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Peer-reviewed article**Rural students' transition in and through a semi-urban university:
Experiences from the National University of Lesotho****Pulane Lefoka**

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings of a study carried out at the National University of Lesotho (NUL). The paper explored the influence of 'rurality' on students who originate from the rural areas of Lesotho and analysed their transition at the NUL. The spatial geographic theory and narrative inquiry were adopted, and qualitative focus groups were utilised to collect data. The students were given an opportunity to conceptualise 'rurality' and narrate their stories about growing up and earlier schooling, as well as their learning experiences at the NUL. The findings revealed that rural students' educational trajectories are indeed filled with numerous challenges, mainly due to deprivation and limited exposure to technology in their earlier lives. The main recommendation made by the paper is that the concerned stakeholders ought to be mindful of the needs of all prospective higher education students, including those from rural backgrounds, and intervene accordingly.

Introduction

The Lesotho higher education landscape consists of three universities namely: (1) The National University of Lesotho (NUL), which was established in 1975, and for many years was the only university in the country (Ntimo-Makara, 2009); (2) the Malaysian Limkokwing University satellite campus established in 2008; and (3) Botho University (with its origins in Botswana) which branched into Lesotho in 2016. The NUL is thirty-four kilometers outside Maseru, which is the capital city of Lesotho. It is situated in the Roma valley, which is semi-urban and cosmopolitan in nature. By virtue of being the only public university in Lesotho, the NUL continues to cater for more than 50 percent of higher education students in the country, the majority of whom come from the rural areas of Lesotho.

There is a considerable disparity between urban and rural populations, in terms of educational facilities and other related services. Due to these disparities, students from deep rural backgrounds do not start their higher education on an equal footing with their urban counterparts (Moletsane, 2012; Azano & Steward, 2016; Timmis, 2018; Maddah, 2019; Timmis, Mqgwashu, Naidoo, Muhuro, Trahar, Lucas, Wisker & de Wet, 2019). While some rural students still manage to do well in their studies, their transition through higher education is, in most cases, not a smooth one (Masaiti, Banda, Kalinde & Bwalya, 2021). Trahar, Timmis, Lucas and Naidoo (2020) indicate that there is a significant amount of research on equity and access to education, but little research has been done on mediating effects of rurality on higher education. In this regard, Masaiti et al. (2021) observe that the influence of rurality is generally not sufficiently understood within the education discourse related to the provision of equal opportunity. Hence there is a need to explore this area further.

Carrying out research on rurality is an idea that was initiated by the Southern African Universities Learning and Teaching (SAULT) Forum in 2017. This coincided with the Southern African Research in Higher Education (SARiHE) focus on aspects of rurality. The project attracted various members of the Forum who are located across Southern Africa, including those based in Lesotho. Therefore, this paper reports on the findings of a study carried out at the NUL with a particular focus on students who originate from the countryside. The paper explored the influence of rurality on these students' transition at the NUL, guided by the following objectives:

- To establish rural students' understanding of the concept of rurality
- To identify the challenges faced by rural students during their transition into higher education
- To propose support measures that can ease rural students' transition into higher education.

Literature review

This literature reviews considers the conceptualisation of rurality and its effects in education. Specific attention is paid to effects relating to higher education. Reference is further made to what rurality means in the Lesotho context.

Conceptualisation of rurality

Leibowitz (2017) indicates that a precise conceptualisation cannot be easily attainable due to complexities surrounding this notion. Nonetheless, the meaning of this concept has been framed in

association with geographical location, culture, material resources and identity. Rurality is further defined in terms of impoverishment, isolation, and deficit discourses. It brings to mind thoughts of cornfields, slowness, quietude, lack of public transportation and other infrastructure, and limited resources (Corbett, 2014; Maddah, 2019).

