



Higher Education in South Africa: addressing inequalities experienced by students from rural contexts

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POLICY REPORT
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About the Research

Against a historical backdrop of apartheid and subsequent continuing coloniality, inequalities in access and participation continue to be major challenges for higher education in South Africa, with significant academic under-achievement and low completion rates for students from under-represented communities. The experiences of students from rural communities, in particular, have attracted little attention in widening participation research or policy yet such students experience distinct challenges in accessing and participating fully and successfully in higher education.

The Southern African Rurality in Higher Education (SARiHE) project investigated the challenges encountered by students from rural areas - one of the groups most marginalised and affected by apartheid in South Africa - in accessing higher education. Additionally, the research focused on how students negotiate the transition to university, the support that they need and how inclusive teaching and learning practices can be developed. The research was conducted at three sites: the University of Johannesburg, Rhodes University and the University of Fort Hare.

20 – 24 second year undergraduates from rural backgrounds were recruited as co-researchers in each university, with a balance between STEM and Humanities programmes. From April – December

2017, they collected accounts and representations of everyday practices in the form of digital diary entries, drawings, photographs, video and audio recordings and other artefacts using an iPad. During this period, they contributed to regular discussions and focus groups, facilitated by the co-investigators. Senior leaders and academics from each university were also interviewed, either individually or via a focus group.

There are very different social and material conditions in the three university settings where data were collected and the co-researcher narratives illustrate how each university's history continues to influence its culture post democratisation.

"[University] through its inclusive practice focuses more on catering for students from multicultural backgrounds and beliefs and everything, like those ones who are disadvantaged and the disabled too."

Some student co-researchers expressed great pride in attending an institution where many of the major black leaders had been educated; many of those from a historically white institution, saw its history as a significant advantage:

"My brother told me to come. He said 'It's a very white university. It's going to get you places'. He associated it with white people and so it was automatically better in his mind."

Rurality in South Africa

An extensive review of rurality related research led us to develop a set of working assumptions to guide the SARIHE study:

- Rurality cannot be given a precise and comprehensive definition. We investigated what rurality means to people, but our aim was not to create a definitive set of indicators
- Rurality should be discussed in relation to geography, space, history, power, culture, access to material resources and identity issues
- Although in certain regions there might be broad tendencies associated with rurality, actual conditions vary across schools, families and individuals
- Constructions of rurality are generated by different people who may be influenced by their urban or rural backgrounds

We used the categories 'formal rural' and 'tribal area' to differentiate the types of rural areas, differentiations based on the categories of rurality provided by the South African Statistics Agency. We were specifically interested in students who had lived and attended school in a rural area (formal rural or tribal area) for at least 16 years of their lives (all students had to have attended a rural school for at least 7 years).

Research findings

1. Importance of rural culture, values and knowledge

Ubuntu is the African idea of personhood, summarised in the expression umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu – a person is a person through persons. Co-researchers make frequent reference to Ubuntu; its continuing importance in guiding how they live their lives is apparent. The rural values held by the co-researchers are illustrated powerfully through their accounts. The ways in which these values contribute to how they position and identify themselves can, however, be problematic in the transition to higher education. Respect for elders, for example, can dissuade students from questioning academic staff.

Additionally, from an early age, students from rural contexts develop significant independence and a sense of responsibility.



The skills acquired (for example, working collaboratively or being resourceful), need to be recognised for their contributions to the higher education learning environment.

Many co-researchers were afraid, however, of losing their indigenous knowledge:

“By the time our parents and our grandfathers die, we will have lost all of that indigenous knowledge we have acquired because we are now so influenced by the western way of doing things. We are letting go of the critical things that make us African.”

There are few outreach programmes in rural communities, hence students' knowledge and understanding about university choice and application processes is limited. Several co-researchers spoke of the help and encouragement that they had received from myriad people – teachers, and the community including religious groups, career exhibitions, study and self-help groups – in considering higher education and making an application. These sources were crucial, particularly for those less supported by family members.

