

# Rurality and Student Transitioning in Higher Education: An Exploration of Views of University of Zambia Students

*Gift Masaiti, Dennis Banda, Bibian Kalinde and Katongo Bwalya  
University of Zambia, School of Education*

## Abstract

*The University of Zambia, located in Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia, has an enrolment system which is open to all deserving candidates. Cognisant of the degree-attainment gap between rural and urban areas of the country, the university introduced a Rural Affirmative Policy that is envisioned at augmenting enrolments of rural applicants. This article investigated the scopes of rurality and its influence on the transition to higher education amongst students with rural backgrounds. Using unstructured interviews, sixteen conveniently sampled students were probed in order to obtain the most in-depth lived experience information on how their rural backgrounds influenced their settling down and learning at the University of Zambia. A categorical analysis of the data collected in the study resulted in five emerging themes: context of rurality among students, students' transitioning, challenges faced by students, coping strategies adopted by students and established support systems for students with rural backgrounds and their progression and completion rates. Results of this study suggest that students from rural communities face additional challenges in order to adjust to the university compared to students from urban and sub-urban areas. Apart from the affirmative policy on admission, there are no mechanisms put in place to cushion the cultural shock such students face once on campus.*

**Key words:** *Rurality, Orientation, Academic Performance, Remoteness, Transitioning, Higher Education*

## Introduction and Context

While rural students have managed to excel in urban universities, it is common knowledge that transitioning into these universities is not always a smooth sailing experience. This said, the influence of rurality is generally not sufficiently understood within the education discourse related to equality, equity and generally provision of equal opportunity. It is either ignored, viewed in a deficit light, romanticised or homogenised. The relevance of the concept of rurality is highlighted in the present era when equity or access to higher education and academic success are highly politicised, but not explored empirically and systematically in relation to theories on learning (Masaiti, Njobvu and Kakupa, 2018).

The concept of rurality is at once demographic, geographic and cultural (Roberts and Green, 2013). In some instances, it is defined 'empirically' as having sparsely populated areas and ontologically as 'a category and a set of experiences' (Moreland, Chamberlain and Artaraz, 2003: 56).

There are problems with generalising rurality (Roberts and Green, 2013) since not all rural contexts are the same. There exists a continuum of contexts of sparse population, small towns and large towns and contexts of privilege and lack of access to resources may even exist side by side (Moreland, Chamberlain and

Artaraz, 2003). Rurality has been associated with discourses of traditionalism, primitivity disadvantage and even backwardness (Robert and Green, 2013).

‘Spatial blindness’, is a large source of concern, as it assumes students from metropolitan and rural areas have the same needs. A further serious concern is that educationists assume that rural students need to become less rural, than what they are in order to be adaptive to the university environment (Banda, 2008). They are even expected to shed off their rural skins overnight and even speak in broken vernacular languages they came with to appear urban. Note also that Rurality is a particular condition in the global South, given the legacy of colonialism and land confiscation.

Higher education is a public good, with potential benefits for the individual in terms of social mobility, knowledge acquisition, understanding (Williams, 2014) and human flourishing as well as benefits for the social sphere (Scott, 2015; Leibowitz *et al.*, 2012). It follows from this that the benefits of higher education could accrue to contexts from which higher education students are drawn. One difficulty with this assertion is when the education system socialises students to misrecognise and even look down upon where they come from (Banda, 2008). Mqgwashu (2016) argues that higher education encourages students to turn against rural life and throw any resemblance of it in a bin of forgotten things. This underscores the importance of an inclusive higher education system, that encourages the participation in universities of students from all social groupings and all geographical locations in a country, and which encourages students to see the value of all social and geographic contexts from which students are drawn away from (Banda, and Islam, 2012).

Expanding access and participation in higher education has been a major and on-going concern for most African countries, including Zambia. What appears to be of concern now is the continuing and significant lack of academic achievement of most students from historically under-represented groups (Masaiti, 2018). This argument has also been made in South Africa by (Mqgwashu, 2009; Morreira, 2017) where scholars assert that students’ achievement dynamics are a function of the colonised higher education landscape failing to embrace their social, cultural and individual experiences. This might not be such a surprise to a country such as South Africa because the country has a history of marginalisation and exclusion based on race, land dispossession and a domination of imperialist economic power through seizures of mineral wealth as argued by Oyedemi (2018).

Apart from the Southern African University and Teaching forum (SAULT) which has devoted space and time to understanding rurality in the region, the Southern African Rurality in Higher Education (SARiHE) has also been actively involved in issues related to rural student transition in higher education. SARiHE has mostly focused on understanding how students from rural backgrounds in South Africa negotiate the transition to higher education and their different trajectories through university. SARiHE argues that there is a lack of recognition of students

from rural areas, and their potential to re-shape universities. Rural students are poorly accommodated as universities are somewhat prepared for Urban students from better off backgrounds.