In the literature, rurality is further associated with notions of passivity, traditionalism, disadvantage and even backwardness (Azano & Steward, 2016; Timmis, 2018; Timmis et al, 2019). Deficit thinking is defined by Moletsane (2012) as one of the hindrances for rural students' transitions into higher education. Rural students are confronted with unfamiliar environments, with different social practices and a campus culture that leaves them feeling inferior (Timmis et al, 2019). Maddah (2019) adds that rural students are seen as slow, socially isolated and prone to lower academic performance than their urban peers.

In Southern Africa, specifically, rurality represents a particular aspect of inequality (Leibowitz & Lefoka, 2018). In conceptualising the term 'rurality', the SAULT Forum understood it to be a demographic as well as social category, which intersects with other indicators of social inequality (Leibowitz & Lefoka, 2018). For the purpose of this paper, rurality is understood in terms of distance from the nearest urban area, lack of facilities and infrastructure, unavailability of resources and, sometimes, social deprivation.

Rurality in the Lesotho context

Lesotho is a relatively small country that is completely landlocked by South Africa. It is also one of the countries in the world at the highest altitude. Large parts of the relatively small country are rural and mountainous (Jacobs & Tlali, 2015). In the Lesotho setting, therefore, rurality is defined in terms of remoteness from the towns, limited services, lack of infrastructure and difficult living conditions (Jacobs & Tlali, 2015). Rural Lesotho is also characterised by poor housing mostly built out of mud, stones or sticks and often lacking proper ventilation due to the absence of windows. Safety and sanitation are also some of the challenges facing rural people (Marrion, 2016).

Jacobs and Tlali (2015) indicate that although basic equipment is provided to rural schools, teaching aids are largely non-existent. Teachers in rural schools also have to manage multi-grade classes. Rural areas also battle to attract qualified teachers due to their inaccessibility and harsh climate conditions. The above challenges are exacerbated by lack of electricity (Mpholo, Meyer-Renschhausen, Thamae, Molapo, Mokhuts'oane, Taelle, & Makhetha, 2018). This means that a majority of rural households use wood or cow dung as fuel. Schools do not have science laboratories or computers. Hence students from these areas only come across computers for the first time when they transition into higher education (Mpholo et al, 2018). In light of these circumstances, the plight of students who grow up in rural areas cannot be overemphasized.

Rural students' transition into higher education

Devlin, Kift, Nelson and Smith (2012) contend that those who teach students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have to know and respect their students, understand their context and embrace what their students bring and contribute to higher education. This view is further underscored by Hlengwa

and Naidoo (2018:1) who emphasise that “knowing who our students are, and their potentialities, is essential for socially just teaching and learning, which is characterised by an acute awareness of the political, social, cultural and material context that influences learning”. Despite the foregoing view, it seems higher education practices are perpetually anchored in Eurocentric or Global North ideologies thereby marginalising practices from rural areas and the Global South (Leibowitz, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

As pointed out by Manathunga (2018), twenty-first century universities are dominated by neoliberal and globalising capitalist culture. This places focus on producing consumable knowledge that ignores time and place, and advances colonial-style discourses designed to support Eurocentric knowledge. As further argued by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021:86):

the Eurocentric idea of a universal knowledge where local and geography does not matter has given ammunition to the neoliberal notion of global economy of knowledge. Consequently, a ‘global turn’ and an idea of a ‘global university’ is being pushed forward.

Accordingly, university teaching approaches often include fast-paced teaching approaches wherein the lecturer presents information to students or gives handouts to study in search of answers to be reproduced (Banda & Kapwepwe, 2020).

This state of affairs leaves rural students feeling left out and isolated. This is because they are used to rural teaching approaches, which include slow-paced guidance, instruction, questioning that is paced with the learners’ abilities, as well as facilitation of student collaboration and active participation (Banda & Kapwepwe, 2020). Nonetheless, the status quo continues despite the fact that higher education is supposed to be a public good that caters for all prospective students irrespective of their geographical or social background. This therefore violates the principle of social justice which the decoloniality project is seeking to advance. Thus, decoloniality aims to undo the multi-layered inequalities related to rurality, class, gender and race, by bringing as much equity as possible to every person, every sphere of knowledge and every locality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; 2021).

