

# Impact of Rurality on Students' Educational Transition in Lesotho. A Case Study

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## Abstract

The students' views, from the secondary education in the rural areas in Lesotho, have been sought on the impact of rurality in relation to their transition from secondary education to higher education (in this regards, the National University of Lesotho (NUL). The students' views were sought through their autobiographies. Autobiographical narratives were employed because it was assumed that they are a good tool for knowing oneself better. The study was qualitative, with the adoption of a case study research design. The participating students were drawn from three of the ten Lesotho districts that are situated in the rural areas. The purpose of the research study was to find out whether studying at the university has an impact on the students who have transited from secondary education in the rural areas and whether university education assists and prepares them to achieve their intentions and to reach a successful outcome.

A purposively selected number of eleven (11) students from the rural areas formed the sample of the study. A one question questionnaire was designed to collect information on the students' experiences from their NUL studies in relation to the transition from secondary education to higher education. An interpretative analysis was employed to unveil the results of the study. The research study finds that the students have deficiencies. Secondary education has not moulded them to have a sudden engagement with their studies in higher education. Many of them still require further training in study skills in order to cope with the academic demands of higher education. It is therefore recommended that NUL should have a programme that serves as a bridge between secondary and higher education.

**Keywords:** The National University of Lesotho (NUL), rurality, students' views, transition, influence, secondary education, higher education

## 1. Introduction

The paper reflects the influence of rurality on teaching and learning at the institutions of higher education in Lesotho in general and at the National University of Lesotho, in particular. It discusses the problems related to the transition of students from rural secondary schools to NUL. The study is based on the assumption that rurality in Lesotho may represent a particular aspect of inequality that leaves students from a rural background at a disadvantage when they transit to tertiary education. According to students' autobiographies (Students' autobiographies presented on the 15<sup>th</sup> August, 2018), inequality in Lesotho may be caused by the fact that the nature of deep rural areas does not give motivation to studying because the average society is illiterate. The rural families are poor and have limited food. This comes with a host of other challenges not only in school work but also in a limited ability of one to participate in extra-curricular activities. Poverty also leads to increased absenteeism and early dropouts in both primary and secondary schools. More of the nature of rurality in Lesotho is raised in the later sections of this paper. Studies such as Guiffrida (2008), Maxwell and Modhuvozi (2014), Sovanak, Vouchsieng and Navy (2018), Pheko, Monteiro, Tlhabano and Mphele (2014) and Marcus (2018) have been conducted on the impact of rurality as students transit from secondary schools and proceed to the institutions of higher learning. Specifically, Guiffrida (2008: 2) indicates that "students from rural communities face additional challenges when adjusting to large colleges and universities compared to students from urban and suburban areas". The author stipulates that these additional challenges include a) a drastic increase in curriculum offerings, b) Lack of exposure to professional and technical careers, c) an overwhelming plethora of course offerings, d) exposure to

unfriendly and hostile social relationships, taking into account the fact that rural students come from relaxed and friendly social relationships, e) and lack of parental support (Guiffrida, 2008: 11 -19).

The challenges encountered by students in their transition from rural to tertiary education attracted the attention of institutions such as Lycoming College in the USA (Marcus, 2018: 3), the University of Exeter Medical School, Medical Imaging in the UK (Bleiker, et al., 2018: 28), the urban universities in Cambodia (Sovanak, Vouchsieng & Navy, 2018: 94), the secondary schools in Germany (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2018: 57), the University of South Africa (Maxwell & Mudhovozi, 2014: 4) and the University of Botswana (Pheko et al., 2014: 313).

Some of the challenges that tend to feature predominantly in students' transition and render the students vulnerable to poor academic performance include the teachers' indifference to the students' needs (Bleiker, et al, 2018: 28; Marcus, 2018: 3), new learning demands, incompetence, loneliness, dependency (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2018: 57; Maxwell & Mudhovozi, 2014: 4; Sovanak, Vouchsieng & Navy, 2018: 94) as well as low proficiency in written and spoken English language (Pheko et al., 2014: 313; Sovanak, Vouchsieng & Navy, 2018: 94).

However, these institutions have begun to address the students' learning impediments by engaging them in activities such as course outlines, teaching methods and assessment ((Bleiker, et al, 2018: 28), for example. This exercise helps teaches to pay attention to individual students' emotions, perceptions, attitudes and expectations (Bleiker, et al., 2018: 28). The institutions further assist teachers to practice positive teacher-student relationships, to facilitate students' competences, relatedness and independent study skills in order to enhance their learning (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2018: 57). In the process, teachers learn to review their teaching methods (Virat, et al., 2018: 4) so that their interaction with students may serve as a bridge from a rural background to urban tertiary institutions.

The National University of Lesotho, the institution of higher learning, is no exception in admitting students from all areas of the country, inclusive of those that come from the rural areas who are to pursue their professional and technological careers. It was, therefore, the aim of the study to explore the issues facing the NUL specifically on rurality and the educational transition. It addressed the question: What challenges do students from the rural secondary schools in Lesotho experience when they go to the institutions of higher learning?

The objective of the study was:

- (a) To determine the nature of the challenges that students from the rural areas experience when they study at NUL.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 The Meaning of Rurality*

Although there is no common definition of rurality, this section presents the various definitions that are given in the literature. According to Kim et al. (2014: 7309), the word 'rural' is manifested in economic, sociological, psychological, ethnic, racial and geographical forms. Urban peoples are generally non-agricultural while ruralists mostly reside in places where the dominant livelihood activities are agricultural. (Kim et al., 2014: 7309).