Relebohile (2012), gives a very interesting account about rurality in South Africa in the article on *Repositioning educational research on rurality and rural education in South Africa: Beyond deficit paradigms*. He laments that two decades after the demise of apartheid, rural communities in South Africa are still plagued by seemingly overwhelming challenges with little hope as the majority in these disadvantaged communities are not having access to higher education as a result of their rurality. He argues that this is premised on the notion that this lack of social change is due to ignoring the voices of those most affected and those who are the intended beneficiaries of the interventions be informed by the scholarship on the nature and context of rurality.

Another comprehensive research on rurality was conducted by researchers from the global North and Global South in which universities from England and South Africa sought to understand the student's encounters with coloniality, as they examined students' experiences of transitions from rural contexts into South African higher education. The research led by Timms, *et al.* (2019) adopted a participatory methodology that involved students as co-researchers in understanding issues around rurality. The researchers argue that there is a lack of recognition of students from rural contexts, and their potential to re-shape higher education applications, entering and participation. They base the analysis on the cultural capital, practices and local knowledge that students bring into the university space. How do students provide improvisations as they negotiate the challenges? The paper concludes that in order to smoothen the transition process there is need to re-shape higher education and transform curricula, institutions need to bring multiple knowledges into dialogue. All this should be through a transformation process that links places, people, knowledge(s) and skills, offering eligible students' spaces for recognition and visibility so that possibly can make sense of their own experiences (Banda, and Islam ,2012).

### **Literature on Rurality**

Literature on rurality is limited, scanty and poorly harmonized. Arguments for and against what constitute rurality are not well concretised. Gordon (2015) argues that rurality could be located in relationship between races, geography, land. It appears according to him, that white people might have more geographical space when compared to black or simply people of colour. Rurality and Poverty are two different terms with a different context and connotations. It is possible though, that students coming from a poor socio-economic background might be as lacking as those coming from rural areas. Ndebele, Muhuro and Nkonki (2016) acknowledge that while poverty is also prevalent in urban conurbations, and students coming from urban townships or settlements may also experience considerable disadvantages,

support, infrastructure and access to social services is far greater in urban than in rural areas. Rural communities tend to be contrasted with their urban counterparts in terms of deficit, disadvantage and passivity.

Balfour *et al.* (2012) contrast a deficit view of rural contexts, presenting a generative and dynamic understanding of rurality, which values the contributions of actors and lived experiences in transforming contexts. Leibowitz *et al.* (2019) look at rurality in the context of education. She presents the role of education in rural contexts as a space that inspires agency and an interactive conception. Masinire and Maringe (2014) and Odora-Hoppers (2004), argue that what is seemingly clear from the above context is the acknowledgement of cultural practices, indigenous knowledge systems and a profound sense of collective obligation in rural communities which tend to nurture better community cohesion and identity (Banda, 2008, Banda and Morgan, 2013)). Leibowitz (2010), submits that the majority of student testimonies about previous learning experiences exhibited how rurality combined with race co-produced the repertoires in terms of practice, literacy and values that the students used to negotiate HE. There is an undeniable diversity of factors affecting university transitions from rural areas including geography, financial resources, schooling and language.

Roberts and Green (2013) argue that rural contexts should not be studied in the right context without being distorted. Moreland, Chamberlain and Artaraz (2003) also observe that there exists a range of contexts of sparse population, small towns and large towns, and contexts of privilege and lack of access to resources may even exist side by side which in essence might not mean rural. Cuervo (2016) adds a caution when discussing rurality and opines the importance of avoiding constructing oversimplified binaries, seeing rural as urban's 'other'. Experiences in urban townships may show many similarities to those of rural settings. Therefore, an understanding of rurality needs to recognize it as all-enveloping content and context. Rurality is at the same time permeable, and intersecting with other aspects of human existence that occur in other locations, be these cultural, historical, institutional or physical. It is interesting to see the constructs of rurality among Zambian students in higher education.

Zambian students from urban townships or settlements may experience poverty and lack of infrastructure that is similar to those coming from rural communities. Nonetheless, important differences remain. A World Bank report states that 'Poverty is higher in rural than in urban areas, and the gap between rural and urban poverty rates widened between 2006 and 2015' as noted by Sulla and Zikhali, (2018).

What is really the problem for this article?