The above position is supported by Kaya and Seleti (2013), who argue that the Eurocentric approach to African higher education has proven to be divorced from indigenous and rural practices. This, according to Trahar et al. (2020), is a clear example of how colonialism continues to negatively affect rural students in higher education. As advocated by Hlalele (2012), social interventions should be put in place to ease the plight of these rural students. Leibowitz, Mqgwashu, Kasanda, Lefoka, Lunga and Shalyefu (2019) argue that higher education has to create space that inspires agency and interventions for rural students, so that they can operate on par with their urban counterparts.

Theoretical grounding

Rurality and its effects on education are usually framed within the spatial geographic theory as defined by Beach, Johansson, Ohrn, Ronnlund and Per-Ake (2019). According to this theory, ‘space’ is understood as continuously in process and shaped through socio-spatial and material practices, while ‘geography’ encompasses social and cultural life in particular locales (Beach et al., 2019). In support of this theory, Corbett (2014) argues that the emergence of spatial thinking represents an opportunity

to re-examine the significance of space and place in educational practices. This theory holds that there is a close link between space, place and the construction of spatial identities as well as social relations (Corbett, 2014).

The spatial geographic theory is regarded as relevant in researching rurality since it debunks the 'spatial blindness' that persists in education, which assumes that students from metropolitan and rural areas have the same needs. A further serious concern is that educationalists assume that rural students need to become less 'rural', and swiftly adapt to the university environment (Masaiti et al., 2021). There are indications that instead of assisting rural students to embrace their identity, the higher education culture often compels them to reconstruct their identity through hegemonic understandings of urban living (Beach et al., 2019).

According to the spatial geographic theory, education is perceived as equally significant to rural people, as their understanding of it is formed in concrete space and time contexts (Corbett, 2014). Furthermore, Manathunga (2018:104) clarifies that "place-based education acknowledges that a sense of place is fundamental to being truly human; that there is a profound relationship between people and their environments". Based on this view, it can be noted that this theory resonates with other Southern theories which seek to undo multi-layered forms of inequalities that intersect in rurality, class, gender and race. Among others, it seeks to ensure social justice by advocating for redress of the inequalities that affect rural education (Leibowitz, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; 2021).

The preceding literature and theoretical perspective provided context and illuminated the discourses associated with 'rurality'. Against this background, the next section will look into the research design and methodology adopted in this study.

Research design and methodology

This study was framed within narrative inquiry, and qualitative focus groups were utilised to collect data. Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to study the lives of individuals through the use of life stories or biographies (Hussain, Elyas & Nasseef, 2013). The approach is further underscored by Daiute (2014) who regards the storytelling method as suitable for exploring socially situated phenomena. This form of inquiry seeks to understand real-life experiences and provides for a rich description of these experiences, as well as an exploration of the meanings which participants ascribe to these experiences. As argued by Wang and Geale (2015), as well as Grady, Clandinin and Toole (2018), narrative inquiry amplifies the voices that may have otherwise been dimmed. This is useful in the context of this research because it gives voice to rural university students to relate their experiences and the effects of these experiences on their education, as perceived by themselves. The focus groups were conducted with the conviction that a meeting-like setup would produce a wide range of responses while at the same time creating a less formal and relaxed atmosphere (Nieuwenhuis, 2015).

We constituted a research team of four scholars. Two were lecturers while the other two were academic developers based in the Centre for Teaching and Learning, who were also members of the SAULT Forum. The lecturers were based in the faculties of Education, as well as Science and Technology. These lecturers were requested to identify rural students in their classes and invite them to participate in the study. Although we had invited ten students, we ended up with a total of fourteen

students who were keen to participate. Four of the students were from the Faculty of Science and Technology, while the rest were from the Faculty of Education. Five students were male and the rest were female.

