

## Review of Transition Experiences of Urban and Rural Learners into Rural Universities

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Article Info	Abstract
<p><b>Article History</b></p> <p>Received: January 17, 2021</p> <p>Accepted: April 29, 2021</p> <p><b>Keywords</b> First year experience, rural universities, Rural high schools, urban high schools</p> <p><b>DOI:</b> 10.5281/zenodo.4728114</p>	<p><i>This paper explored the transition experiences of students from urban and rural high schools to rural universities, and also identified some factors influencing first year rural university student experiences. Relevant literatures were reviewed on transition of students from high school to university. The findings of the study show that parent involvement, socio-economic background, learners exposure, among others influence the first year rural university students' experiences. Also, while students in rural universities may easily acclimatize to the host community of their university, they tend to struggle trying to adjust to university life. On the contrary, while students in rural universities from urban based high schools may struggle to adjust to the host rural communities where their universities are situated, they tend to easily cope with university life, though sometimes negatively affected based on the level of quality university education provided. The study therefore recommends amongst others that the services of career counsellors who will assist learners should be employed, quality should be ensured in rural institutions of learning both at high school and university levels, high schools should be affiliated to universities who will be made to oversee certain activities of the high schools and guide the where necessary.</i></p>

### Introduction

Gupta (2006) defines communication as an exchange of information, ideas, opinions or emotions with a view to establish a mutual understanding. Communication is considered as the zenith of passing and receiving information during teaching and learning activities (Fashiku, 2017). Henrico and Visser (2012:183), Kupritz and Cowell (2011:58) explains communication as a communal act which involves the transmission and exchange of information, thoughts, strategies and concepts amidst individuals in order to influence their behaviour and await responses. Active communication assists people to accomplish their aims and objectives and yield great result (George & Jones, 2012:428). Mishra, Boynton and Mishra (2014:190–191) adds that effective communication yield a high level of productivity. Daft and Marcic (2009:552) point out that effective communication process comprises of active listening, provision of information and receiving of feedback. Robbins (2002:114) state that communication performs four major purposes which is: to regulate, to inspire, to show emotional expression and to inform people.

Sequel to the foregoing, it can be stated that communication is the most important because it influences every part of human activities. Thus, the process of adjustment, adapting and success transition of first year student from high school to the university is of maximum importance and concern both nationally and internationally (Beyer, Gillmore and Fisher 2007; CHE 2004, 2007, 2009; Kuh Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). CHE (2013:45) reveals that more than 70% of first year students enrolled at the university have first-generation status, thereby creating additional difficulties for many of these students, caregivers and even for the first-year lecturers (Bowl, 2001). The research conducted on the success rate of first-year students at higher education institutions illustrate that one out of three students who got enrolled at the university drop out at the end of their first year (Groenewald 2005; Scott, Yeld & Hendry 2007). A school of thought known as the Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) and the consultancy Research and Academic Development (RAD) confirms this statistic from a study conducted recently between April 2007 to May 2008.

Hutt and Tang (2013) opine that one of the factors which influences first year student success rate is academic negligence, when a lecturer is unable to pass information to students adequately. In other words, lecturers fail in their responsibilities when they are unable to communicate properly and pass accurate information to students. Conversely, when they fail to guide students to acquire accurate information, they fail in their responsibilities. Similarly, students will be considered to have failed to learn when they are unable to get the necessary information from their lecturers. On the other hand, first year students are usually regarded as students in need

of adequate caution and attention due to their level of knowledge, experiences and exposure are considered to be found wanting in being able to communicate and gather accurate information from lecturers. Gallagher (2013) and Kaufman and Sandilos (2016) consider poor lecturer-student relationship as a major factor affecting first years in their ability to get accurate information from lecturers either during teaching and learning activities or other times. Additionally, first year and rural based university students seem to be more affected in subject matter as this. According to Uleanya and Gamede (2017), this can be hinged on the communication gaps experienced during transition from high school level to university and the differences in the adopted language of instruction and home language.

According to the document and statistics produced from the Department of Higher Education and Training at 2015 Higher Education (HE) summit entitled: "Are we making progress with systemic structural transformation of resourcing, access, success, staffing and researching in higher education: What do the data say?" (DHET, 2015), as well as the 2016 "2000 to 2008 First time entering undergraduate cohort studies for public higher education institutions" (DHET, 2016), indicate that even though the level of drop-out is reducing but the biggest attrition still remains between the first to second year transition. The statistics of first year drop-out by (DHET, 2016: 18) state that currently the proportion alters between 61 and 71% which absolutely affirms the significance of the first year.

The Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2013) points out that the poor level of student success rate and the challenges experienced by students at the first year is a complex situation which involves urgent attention by relevant stakeholders such as (students, schools, universities, government, communities, the business world, etc.) in order to provide a solution to this issue. CHE (2013) observe that this poor level of student success (particularly for first year students) demonstrate that "... the system has not yet come to terms with the learning needs of the majority of the student body". A feasible alternative regarding the active termination of this so called 'articulation gap' existing between the school and the university will require a long-term solution (CHE, 2013). During one of the visit to South Africa by Tinto (2003:6), he mentioned that: "Improvement in rates of student success requires intentional structured and proactive action, that is systematic in nature and coordinated in application" Another school of thought, Trowler (2010), Strydom, Basson and Mentz (2010) state that the institutions must ensure to provide better access and engagement for students (most especially first year) in higher education. Better access in this context will mean, access with success which is used to mean providing quality education to students. Engage for students on the other hand, implies the communication strategies adopted in ensuring quality education. Hence, the reason for this study which aims at exploring the form of access and engagement for first year students in the selected rural South African based university.

The need for tertiary education in Africa was considered pivot to the economy and national development of many African nations (Yesufu, 1973). This accounts for the reason for the move for the Africanization of African tertiary institutions of learning. According to Yesufu (1973), the move enhanced the increase in access to tertiary education for many African students. Mitra (2011) avers that increase in the level of education in nations will propel development in such nations. Meanwhile, according to Dani and Shah (2016) opine that rural institutions of learning are established in specific purposively selected rural locations. They aver that the purpose for such is to ensure development in such selected rural areas. Suffice to state that establishment of institutions of learning and increasing the number of educational centres in any nation is targeted towards nation building and development. On the contrary, many nations of the world seek to increase the level of education by ensuring access at various levels (Akojee & Nkomo, 2008). However, Uleanya and Gamede (2018), quoting Akojee and Nkomo (2008) state that in many African nations, inclusive of South Africa, participatory access to tertiary education is experienced more compared to access with success. Access with success is used to mean opening opportunities for students to enroll for quality tertiary education and ensuring that such is enjoyed. The outcome is seen in their output as they tend to be more productive and help improve the level of development experienced in the nation. Meanwhile, participatory access is used to describe a situation whereby students are enrolled into the institutions of learning without taking into consideration the level of quality education provided to such students. According to Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) state that participatory access contributes to high dropout rate. In other words, enrolling students into various degrees and courses of their choice without ensuring provision of quality education amounts to increasing the chances of high dropout rate. In some instances, students fail to graduate in record time due to poor access to desired quality education.

First year students are considered to be more vulnerable in instances such as this. They are considered more vulnerable due to several factors amongst which are: previous learning experiences (Uleanya & Gamede, 2018), acclimatization to the new environment (Muro & Jeffrey, 2008), exposure to academic literacy and academic writing style (Strauss, Goodsir & Ferguson, 2011), volume and burden of assignment (Fook & Sidhu, 2015), family socio-economic background (Caschera, 2013), availability and exposure to recent and trendy teaching and learning materials (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick & Yehuda, 2014). Memory and Memory (2013) opine that participatory access is experienced in many African nations due to high rate of poverty. However, Kigotho and Lloyd (2004) assert that the education sector in many African nations receive larger percent of the budget annually. Thus, he considers corruption as the root cause of low quality education in many

African nations. On the contrary, Bower (2010) asserts that with little or no provision of essential Learning and Teaching Support Materials (LTSMs), lecturers are expected to communicate and transfer the necessary knowledge to students especially the first years that are relatively new to tertiary education system and may be open to receive information in order to make progress in their academic pursuits. Hutt and Tang (2013), as well as Uleanya, Rugbeer and Olaniran (2019) opine that failure of lecturers to communicate the necessary ideas to students based on various reasons is tantamount to academic negligence.

In brief, several factors are considered by various scholars as the causes of poor academic performance by first year students in tertiary institutions. Communication is considered very important regardless of other existing factors. However, little is known about the communication strategies that can be adopted to ensure that first year students are imparted adequately to ensure that they graduate in record time with the necessary education, knowledge, technical know-how and information capable of making them employable and contributing to nation building. Thus, the reason for this study which aims at exploring communication strategies aimed at improving first year experience at higher education institutions using a review of selected relevant literature.