### **Statement of the problem and objectives**

This research speaks to a real-world problem as well as a knowledge problem. In the first instance, students from poor and rural areas are educationally disadvantaged by and large and their transitions to higher education are constrained and limited. The

real-world problem is that higher education institutions do not cater adequately for students' prior learning and their cultural capital and do not adjust the curriculum or university structures to cater for these differences and constraints. Currently, it appears, we do not have adequate studies about rural students transitioning in higher education in Zambia. In spite of this, it appears we do have an adequate explanatory framework pertaining to issues of rurality and theory on learning well linked to rurality. We also need to understand the interaction of local knowledge and institutionally powerful knowledge, in order to devise an adequate response to issues of rurality in higher education. A final angle on the knowledge problem is that the scholarly literature on rurality in higher education emanates, by and large, from wealthier regions, including Canada, the US, Australia and the UK, and does not portray conditions in Southern Africa and much less, Zambia.

There is a great need to understand the nature of the formal and hidden curriculum, and how it is received by all students, but more importantly, by students from non-traditional university backgrounds and to investigate what can be done to transform this curriculum. Such an understanding requires scholarly, theorised and empirical investigations into conditions at universities and into how these are experienced and managed by students, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds.

This study sought to;

1. Determine the students' perception of rurality.
2. identify the experiences shaping the learning of university students from rural areas in Zambia.
3. establish the challenges faced by rural students while transitioning at the university of Zambia.
4. establish the coping strategies adopted by rural students to navigate the transition challenges faced.

### **Methodology and Design**

Considering critical inclusion criteria and heavy involvement of a narrative design, the research uses semi-structured interviews to get the students' perspectives of rurality to establish the challenges faced during their studies at an urban university as well as the support systems they have engaged to mitigate the said challenges. Volunteer and snowball sampling methods allowed us to select students from all the schools of the University of Zambia. We selected students who were in the second year up to the fifth year who should have lived and attended school in a rural area (formal rural, tribal or ethnic area) for at least the first seventeen years of their lives.

Just like Timms *et al.* (2019) the study employed some elements of identifying students as co-researchers participated in face-to-face, discussion and mapping. They provided some initial phase of data analysis. They created longitudinal, personal accounts and representations of everyday practices in their rural

communities and in their university academic and social lives by collecting a series of different depictions and stories. This was a simplified version of co-researching.

The semi-structured interviews included open-ended questions inquiring on their expectations and experiences in the university. The questioning was done with a focus on collecting qualitative data about the experiences and perspectives of each participant in the transition from studying in a rural setting to an urban university and the challenges they have faced during their studies. The interview questions were divided into four main sections. The respondents were initially asked to give their perception of what rurality is. Secondly, they were asked to narrate the experiences shaping their learning at the University of Zambia. Thirdly, the respondents identified the challenges they faced while transitioning to university of Zambia. Finally, respondents explained the coping strategies they had engaged to navigate the transition challenges faced.

Data analysis was conducted inductively and theoretically. A systematic and thematic analysis of all data was first conducted. Thematic analyses were further interrogated collaboratively through whole team sessions including in some cases the student co-researchers. After conducting the interviews and categorising the data into the common themes, the findings were compiled for review.

### **Findings and Data Analysis**

Based on the answers of each respondent, common experiences, challenges and adaptation strategies were identified as listed below.

#### **Zambian Context of Rurality**

When asked on rurality, the respondents associated the term with farming engagement, animal domestication, remoteness, witchcraft, grass thatched houses and poor sanitary conditions.

#### **Farming engagement and Domestication**

Out of sixteen participants, fourteen acknowledged that their parents and guardians were peasant farmers which was the main economic activity being practiced in the rural areas where they were coming from. The major crops grown included maize and rice as P1 from *Vubwi* narrated that:

My parents are basically peasant farmers and everything we do there is about farming, so it's just persistence of you seeing others making it through school and then you also get encouraged to do it.

Mostly the crops grown are for home consumption and in case they have surplus crops they sell to the Food Reserve Agency (FRA). P11 echoed that:

My guardians are peasant farmers, they mostly depended on farming and the major crop grown was maize with hope of FRA can buy some of the excess crops.

However, it was reported that FRA was not paying their parents on time. Further, from the interviewed participants, three stated that they kept domestic animals in their rural homes which were mostly chickens and pigs. They raised school fees from selling these animals.

### **Remoteness**

The study established that all the participants were from a rural area or rurality. They had to travel long distances to administrative centres to access basic amenities such as banks, markets, health facilities, electricity and other services including charging their phones. P9 from Chavuma district stated that:

I'm from Chavuma a certain District from North-Western province and most of the places are rural and remote and life in Chavuma as I mentioned is a rural one and when some is exposed to places like Lusaka life completely changes.