Four focus groups were conducted with three students each, while a fifth one consisted of two students. These were conducted over five working days, each session starting at 17:00. During the focus groups, the students narrated their biographies by sharing what rurality means to them, their educational journeys, as well as their transition into university education. All the interviews were conducted in English. Those who had narrated their stories were then asked to document them in a written form, and come back to read them to the group. They did so diligently.

The culmination of the data collection came when the research team and participants all converged in one collective focus group, among which there were visiting international professionals. This group of professionals were drawn from universities in Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Eswatini, Zambia and the United Kingdom. Each participant was allocated 5 to 6 minutes to share their story. The presentations were followed by discussions, which gave the research team and participants an opportunity to ask questions and make comments. This methodology allowed for students' voices to be heard, and it also afforded them a deeper reflection on their experiences. For the purposes of data analysis, these stories were transcribed verbatim and were analysed using qualitative inductive codes that emerged from the data itself (Meriam, 2009). In terms of theoretical positioning, the emerging themes were scrutinized for whether and how they underscored the assumptions made by the spatial geographic theory. That is, the themes were analysed for the extent to which they illuminated the influence of rurality on students' transitions into higher education (Beach et al., 2019).

Ethical considerations

The researchers paid special attention to ethical issues that came up in the process of conducting this research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Strydom, 2011). Consultation was undertaken with the Office of the University Registrar to grant the research team permission to conduct the research in the institution. Although students did not sign consent forms, they verbally agreed to participate in the study. However, they expressed a need for recognition and demanded that the typed stories should be made available to them, and we obliged. We also ensured confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study so that we could protect the dignity of the participants (Cohen et al, 2011). As such, the participants were allocated codes to disguise their identity. For example, the participants were labelled S-1 to S-14, where 'S' designates 'student'. This also ensured ease of reference when reporting the findings.

Findings

The findings indicate that there are some common experiences among students from rural areas and that they indeed endured a number of challenges in their educational trajectories. Against this background, the findings have been categorised into three broad themes and related sub-themes. The first theme pertained to (1) rural students' description of the concept of rurality and related earlier schooling experiences. This theme was further broken down into four sub-themes, namely: (1.1) little value attached to education, (1.2) lack of career guidance and ignorance about further education, (1.3)

lack of parental support, and (1.4) harsh weather conditions. The second theme entails (2) rural students' experiences at the university. This was further categorised into the following sub-themes: (2.1) inability to cope with teaching and learning approaches, (2.2) difficulties with the use of technology, and (2.3) challenges in navigating campus infrastructure. The third theme consists of (3) challenges experienced by rural students while navigating the university social life. This was further divided into the following sub-themes: (3.1) lack of budgeting skills, (3.2) isolation and homesickness, as well as (3.3) uncomfortable friendships.

Rural students' description of rurality and related earlier schooling experiences

The participants were asked to first give a description of the concept of rurality before they could commence with their stories. Their description revealed that most of them associated rurality with several difficulties, which are particularly related to the social, environmental and climatic conditions experienced in the rural areas.

Little value attached to education

By virtue of sharing their understanding of the concept of rurality, these students got an opportunity to reflect deeply on their growing up and earlier schooling experiences, as well as how these shaped or influenced their learning. As indicated in the participants' own words:

Rurality is signified by very small villages of few households and most of them are of the same clan. The place is surrounded by mountains and there is lack of infrastructure, sanitation facilities, electricity, health centres and education is not seriously thought about in the village. The problem is with the boys because most of them do not even know how to read and write. Normally girls go as far as end of primary school. (S-1)

As indicated above, the lack of infrastructure in the rural areas could be a demonstration of little value attached to rural education by educational authorities. This also ripples down to the little value the rural people themselves attach to education. This is indicated by the fact that most boys did not even attend school while most girls go as far as primary school. This point is supported by another participant who noted that:

Rurality is a life of misery. There is lack of infrastructure, clean running water, health services, a limited number of schools and a small number of teachers in a school with heavy workloads. It also involves students that are never exposed to the modern ways of living such as the use of technology. (S-4)

From the above quotation, it also became clear that learners endure difficult circumstances due to having fewer qualified teachers who were themselves overloaded. The absence of educational resources, especially technology also posed a hindrance.