Rural universities are intentionally established in selected locations in order to ensure that they proffer solutions to existing challenges in such communities and enhance sustainable developments in such areas (Dani & Shah, 2016). Rural universities comprise higher institutions of learning which are strategically situated in local communities with the aim of striving to reinvent the mission of orientation (Sehoole and Nkomo, 2007). The purpose is to enrich their research capability and output; expand their intellectual, social and entrepreneurial resources; and establish durable collaborative relationships with other institutions towards the enhancement of development in their local communities and surrounding environment (Sehoole & Nkomo, 2007). In other words, rural universities are institutions of higher learning that are strategically positioned at less advantageous local communities with the aim of bringing sustainable development to such area through empowerment, support and collaboration with different education stakeholders. Thus, rural universities are established to cater for the peculiar needs of the people within the community while taking into cognizance the peculiar nature of the students (Bookin-Weiner, 2015). Research conducted by Zucker (2007), illustrate that most rural student are academically ready as their urban counterpart but they encounter socio-cultural challenges when transitioning to the rural university from high school compared to their urban and suburban students.

Secuban (2012) maintains that getting enrolled at the university is a positive development because of the varieties of opportunities available in terms of the academic and social growth of such student although the university has its own life challenges. Ayele (2011) notes that the first year at the university can be a very demanding period regarding social and academic change for most student. Many of these challenges can be in terms of, leaving home, making new friends, adapting to a new environment with regards to heavy workload (Bojuwoye, 2002), homesickness (Thurber & Walton, 2012), maintain a good relationship with roommates (Secuban, 2012) and poor student-lecturer relationships (Ayele, 2011). Gallagher (2013) and Kaufman and Sandilos (2016) consider poor lecturer-student relationship as a major factor affecting first years in their ability to get accurate information from lecturers either during teaching and learning activities or other times. This kind of situation can be regarded as noise in communication because it hinders the free flow of information from the lecturer to the student and vis-a-vis. In teaching and learning activities, communication will be considered as complete when the students are able to accurately present what they have been taught either using their own words or the words of the lecturers. However, where the reverse is the case, such lecturer will be considered as not being able to communicate adequately with his/her students. Similarly, students in such instances will be said to be unable to get appropriate information and lack the ability to communicate with their lecturers.

Pillay and Ngcobo (2010) point out that another challenge experienced by first year rural university student is the demanding curriculum and the fear of failure which seem to be the greatest stress for them to conquer. This opinion is supported by Hassim, Strydom and Strydom (2013), who state that first year students need to learn how to adjust to examination anxiety, financial difficulties, personal relationships and social problems. Jemal (2012) mention that the attrition rates amidst the first year students at the university seemed higher than that of the other levels in the university. Le Roux and Brier (2012) embraces Jemal (2012) view that the highest existing dropout rate at the university happens among the first year students. Muldoon and MacDonald (2010) observe that one of main causes of attrition (drop-out) is the lack of social integration into the university environment. Salami (2011) indicated that as a result of the new environment (university) many of the first year rural students feel isolated and a sense of lack of self-esteem. Farris (2010) view that student who feel isolated already at the first year of study is possible to experience difficulty in the adjustment process at the university.

Heaton-Shrestha et al. (2009) point out that Tinto's (1993) theory on student adjustment discusses the early departure of most first year students from the higher institution of learning. Tinto (1993) theory is the most cited retention theory worldwide. Kwai (2009) explain that the criticism of Tinto's (1975) theory provided the 1993 theory which comprises of five principles: These included psychological, societal, economic, organizational, and interaction factors. According to Tinto (1993), students who have become a part of the institution in terms of their academic performance and social involvement are possibly not going to drop-out of the university. Strahn –Koller (2012) state that the model has provided a systematic tool over a long period of time for most

researchers who are learning about student success and persistence at the higher institution of learning. Tinto's (1993) theory identifies that the first year of study for many students is a very crucial and critical year which determines the success rate of the student at the university. Tinto (1993) theory view that after students are being enrolled at an institution they come with varieties of background traits which include educational aspirations, socioeconomic status, high school grades, ability, sex, and ethnicity that influence success. Tinto (1993) provided three main requirements which need to be met so as to fulfill student persistence.

- The first requirement is that students should be given the opportunity to have access to retention programmes, which in turn aim to support them rather than the institution.
- The second requirement is that retention programmes should not be targeted at a specific student population (the low-income or the minority students), but rather target all students.
- The third condition is a positive retention programming which must present an intensity of integration for students both in social and academic environment.