The participants also acknowledged that most of the services found in urban areas were not available in rural areas hence making life very difficult.

### **Grass thatched houses**

From the interviews conducted, it was deduced that the participants' home structures were grass thatched. Although P11 from Kalomo district acknowledged that despite having grass thatched houses, there were few modern houses. It was further highlighted that these thatched houses were separated, some for boys and others for girls as culture requires that boys and girls should not mix.

### **Poor Sanitary**

The sanitary conditions in rural areas are not conducive. The key issue raised by the participants especially the female included lack of water in most households as they had to travel long distances to fetch water which entailed difficulties in washing household utensils and clothing.

## **2. Students transitioning and rurality**

Orientation, accommodation and sponsorship were the outstanding themes on experiences shaping the learning of university students from rural areas at the University of Zambia.

### **2.2.1 Orientation**

The study revealed that ten of the students who came from rural areas missed the orientation programme. Their missing of the orientation was due to accommodation

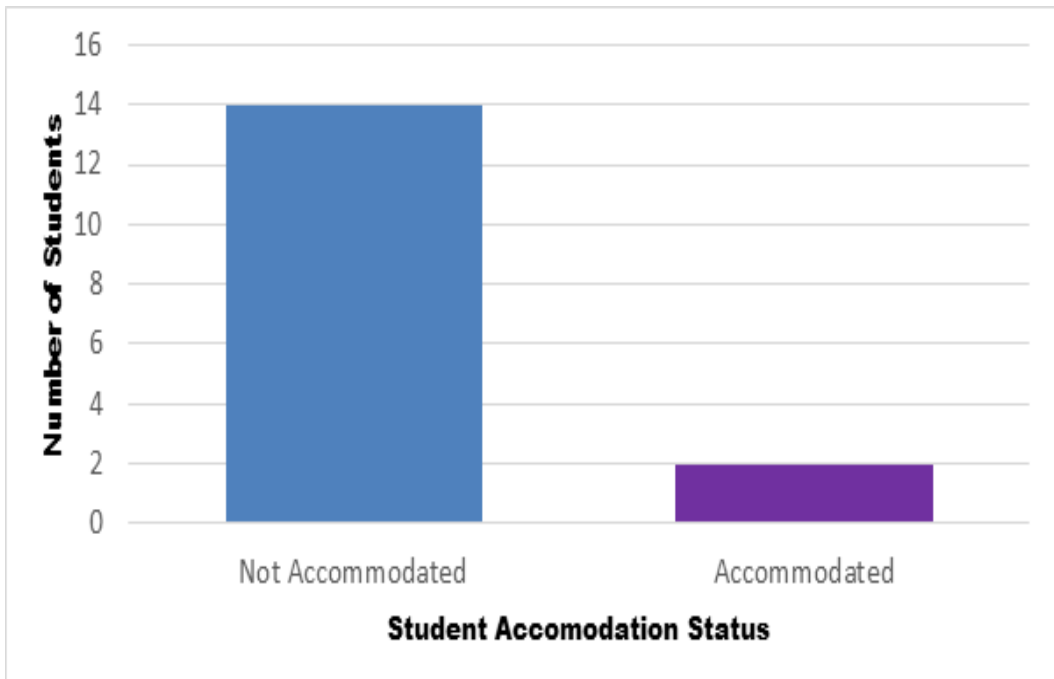
and financial challenges resulting into late reporting. P1 from Namwala district echoed that,

I missed the orientation programme because of the financial challenges which made me to report late. So, by the time I came to UNZA, I found orientation was already done.

Further, the study established that six participants who attended the orientation programme only attended part of it. They further stated that the programme was not well structured and coordinated; hence they missed on a number of key aspects of the orientation. P7 from Rufunsa district elucidated that:

We were orientated although it was not adequate, we were only showed directions where to find the library, classes and hostels but were not orientated about the social life at UNZA.