Lack of parental support

It seems that some parents also did not prioritise their children's education as they added to schooling difficulties by burdening them with household chores. One participant divulged:

My father made sure that, before I went to school, I fetched some wood and water for him and that became my daily job in the morning and after school. It was not easy. I knew that if I failed to abide by his command, he would whip me. Sometimes I would arrive late at school and I would get punished. That made me dodge classes as I was scared of being punished. (S-9)

This illustrates that some rural learners had little support from the home. Due to their fear of being punished twice (both at home and school), they ended up avoiding school, which undoubtedly affected their learning.

Lack of career guidance and ignorance about further education

The findings revealed that participants did not know about university education, and did not aspire to go beyond secondary schooling. The quotation below helps to clarify the point made:

Rural students lack a lot of knowledge about post-secondary education. Even before applying to the university, there is no guidance given to them concerning the choice of courses to study. (S-2)

Another participant added:

I obtained a first-class pass from my previous high School. My teacher talked to me about going to the University. I was hearing about the word university for the first time as a place for further education. The teacher helped with application forms so that I could come to the National University of Lesotho. I am thankful to this teacher because I would not be here. (S-3)

This lack of career guidance and ignorance about post-secondary education is a disadvantage for rural learners and it negatively affects their aspirations for further education.

Harsh weather conditions

Harsh weather conditions added to these students' hardships. This is what one participant had to say:

Harsh weather conditions were a big challenge in the rural areas. Sometimes I could not go to school for a number of days or weeks depending on how heavy it had snowed and that affected my learning negatively. (S-11)

Another participant reiterated:

Weather conditions were a challenge. The rainy days were even worse because we arrived at school with wet clothes and the body cream all washed away. I would sit in a classroom shivering and it was not easy to concentrate. (S-14)

The above quotations indicate that rural learners either endured considerable harsh weather conditions, or they had to skip school whenever the weather was bad. There is no doubt this negatively hampered their learning as some would miss a lot of school days due to snow or heavy rains.

Rural students' learning experience at the university

The participants also shared their learning experiences while transitioning from secondary school into university. These experiences show an inability to cope with the teaching and learning approaches, difficulties with the use of technology, and challenges in navigating campus infrastructure.

Inability to cope with teaching and learning approaches

The participants observed that the basic (primary and secondary) education levels are administered differently in comparison to higher education. Thus, some participants had difficulty adjusting to the fast-paced teaching and learning approaches. As articulated by one of the participants:

University work is really hard. I got very low grades because I had to learn lecturers' expectations and styles of teaching and that took me time to understand. I had a lot of pressure because I had to have good time management skills in order to do my work properly. Unfortunately I did not possess such skills. (S-1)

Adjusting to the lecture method was a challenge and this was made worse by the fast-pace and unfamiliar accents of some of the lecturers. This is what another participant had to say:

Coping with the lecturing mode of teaching was a big challenge when I first arrived at the University. I was used to slow-paced teaching coupled with teachers writing notes on the chalkboard at high school level. Dictating of notes by our lecturers was not easy for me as sometimes we were taught by foreign lecturers who were very fast in pronouncing some of the words and sometimes I missed the very important information they were giving. (S-3)

Some participant illustrated that it was a struggle to cope with the independent learning that was required of them. This is what one participant had to say:

I also needed help adjusting to the lecturer's demands on the mode of learning. This lecturer told us that he will give us only 10% of what we ought to know. The remaining 90% was for us to do on our own. I needed help. (S-2)

This clearly indicates that some rural students came under-prepared to cope with the demands of the university academic culture.