Additionally, previous research studies have focused on student engagement at university (Strydom, Basson & Mentz, 2010) and also on the pre-university non-academic factors such as: family support, parental encouragement and life circumstances according to Pather and Chetty (2016), Norodien-Fataar (2016), Van Zyl, Gravett & De Bruin (2012) and Gillies (2006). Also, most studies conducted have been on factors affecting the academic performances of first year students (Fook & Sidhu, 2015), impact of orientation programmes on first year students (Schoole and Nkomo, 2007), reasons for high dropout rates of first year students (Akojee & Nkomo, 2008). However, there has been limited reviews on the transition of first year undergraduate students from urban and rural based high schools to rural universities. Thus, this study aims at exploring the transition experiences of learners from urban and rural based high schools into rural universities. In other words, the first year rural university experiences of learners from urban and rural high schools are explored using a review of selected relevant literatures. In order to achieve the aim of the study, attempt is made to proffer answers to the identified research questions guiding the study. These identified research questions are: What are the transition experiences of students from urban and rural based high schools to rural universities? What are the factors influencing first year rural university student experiences?

## **Methodology**

The study explores the experiences of learners from urban and rural areas with regards to their transition into rural universities. Review method was adopted for the study, hence, various relevant literatures were reviewed in order to identify the opinions of scholars on transition of urban and rural learners into rural based universities, as well as the impact of such transition process in the academic performance of the learners. Literatures such as: to Ayoub, O'Connor, Rappolt-Schliemann, Vallotton, Raikes, and Chazan-Cohen (2009), Hanson, Miller, Diamond, Odom, Lieber, Butera, and Fleming (2011), Westerlund, Gustafsson, Theorell, Janlert, and Hammarstrom (2013), Maxwell and Mudhovozi (2014), Banerjee (2016), Dani and Shah (2016), amongst others were reviewed in order to explore the experiences cum effect of learners' transition from rural or urban high schools to rural universities.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The findings of the study based on reviewed relevant literatures are presented based on the identified questions.

### **Research question 1: what are the transition experiences of students from urban and rural based high schools to rural universities?**

The work of Maxwell and Mudhovozi (2014) which was conducted using qualitative research method indicates that it is more difficult for students from rural high schools to undergo application processes, get admitted and enrolled into university programmes compared to their counterparts from urban based universities. The further opine that the difficulties experienced by many of the rural based high school learners in getting admitted into universities is dependent on certain factors such as: limited spaces in higher institutions of learning, poor scores which is tantamount to not meeting minimum selection requirements and economic challenges which are predominant in rural communities and among rural based learners compared to urban based learners. Banerjee (2016) opines that the level of exposure of learners from rural based high schools to psychological and physiological stress is higher compared to their counterparts in urban based high schools, hence, such is a contributory factor which affects their academic performance and hinders them from being able to get enrolled into their desired programmes. However, according to Westerlund, Gustafsson, Theorell, Janlert, and Hammarstrom (2013), it is the level of parental involvement in the academics of the learners that affect their possible enrolment into university programmes. Meanwhile, Ayoub, O'Connor, Rappolt-Schliemann, Vallotton, Raikes, and Chazan-Cohen (2009) and Hanson, Miller, Diamond, Odom, Lieber, Butera, and Fleming (2011) had earlier opined that the level of education and academic qualifications of parents contribute to the academic performance of learners, consequently their ability to successfully get enrolled into the university.

According to Dani and Shah (2016), rural environments in Africa are largely characterized by illiteracy. Hence, illiteracy level amongst parents in rural settlements are likely to be higher compared to those in urban settlements. Thus, children in rural areas are more vulnerable to lack of parental involvement and support in their academic pursuit due to illiteracy. This consequently contributes negatively to their academic achievement. Additionally, Uleanya and Gamede (2018) opine that it is the quality of education provided for learners at high school level that affects their level of academic achievement. Surmise to state that going by academic performances, rural based high school learners are likely not to be offered admission into rural or urban based universities, whereas, their urban based counterparts who are likely to perform well have the tendencies of being offered admission into universities.

Additionally, Guiffrida (2008) conducted a study in order to investigate the variance in transition rate between rural and urban based high school learners from their different high schools to university. The result showed that while urban based high school learners could easily adjust and get settled, their counterparts from rural high schools in some instances dropped-out due to their inability to cope.