2. Digital Technologies

Many students from rural communities face considerable challenges, when encountering technological systems, requirements and practices. Other than cell phones, they have limited prior experience of digital technologies (for example desktop or laptop computers, internet and online applications), which are essential for applying to university and once there, for learning activities. All co-researchers found such technologies to be essential tools for researching and applying to universities, for most, however, their inexperience causes considerable challenges and anxieties. Students spoke of how terrifying it is to have to type and submit assignments online without knowing how to switch on a computer.

“I didn’t have exposure, I didn’t have internet ... I got here I was computer illiterate because ... I didn’t know about the digital media because the student portal when you needed to log in like I couldn’t use that, it was so hard.”

Student co-researchers gave accounts of programmes designed to support them in their use of technology, some of which they found helpful, but these programmes assumed a level of familiarity with technology that they did not possess. Moreover, digital education systems and practices form part of a wider technocratic system which takes limited account of prior experience and context in favour of globalised modernity, a form of continuing coloniality.



3. Curricula

Our findings illustrate the importance that student co-researchers attributed to being able to relate to curricula that reflect their own lives and indigenous knowledge systems, curricula that they do not experience in higher education. They feel alienated by existing curricula and this alienation may, we argue, be a factor in low retention rates.

Students’ accounts foregrounded experiences of the historical effects of colonialism, for example, through the lack of awareness or indifference of some staff and assumptions made about prior experience. They spoke of having to navigate environments that are often culturally incongruent, that ignore their cultural and historic identities and, do not acknowledge or value the knowledges and skills that they have developed in their rural communities. As one student co-researcher said,

*“You have to change.
The curriculum stays the same.”*

Further, English is not the first language of the majority of students from rural contexts. Many of them talked of the difficulty they have in participating in teaching and learning, for example, in understanding lectures, often because of their previous experiences in smaller classes, where the teaching was more formal and directed or because they had not encountered English as the dominant teaching language.

Students from rural contexts have the potential to enrich higher education for everyone. They want to be recognised as key contributors to knowledge production and to learning and teaching activities that are relevant for all students.

Policy Recommendations

Since #Fees Must Fall, university students have been calling for greater social justice through the realisation of a decolonial agenda in formal education. The South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) should, therefore, ensure that universities have policies and strategies to expand the decolonisation of their ethos and practices to meet the needs of all students, including those from rural contexts.



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Key recommendations

Universities should be required and supported to:

- Expand recruitment from rural schools, developing enhanced outreach strategies that 'speak' to rural communities.
- Collect access and completion rate data on students from rural contexts and make these publicly available.
- Address the wide-ranging digital inequalities faced by students from rural environments through:
 - enhanced support for online applications
 - tailored peer mentoring and outreach to support confident engagement with multiple devices, online cultures and systems before arrival and during year 1 of university.
- Work with academics, academic developers and students to implement enhanced curricula, teaching and learning strategies that are inclusive of and value the experiences and aspirations of students from rural communities.
- Take into account the previous experiences of rural students when reviewing policies or implementing learning, teaching and assessment practices.
- Ensure that university staff recognise the importance of removing colonial and exclusionary practices, alongside their responsibility to enable students from rural contexts to participate fully in the institution.

Further information:

SARIHE website: <http://sarihe.org.za>

SARIHE Working Paper 1: Rurality and Education <http://sarihe.org.za/publications/>

SARIHE Working Paper 2: Practices, transitions and negotiations to new figured worlds: Southern African rural students in higher education <http://sarihe.org.za/publications/>

SARIHE Working Paper 3: Southern African Rurality in Higher Education: Towards a participatory and decolonising methodology <http://sarihe.org.za/publications/>

Leibowitz, B., Mgqwashu, E.M., Kasanda, C., Lefoka, P., Lunga, V., Rakel, K. S. (2019) Decolonising research: the use of drawings to facilitate place-based biographic research in Southern Africa, *Journal of Decolonising Disciplines*.

Statistics South Africa <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?m=2019>



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