### 2.2.2 Accommodation

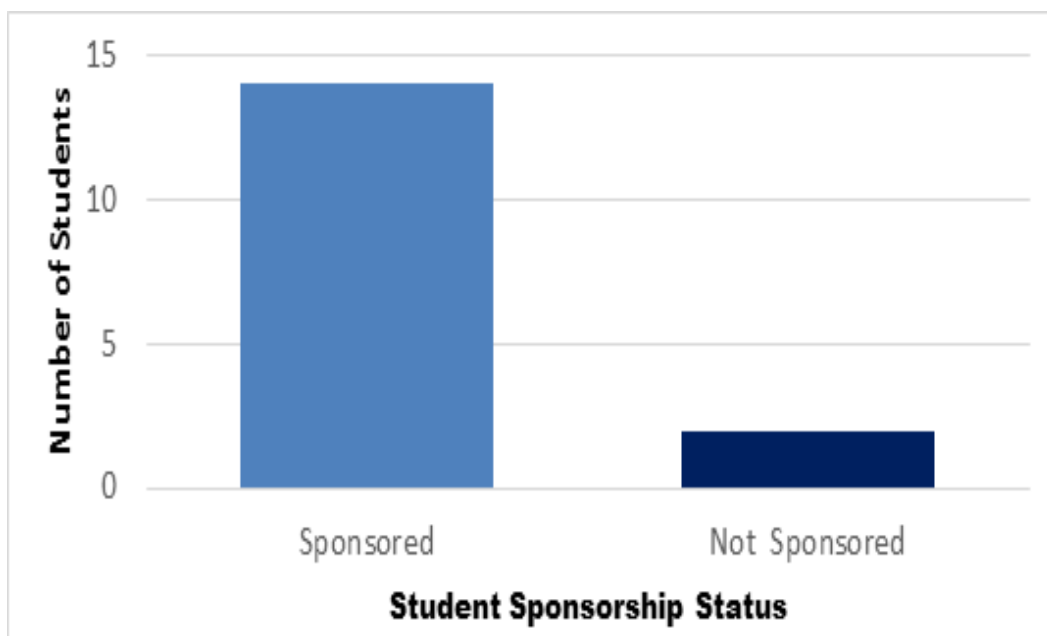


**Figure 1: Accommodation Status of the Participants**

The Figure 1 indicates that out of sixteen participants fourteen participants were not given campus accommodation and only two were given campus accommodation.



### 2.2.3 Sponsorship



**Figure 2: Government Sponsorship Status of the Participants**

Figure 2 indicates that out of the total number of sixteen participants fourteen participants were on government sponsorship and only 2 were self-sponsored.

### 3. Challenges encountered by students from rural places

Academic challenges, economic challenges, technological challenges and dress code were the prominent themes emerging under challenges encountered by students coming rural places.

#### 3.2.1 Academic challenges

The study revealed that all the 16 participants had challenges in relations to academic work as it was indicated that it was difficult to follow the mode of lecturing at UNZA and this was due to the extreme variance with what experienced at secondary school. P7 from Vubwi district stated that,

The system was different from that of secondary education. I thought it was going to be full time learning and someone writing notes on the black board but only to discover that here they dictate notes. Listening and writing notes at the same time was a challenge.

In addition, P13 from Kasama district observed that:

The language used by some lecturers was difficult for us to follow. It was also difficult for us to listen and write notes at the same time. She further added that in the school of natural sciences first year lectures are always congested and difficult to get the concepts from lecturers unless you start off for a lecture 30minutes before to find a seating space.

### **3.2.2 Economic challenges**

From the study, it was noted that out of sixteen participants, fifteen faced a number of economic challenges as most of their parents and guardians were not formally employed or involved in meaningful economic activities. P5 from Nangoma district lamented that:

Most people who come from rural area including our parents believe that once BC is given it caters all the problems hence no need for them to send money for us and it is not something easy that you can take upon yourself to go and convince them. So economically I can say I have been facing a lot of challenges and it is not until I register when I receive meal allowances.

In addition, P14 from Chikankata district echoed that:

My parents were not able to send me money for food, accommodation and registration fee. They told me that they had a lot of financial challenges as they had to help my other siblings back home.

Further, the study established that fourteen participants had financial challenges to meet their registration and accommodation fees because as it was observed the accommodated students charged their fellow students a squatting fee ranging from K1,000 to K1,500 per term.

### **3.2.3 Technological challenges**

It was noted that out of sixteen participants, fourteen had challenges in operating ICT gadgets because the places they came from had no computers nor smartphones. They stated that it was difficult to find data for assignments and reading because navigating through computers to access this information was a challenge. P3 from Vubwi narrated that:

At the time of reporting I had no smartphone and a laptop to use for academic work. I also did not have most of the materials because there were given to us through soft copy.

It was further established that students formed ‘WhatsApp groups’ where they shared study materials and other academic updates. P11 from Kalomo in agreement stated that:

I could walk from the boarding house to come and attend lectures but only to discover that the lecture is cancelled and the information was shared on WhatsApp group.

### **3.2.4 Social and cultural challenges.**

The study established that out of sixteen participants, ten had no major challenges on coping with social life. However, six participants experienced challenges in terms of socialising and interacting with strangers as P3 from Vubwi district narrated by saying:

It took time for me to start associating with other students. I was only able to associate with only two friends I came with from the same secondary school.