Sequel to the above discussion, it can be deduced that urban high school learners have the tendencies of getting admitted into different universities: rural or urban based on their academic performances. However, their ability to cope if admitted into a rural based university remains questionable. This is due to the unavailability of certain resources that they might have been exposed to, and the quality of education that will be provided if they envisage to keep pace with their good academic performance.

### **Research question 2: what are the factors influencing first year rural university student experience?**

Different factors are considered to be responsible for influencing first year rural university students' experiences. The adopted language of instruction is a major factor which influences first year rural students' experiences especially in instances where a foreign language is involved (Sawir, 2005, Uleanya & Gamede, 2017 and Li & Carroll, 2017). For instance, according to Uleanya and Gamede (2017), English language can pose some forms of difficulty for students whose first language is not English.

Also, students' Intelligent Quotient (IQ)/academic performance (Rajandran, Hee, Kanawarthy, Soon, Kamaludin, & Khezrimotlagh, 2015). A study was conducted by Rajandran et al (2015) to investigate the factors influencing first year rural university students' experiences. The findings show that students' level of intelligence is a major factor which contributes to their experiences in their first year in rural universities. However, the findings of the study also suggest that the demographic features such as age, gender, amongst others of first year students influence their experiences, though minimally. Suffice to state that from the result of their study, it can be deduced that demographic features of first year rural university students minimally influence their university experience while their level of intelligence maximally influences their university experience. The finding of the study of Uleanya (2018) corroborates the work of Rajandran et al. (2015) on demography of rural university students minimally influencing their university experience. However, according to Uleanya (2018), the issue of students' demography influencing their experiences in the university is relative and largely dependent on the quality of the education provided. Thus, quality is also a contributory factor.

Additionally, according to Uleanya and Gamede (2018), the previous learning experiences influence the first year university students' experiences. In other words, the high school learning experiences of students have impact on their experiences in the university, at least in their first year. This accounts for one of the major reasons why the need for orientation is considered important. According to Davis (2013) as well as Wu, Garza and Guzman (2015), orientation is an integral part of students learning especially in their first year regardless of the status or structure of the university: rural, semi-urban or urban. This is envisaged to help students acclimatize to their present environment and happenings around, while relieving themselves of unwanted and undesired high school experiences. However, in some instances, their high school experiences continue to influence their activities at the university for some time. This implies that for learners from urban high schools, it may be relatively difficult to adjust to rural environment though in a university, whereas, for students from rural high schools, the challenge may only be with coping with the university environment, not rural community. However, students from urban high schools may struggle trying to cope with the low level of quality education usually experienced in rural universities compared to their urban counterpart. For instance, students from urban based high schools who have been exposed to certain forms of high quality technological facilities/aesthetics in teaching and learning environments may struggle trying to adjust if such are not provided in the rural university where they find themselves.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored the transition experiences of urban and rural learners into rural universities using review of relevant literatures. Sequel to the study, it is generally perceived and accepted that students tend to struggle to transit from high school to university. Hence, orientation programmes and other activities considered important are carried-out. However, transition experiences of students vary, especially as it concerns the high school backgrounds and experiences of the students. For instance, while it may be easy for students in rural

universities, with rural high school background to acclimatize with the rural environment where the university is established, it may be difficult for them to cope with the university environment. On the contrary, it may be difficult for students in rural universities from urban based high schools to cope with their university environment, though, they may easily adjust to the university environment.

## Recommendations

Sequel to the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- Parents should be made to be involved in the academic pursuit of their children especially at high school level. This tends to help the students in the future academic pursuits. This can be done through collaboration between teachers, parents and school authorities where periodic meetings are scheduled to discuss the progress of children on individual basis.
- Schools should be encouraged to ensure that there is an office of school counsellors whose major function amongst others will be to guide learners in selecting universities and courses of study. The counsellors should also be made to motivate learners to believe in themselves.
- High schools should be affiliated to universities who will help in exposing their learners to university environment. The universities should also be made to oversee certain activities in the high schools affiliated to them. Collaborations between high school schools and universities can also be encouraged in place of affiliation. This will help learners to get exposed in different ways to universities while in high school.
- Quality should be ensured in rural education, both at high school and university levels. This will help easy transition of rural high school learners into the university system regardless of the environment. Also, it will assist learners from urban high schools as quality will still remain intact. Quality can be ensured in rural institutions of learning through periodic benchmarking with urban institutions of learning.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that, this study is specific to the communication strategies aimed at improving first year rural university student experiences. The study is limited to review of relevant literatures on first year students. Hence, it is suggested that an empirical study be conducted in this regard using quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods for data collection.

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