Difficulties with the use of technology

Due to the lack of exposure to technology in their previous schools, some participants struggled to adjust to the university's technological demands. Lack of technological skills was a big hurdle for some of these students that negatively affected their studies. One participant stated that:

Assignment had to be typed on a computer but I was really troubled by that because I had no computer skills. Seeking help from other people was my only option but it was quite a challenge because I knew no one at first and I was a shy person. That hindered my learning process because I was behind in everything. (S-10)

Another participant highlighted that:

Access to internet in general was indeed another factor that affected me negatively because I did not even know the Wireless Network, let alone the mention of the Learning Management System on which assignments and announcements were posted. As a result of my ignorance, I would find myself left behind when others were up to date on everything concerning the courses they were taking. (S-11)

Challenges in navigating campus infrastructure

Due to the poor infrastructure that the rural students were used to in their earlier schooling, they had challenges finding their way around the university campus. This also illustrates that the orientation programme was inadequate in assisting them to settle into the university academic life. This is what one participant had to say:

I had a difficulty to locate seminar rooms. My schools did not even have a science lab or a library, it was not that easy to read and do the assignments at the NUL library. The worst was the use of internet, using smartphones and laptops was really challenging in a way that, I was not able to connect to the internet while searching for materials in the library since I had no idea how to do it. (S-11)

Another participant reiterated that:

Life in the first year was not that much easy at all. My high school did not have a library. Sometimes I used to go to [the] library to find certain books that we were required to read, but I would return without getting the requested book due to lack of library search skills. (S-14)

The above findings indicate that students from rural backgrounds struggle to cope with the university academic culture and that without prior exposure and support these students do indeed lag behind.

Navigating the university's social life

Independent decision making was new and that led some rural students to feel uncomfortable about the level of freedom at their disposal, both in their finances and personal lives. Some also felt isolated and homesick, while others found themselves in uncomfortable friendships.

Lack of budgeting skills

Budgeting was cited as one of the serious challenges, as some of these rural students had not been exposed to handling money before. One participant disclosed:

Another big problem was managing the stipend we get from National Manpower Development Secretariat (NMDS). I had no control over my budget. Handling large amounts was new to me. So, I used it recklessly without putting important needs into consideration. (S-8)

Another participant was even embarrassed to mention:

I had no knowledge of banking services and could not use the ATM card. I remember one day my debit card was captured at the ATM. I was so confused that I wanted to drop out of school due to fear that I had caused the bank a problem. (S-13)

In this instance, the student felt that the bank card being retained by the ATM was a result of their own inexperience and ignorance.

Isolation and homesickness

Some of the participants indicated that they experienced challenges being separated from their families and adjusting to the university social life. As expressed by one participant:

Being one's own boss really challenged me. I also missed my family and I wished I could have a chance to talk to my parents but I did not even have a cell phone, let alone the literacy to operate technology. (S-7)

Another participant related:

I had no one to share my academic and social problems with. I failed to understand that I am an adult to conduct myself with no help of parents since I was not exposed to too much freedom at home. (S-4)

Uncomfortable friendships

Some participants shared bad experiences they had in some of the friendships they made. This is what one participant had to say:

One of my problems was that of befriending different people with different choices, opinions, and mind-sets totally different from mine. I thought they were too clever for me because of being from urban areas. I thought I had to listen to whatever they were telling me. Some just pretended to be friends while in fact they were my enemies. (S-1)

From the above findings, it becomes evident that students who come from rural areas have various challenges that they encounter in their educational trajectories. These challenges pertain to both their academic and social life. While the university may provide information during orientation, they still experience difficulties. Unfortunately, these challenges not only affect learning but, in most cases, hinder completion.