Culturally, participants had challenges in mixing with students of the opposite sex as P4 from Senanga district indicated saying:

I found it difficult to mix with ladies because where I come from we are not allowed to mix with ladies anyhow especially if you undergoing the initiation ceremony. But here at UNZA the situation is different. Female students can freely go to male’s room.

### **3.3.5 Challenges with dress code**

The study revealed that male participants complained about inappropriate dressing exhibited by some female students. As P2 from Vubwi narrated that:

When I came at UNZA, female dress code was so disturbing. Seeing short skirts in class or around campus was something strange in my life.

In addition, a female participant highlighted that female students who put on long dresses made of *Chitenge* materials were laughed at and perceived to be backward. To this P12 from Petauke district added that:

One day I was going for class wearing *chitenge* material and my roommates laughed at me and told me to put off the *chitenge* material as they said that it was not normal to put on a *chitenge* material when going for classes.

## **4. Coping strategies adopted by rural students**

Coping strategies adopted by rural students, the following themes emerged; as academic strategies, economic strategies, technological strategies, social and cultural strategies.

### **4.2.1 Academic strategies**

The study established that in as much as participants had challenges academically, they still found coping strategies. Forming of study groups and group work proved to be more effective as a way of overcoming academic challenges. To emphasise on this, P13 from Kasama district narrated that:

when I came here I had challenges in understanding most of the course work especially physics and mathematics hence this forced me to identify male students who were good in the mentioned courses and together we formed a study group which aided in improving my performance.

It was also reported that some lecturers and tutors were of great help because they encouraged students to consult them on things they did not understand clearly in class.

### **4.2.2 Economic strategies**

In terms of coping with economic challenges, the study established that three participants had other sources of income generation. P7 from Kalulushi narrated that:

for me to survive, I started a small business of selling clothes and shoes to my fellow students as a way of raising an additional income to the upkeep allowances given by the government which is standing at K22.5 per day.

The study also established that fellow students were very helpful to one another in an event someone lacked food as narrated by P14 from Chikankata district who narrated that:

the time I came here did not have enough funds to cater for food and basic needs. I had to survive through the help of my friends. Furthermore, P5 indicated that for him to survive, he had to engage himself into borrowing money which was to be paid back with interest when they receive their BC.

### **4.2.3 Technological strategies**

The study established that despite having technological challenges at the beginning of the study, participants stated that they were able to buy laptops and smart phones through their BC allowances as P7 from Kalulushi district indicated that she was able to buy a smart phone through BC.

Out of sixteen participants, fourteen indicated that they were mostly assisted by other students who included roommates and course mates who had the technical know-how.

### **4.2.4 Social and cultural strategies**

The study revealed that socially, most participants were able to cope and adapt to UNZA life through openness which made it easier to make new friends.

Culturally, it was observed that participants acknowledged that culture is a way of life and people should stick to norms and values accepted by the community. The study also established that culture should not be rigid but dynamic as a way of facilitating development.

Furthermore, it was also noted that participants had to adjust by coping with some of the practices they perceived to be morally upright and neglected those in conflict with their beliefs.

### **Support systems given to students coming from rural places**

The research carried out from sixteen participants on Support systems given to students coming from rural places, the following themes emerged as academic support, economic support, technological support, social and cultural support.

#### **5.2.1 Academic support**

The study established that there seemed to be a uniform response from participants on academic support given. All the participants indicated that lecturers, tutors and friends respectively were of great help. Despite this, participants expressed displeasure in the manner in which some lecturers treated students as observed by P11 from Kalomo district in Kabanga area who clearly stated that:

Some lecturers were very helpful, they used to tell us expectations from the beginning of the courses, the course outline and the recommended study materials, but some lecturers when going to consult them would tell you am busy come back later and if you have no patience, you give up.

#### **5.2.2 Economic support**

Fourteen participants felt that BC was the major source of income for most students from rural places. It was further echoed that friends were of great help in an event that one lacked especially food. Thus, P 4 from Senanga district showed sadness on the move which was taken by the government to scrap off meal allowances by the government as this was the major source of income especially by students coming from rural places as he narrated that:

When I came here, I first bought my smartphone from the BC money and now that meal allowance for first year students has been scrapped off, it will be very crucial for them to survive.

#### **5.2.3 Technologically**

Out of sixteen participants, fourteen pointed out that at the time of arriving at the university, they did not know how to operate computers and did not even have technological gargets such as phones and laptops. It was noted that most of them received support from friends who had technical know-how in this area. UNZA was of less help as narrated by P13 from Kasama district:

There is free Wi-Fi for students which is accessed through entering of your computer number in the online system but in my case it didn't work because every time I entered my computer number it used to write that invalid number but my friend helped me to be login using his computer number.

