduate student leadership for a sustainable learning environment*, shows how a critical, participatory action research and thus democratic mode of supervising postgraduate research ultimately enables students thus supervised to be champions and change agents towards the cultivation of a more democratic citizenry.

R. Balfour through his article, *‘Water, water everywhere ...’: New perspectives towards theory development for rural education research in (South) Africa*, takes the above argument to the next levels as he emphasises the value of knowledge production approaches which validate the poor and the marginalized rural communities in the broadening of democracy. His view is that the rural contexts need to formulate their own theory which will explain and capture their experiences and aspirations more accurately. Higher education in rural and mostly developing contexts can thus play the role of leading this process of bringing the plight of the rural to the attention of all thus broadening participation by all towards the enhancement and protection of democracy which valorises the voices of all, especially of the rural communities.
Beyond this theorisation which Balfour ably elaborates, N. Lange, M. Khau and L. Athiemoolam demonstrate how this can be done through the practice of teaching in their article, *Teaching practice at a rural school? ‘And why should we go there?’*. The three authors show how a paradigm shift in favour of rural school and their contexts can happen through immersion and support of student teachers in such contexts. The argument is that through such processes democratisation can happen where respect for other forms of knowing can become part of the main stream knowledge production and dissemination. The process of enhancing democracy through practical strategies such as the one suggested above is further elaborated on by B. Moreeeng who uses new ways of teaching History in schools as such mechanisms. In his article, *Reconceptualising the teaching of heritage in schools*, he provides further evidence that higher education through its transformative teaching and learning programmes can contribute towards the democratisation of our society. W. Nel concludes the above conversation in his article titled *Critical community psychology in education: An argument for transformative autonomy*. He emphatically observes that: ‘Higher education, by emphasising transformative autonomy during teacher education, can play a crucial role in framing education as a public good and for the furtherance of democracy.’

W. N. Msomi, G. J. van der Westhuizen and K. Steenekamp take the argument from a slightly different perspective as they show how practising teachers can actually learn from interacting with their environment in their article, *Teacher professional learning in the context of policy implementation*. It is not only about teachers imparting knowledge to rural and excluded contexts, but it is the case of those contexts also contributing greatly to the knowledge of the teachers who have been educated in higher education institutions. This helps in democratising the whole society through inclusion of rural and marginal voices into the mainstream discourses. T. Z. Zeru and L. C. Jita’s well-documented article, *Teacher induction in Ethiopia: Structures and practices*, reminds readers that the processes of democratisation of society through education are not solely a South African concern. Through findings from their study in Ethiopia they show how empowering newly appointed teachers by means of a sustained and formalised induction programme enables them to cultivate the requisite confidence which translates into better performance by their learners. Thus, democratisation is conceptualised as the ability to make good decisions and engage in informed actions.

A pleasant and optimistic conclusion to all the above discussions is captured in J. L. van der Walt, F. J. Potgieter and C. C. Wolhuter’s article, *Can universities meet their mandate to be socially critical as well as constructive?*. They emphatically say the following: ‘This article defends the claim that two conditions facilitate sustainable development, namely a democratic citizenry and social justice, and that in establishing these, the university is indispensable and ideally placed.’ This seems to have provoked a divergent view in A. Keet’s article, *Spectacle and spectators: Higher education and the ‘disappearance’ of democracy*. He concludes that ‘higher education contributes to the disappearance of democracy’ because ‘Higher education,
along with popular images, presents the state as the “terminal point for political thought” and is thus complicit in the absence of an authoritative politics outside the state’. Keet is further supported by M. Monnapula-Mapesela in her article on *Sustainable development as social equity: Policy contradictions and their impact on higher education*. Monnapula-Mapesela argues that ‘although education underpins the success of sustainable development (SD), higher education policy shows minimal concern for SD’.

The above discussion thus presents this section of *SAJHE* as a truly democratic conversation among higher education researchers, emphasising different points, constituting the debates and contradictions and clarifications therein. It is indeed a bricolage of thought in celebration of Samuel’s wish for a higher education which would lead to the democratisation of South Africa through education for social justice.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Work reported in this special section of the journal is based on the research supported in part by the National Research Foundation of South Africa.

**REFERENCES**

Samuel, J. 2013. Informal discussions as well as oral presentations during our Sustainable Learning Environments research team’s conversations.