Discussion and recommendations

Students who enter university from rural backgrounds have unique experiences compared to their counterparts from the urban parts of the country (Maddah, 2019). In the case of Lesotho, it becomes clear that rural students also face numerous challenges in their transition into higher education, mainly due to the rural-urban imbalances that characterise this country. As a prelude to exploring these challenges, the students were first asked to share their understanding of the concept of rurality, which was in line with the spatial geographic theory that foregrounds place or space in researching rurality (Corbett, 2014; Beach et al, 2019). This was necessary to ensure that the students reflected on the place or space that laid a foundation for their educational trajectories.

Their description turned out to be congruent with the conceptualisation of rurality adopted in this paper provided in the literature section. For instance, they indicated that rurality means, among others, a geographic area that is located away from the cities or towns, where only a few services are available (Leibowitz, 2017; Maddah, 2019). For some, rurality means a purely traditional area, with traditional ways of living and doing things. In their view, the rural society upholds traditional practices including the expectation that school-going children miss school to do some chores. They have experience of learning in poor infrastructural settings. While these findings do not explicitly reveal whether or not these rural students subscribe to the deficit view of rurality, they do however foreground the difficulties they had to endure in their growing up and educational journeys. They were also aware of how lack of exposure, especially to technology, adversely affected their transition to higher education.

The findings revealed that rural students join university education without much of the requisite information and skills necessary for adjusting to the university's academic culture. As such, they tend to be overwhelmed with both academic and social demands (Beach et al., 2019). For example, the students were daunted by the fact that they had to do the bulk of the work independently, while at the same time they struggled to cope with fast-paced lecturing where information was presented and handouts issued without adequate guidance and explanation (Banda & Kapwepwe, 2020). This implies that higher education teachers need to be more conscious and empathetic of the fact that their students come from different backgrounds (Devlin et al., 2012). As indicated under the methodology section of this paper, during the final collective focus group, the participants presented their biographies in the presence of some international academics. This group of professionals considered their participation as an opportunity for them to reflect on their own teaching. The implication is that

more higher education teachers need to engage in this type of reflection and review their teaching practices accordingly.

The foregoing position is underscored by the literature, which indicates that those who teach students from low socioeconomic backgrounds must know and respect their students, understand their context and embrace what their students bring and contribute to higher education (Devlin et al., 2012; Hlengwa & Naidoo, 2018). Thus, there should also be application of teaching approaches that are accommodative of rural students. Higher education should regard decoloniality and the related spatial geographic theory as imperatives to be considered to ensure equitable access on the part of students from different socio-cultural backgrounds (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Banda & Kapwepwe, 2020). For instance, these students should undergo a comprehensive orientation programme with specific focus on study skills and life skills required to ease their transition.

In addition, the participants highlighted prior ignorance about education beyond secondary schools. This implies that learners from poor rural backgrounds do not get the requisite exposure and information that prepares them for education beyond secondary schooling. This affects how they engage with education beyond their local schooling. These experiences also shape their expectations and learning practices at the higher education level. These findings necessitate the provision of career guidance to sensitise rural secondary school students about post-secondary education opportunities and expectations. The findings also have implications for various higher education stakeholders, namely: policymakers, administrators, student welfare services, as well as teaching and learning support centres. Thus, the different stakeholders need to advance equity interventions with a view to uplift the lives of rural people, especially in terms of educational facilities (Hlalele, 2012; Leibowitz, 2017).

Conclusion

This paper focused on rurality and how it affects rural students' transitions in and through higher education. As highlighted in the recommendations, it would indeed be significant for stakeholders to be mindful of all prospective higher education students, including those from rural backgrounds. Equally important, higher education teachers are required to reflect on their teaching practices with an intention to accommodate students from poor rural backgrounds. Our view is that 'spatial blindness' is an issue that needs to be addressed with utmost seriousness, especially in higher education. Hence interventions and systemic adjustments need to be made in order to ease rural students' transition in and through higher education. These include upgrading of facilities in rural schools and in rural areas in general, provision of career guidance, instituting a comprehensive orientation programme and review of higher education teaching and learning approaches.

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