## **5.24 Social and cultural support**

From sixteen qualitative responses of participants, twelve of them narrated that they received help from friends through supportive social networks. The outstanding support in this regard was emotional and informational support. They had friends to turn to in times of need. However, four participants indicated that they did not receive social support as it was difficult for them to socialise with others. This is in agreement with the findings in Banda (2008: 211) where it was discovered that in some cases students from rural areas had to speak in deliberately broken local languages to be accepted as urban students.

In terms of cultural support, participants indicated that there was serious cultural scaffolding. The interaction of language and thought as well as transfer of responsibility was observed in the sense that students had to adjust in the way of doing things as narrated by the majority. Most of them had to learn to take control of their own learning, how to dress and how to interact with other students of different cultural background.

## **Proposed measures for rural students transitioning into university life**

The research carried out from sixteen participants proposed measures for rural students transitioning into University life. The following themes emerged; prioritising accommodation to rural students, extension and improved orientation, University of Zambia management to adopt an open-door policy and enhanced counselling.

### **6.2.1 Prioritising accommodation to rural students**

The study established that, campus accommodation was the most pressing issue among rural students. Therefore, all the participants recommended that rural students should be the first choice when it comes to room allocation through the office of the Dean of Students as P6 from Rufunsa district emphasised that:

The first thing that is very important is accommodation, at least they should try by all means to first accommodate students from rural areas.

### **6.2.2 Extension and improved orientation**

The need for extended and improved orientation seemed to be the second pressing issue among rural students as ten participants missed it due to various constraints. ten of the participants suggested that orientation should be extended and improved. It was also suggested that those assigned to orient first years are supposed to have the technical know how of both rural and urban life. P3 from Vubwi district clearly stated that:

Everything here seems to be well set up but orientation needs to be improved, students from rural areas should be well oriented because the problem is that students from the rural areas they don't get firsthand information. They only get to know things when they are already in the university.

### **6.2.3 Adoption of an open-door policy by University of Zambia**

It was noted that participants were not happy with the unwelcoming attitude of some lecturers. It was indicated that some lecturers and other members of staff were not welcoming henceforth, it was suggested that the university should adopt an open-door policy as this would encourage open communication, feedback and discussion about any matter of importance to a student's welfare. The university should create an environment where students can freely express themselves especially with the lecturers and tutors.

Furthermore, two participants advised that the university should explain the value of the programmes they offer so that students can make informed decision before applying for a particular programme.

### **6.2.4 Enhanced counselling**

Additionally, participants suggested that counselling services at the institution ought to be improved as it was discovered that the counseling center at the institution was seen as a white elephant. Further, it was suggested that it would be ideal if a student is assigned an individual counselor to talk to for professional assistance and guidance in resolving personal, social and psychological problems. P6 from Samfya district narrated that:

There is need for more counselling to be done and counselors should be welcoming, UNZA should try to find personal psychologist or therapist to help rural students.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The research sought to understand the scope of rurality and its influence on the transition to higher education amongst students with rural backgrounds. All the participants in the study asserted that they considered themselves rural due to the remoteness of the schools and homes they came from away from the central business district, their involvement in farming and animal domestication and living in grass thatched houses. The students noticeably faced many challenges that increased their attrition rates as they transitioned into the university. The challenges ranged from academic, economic challenges to technological. These findings resonate with those of other authors who contextualise rurality in terms of geography and land. The Zambian participants, however, did not consider race to be a big variable in defining rurality. In the study by Gordon (2015), rurality is anchored by geography, land and race.

In discussing the issues related to students transitioning and rurality, three key issues emerged of *Orientation, Accommodation and Sponsorship*. These themes were outstanding experiences in shaping the learning of university students from rural areas at the University of Zambia. The kind of programmes institutions have to re-integrate rural student was critical. The orientation at the University of Zambia was cosmetic and artificial. In any case, the orientation was for both urban and rural students mostly focusing on academics and less on transitioning. Though the University has a rural affirmative policy, less priority was given to rural students in terms of accommodation.

An alarming truth to the accommodation reality is that University of Zambia has a total bed space of 5,000 against 25,000 students. Already accommodation is not adequate further complicating the lives rural students as they navigate and transition in to the new environment.

The country recently transformed the bursary scheme into a loans facility which mostly uses means tested away from the tradition of merit tested support. Only a handful of rural students manage to access these loans further compounding issues related to their transition into higher education. Actually, a huge number of rural students drop out of university because of lack of support. There is need for better policies to target the rural students. This is similar to what Balfour *et al.* (2012) noted in South Africa, there is a lack of visibility of rural communities and their needs in terms of policy. Balfour, de Lange and Khau (2012), write that almost all education policies in South Africa are aimed at the urban elite. Rural education and rural educators are ignored. Furthermore, many teacher-education programmes are not explicit in identifying how they prepare students for the realities of rural education (Islam, 2012; Masinire & Maringe, 2014), implying a policy gap in relation to the influence of rurality on HE accesses and transitions.

The article establishes a number of challenges encountered by students from rural places at the University of Zambia. Among many other challenges, the most prominent ones that emerged included academic challenges, economic challenges, technological challenges and dress code encountered by students coming from rural places. The transition from Socratic methodology to more research-oriented university delivery of materials was a huge challenge for rural students. A number of rural students also exhibited a number of economic challenges, most of which emanating from the socio-economic status of the family.

In some cases, parents and guardians were not involved in any meaningful economic activity. Rural students by nature of their background had challenges in operating ICT gadgets as the places where they were coming from had no computers nor smartphones. The navigation was extremely challenging the environment of austerity. Urban socialisation was different from rural networking. The University of Zambia was even a bit on an extreme side in comparison to normal cosmopolitan



life of Lusaka. Socialisation was one big challenge for the rural students in terms of socialising and interacting with strangers.

Another interesting discovery was that of dress code. The study revealed that male participants complained about the inappropriate dressing exhibited by some female students. These challenges resonate with the findings of SARiHE. The Southern African Rurality in Higher Education (SARiHE) study investigated how students from rural backgrounds in South Africa negotiated the transition to higher education and their trajectories through university. They argued that there is a lack of recognition of students from rural areas and their potential to re-shape universities. In this context SARiHE highlighted the challenges students experienced when applying, entering and participating in higher education. Students felt a loss at lack of recognition in comparison to their rural lives but found ways to recover over time.

For rural students to survive the sometimes-hostile environment, they developed coping strategies. Coping strategies adopted by rural students included academic strategies, economic strategies, technological strategies, social and cultural strategies. Some of the strategies employed involved forming study groups. Economically, rural students were helped by fellow students in times of need especially when it came to food. They quickly adjusted and from their savings from the loan's funds, they were now able to buy tablets, smart phones and laptops. Increasingly, they became open to cope with urban and university environment. Some Universities on the continent have realised this gap and are now leveraging on the rural students by emphasising the cultural capital, practices and indigenous knowledges that students contribute. They now show how students from rural backgrounds how to invest in the practices that shape their encounters with the university world, exploring the improvisations they make to navigate and transform themselves and the dominant knowledges and systems at universities, thereby reclaiming agency and epistemic becoming (Fataar, 2018; Banda, 2008, Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998).

The article also explored the support systems given to students coming from rural places. Debate and discussion on the level of this support might show limited support but it appears a level of support existed in terms of academic support, economic support, and technological support, social and cultural support. This support sometimes came from the University systems, programmes, student unions, subject associations, lecturers and fellow students and in some cases the enabling environment was provided for the rural students to transition. The monthly stipend allowance was also a big support to rural students. There was, to some extent, an element of embracing the new social culture what one would refer to as cultural scaffolding. This is in line with the kind of support Ndebele, Muhuro and Nkonki (2016) advocate for rural students in higher education based on infrastructure, financial support and access to social services.

There is therefore, need to make proposals and measures for rural students transitioning into higher education especially at the University of Zambia. Clearly the life of a rural student is not only under researched but has fewer strategies put in place to mitigate the severity. The following measures needed urgent inclusion such as prioritising accommodation to rural students, Extension and improved orientation. The University of Zambia management to adopt an open-door policy to deserving rural students, enhanced counselling and adjusting the curriculum to fit in well with rural students. The rural affirmative policy should be fully implemented and the context should be expanded to begin tracking issues related to student transition in higher education. These findings are in tandem with those of Timms *et al.* (2019) which established that rural students showed the particularities of epistemic in nature. That these students from rural communities across complex, exhibit multiple social and temporal landscapes and that these needed to be recognised. Timms *et al.* study argued for curriculum as a process of transformation that links places, people, knowledge(s) and skills. Timms *et al.* (2019) made a passionate plea that of involving students from rural contexts and other backgrounds, as key agents in curriculum development. In conclusion, the paper argues that rural affirmative policy limited to admission alone is not enough as more goes on in these universities once the rural students have been admitted and are in school. They still need a lot of learner support which should include even the establishment of peer support systems at all levels.

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