Beyond the core features related to the natural resources and population density, rural areas can be characterized in different ways, such as places where most people spend their working time on farms as well as the abundance and relative cheapness of land and association with long distance and poor infrastructure (Abdulwakeel, 2017). It is also a place of tradition rather than modernity, of agriculture rather than industry, of nature rather than culture and changelessness rather than dynamism` (Abdulwakeel, 2017). In Sweden, rural areas have been categorized through the characteristics such as non-existent communal exercise, inadequate connectedness to the conveyance system (IT network and innovation), low technology for crops, livestock farming and poor savings culture (Abdulwakeel, 2017).

### *2.2 Rurality in the Context of Lesotho*

Rurality in Lesotho is couched in circumstances that often compromise the quality of education for students who grow up in this place and makes it difficult for them to transit from secondary to higher education. Rurality involves the keeping of livestock and crop farming in the districts that are mountainous, inaccessible and sparsely populated (Marrion, 2016: 8). Most housing structures in rural Lesotho do not meet any standards for decent living (Makuta, 2001: 2). The bulk of them are built out of mud, stones or sticks and often lack proper ventilation due to the absence of windows. Safety in such houses is negligible as the doors are run-down and often lack suitable door locks. Sanitation is a challenge. Basotho in these areas often have to grapple with (and therefore need to construct) pit latrines the ways to improve them (Makuta, 2001: 2). Since teaching and learning thrive in conditions that resonate

with extra-mural activities as well as the physical and mental welfare of all the stakeholders, it may not be difficult to appreciate why students in the rural areas struggle to transit from high school to institutions of higher learning.

The challenge of limited services (such as lack of infrastructure, economic and health centers and their being largely inaccessible (Marrion, 2016: 2), is compounded with lack of electricity. According to Mpholo et al. (2018: 100), despite the serious efforts of the Lesotho Government, the Lesotho Electricity Company (LEC) and other stakeholders, the level of rural household electrification and affordability are still low. Whereas in 2015 about 72% of urban households were grid-connected, this was only true for 5.5% of the rural households. Furthermore, the vast majority of the rural households use wood for fuel while electricity use, where available, represents a small share of the domestic energy consumption (Mpholo, et al., 2018: 100).

The lack of electricity in particular implies that schools in these areas hardly have science laboratories or computers. Students from these places tend to encounter computers for the first time when they transit to colleges and universities in the urban areas (Mpholo, et al., 2018: 100).

The boys who come from wealthy families, in terms of livestock, tend to miss school on account of having to look after livestock (Lefoka, 2007: 13-14). This occupation goes on even during the weekends. Those who grow up exposed to initiation schools believe that they have obtained manhood. They become arrogant and refuse to go back to school (Liphoto, 2018:1) after their initiation.

The overall experience of the rural learners they are taught only by Basotho nationals who speak the local language or English language. This experience proves to be a challenge when students get to institutions of higher learning where they are sometimes taught by foreigners with unfamiliar accents.

However, the moments enjoyed by most students are in winter, where they sit around the three-stone fireplace and roast ears of dried corn with other family members (Countries and Their Cultures, 2000). These are instances in which storytellers, dancers and musicians join the audience in chanting, clapping and singing to retell ancient folktales (Countries and Their Cultures, 2000: 5). In the end, it is the combination of all the circumstances referred to above that suggest that the quality of education of the students in the rural areas leaves much to be desired.

### *2.3 Other Case Studies on Rurality and Transition into Higher Education*

Guiffrida (2008: 2) substantiates the assumption that students encounter some challenges in their transition from rural secondary schools to tertiary education. Guiffrida alludes to the benefits enjoyed by the students in the rural settings. He writes:

- a) *“Small classes enable teachers to give personalised attention to students; b) pupil to teacher ratio is normally lower. This allows for more effective learning experience; c) rural environment tends to be more relaxed, friendly and collectivist in nature; whereas urban environments tend to be more hurried, less friendly and more competitive; d) social relationships in rural communities tend to be more personal, tightly-knit than urban social relationships”* (Guiffrida, 2008: 12).

Instructors in some colleges such as Lycoming College, USA, acknowledge that once students from a rural background get to college, they are more likely to drop out (Marcus, 2018: 3). Their excuses are often that they were not aware that the students from rural backgrounds need assistance. They say, "We never really came to terms with the fact that they needed extra support" (Marcus, 2018: 3). The president of Lycoming College is quoted as saying "It's fair to say that until fairly recently, we just took our rural students for granted," (Marcus, 2018: 3).

Bleiker, et al. (2018: 28) of the University of Exeter Medical School, Medical Imaging, in the UK, conducted a study through which they discovered that since students often “differ in terms of individual psychological characteristics such as emotions, perceptions, attitudes and expectations” (all of which have an impact on academic performance, professional and technological careers), teachers should provide a safe and fair environment for them and for other teachers. They should also “listen to and respect [the] wishes and needs of the students” (Bleiker, et al., 2018: 28). Teachers were encouraged to devise the ways through which they can engage students in the design of course outlines, curriculum, teaching methods and assessment. In the process, teachers would be acquainted with individual students’ needs, expectations, perceptions and feelings (Bleiker, et al, 2018: 28). The study concluded that when teachers have an idea about the background of their students, they are likely to advance equality and diversity (Bleiker, et al., 2018: 29) while at the same time exercising compassion and non-judgmental acceptance of all their students.

In another study conducted in France the focus was on assisting the teachers to become acquainted with the concept of compassionate love. The teachers learned that such a concept was:

*“... an attitude toward other(s) either close others or strangers or all of humanity, containing feelings,*

*cognitions and behaviors that are focused on caring, concern, tenderness and an orientation toward supporting, helping and understanding the other(s), particularly when the other(s) is (are) perceived to be suffering or in need” (Virat, M., et al., 2018: 4).*

Part of what French teachers were expected to do in their venture of teaching and learning and applying compassionate love in their interaction with their students was to help the students to feel that they were valued at a fundamental level (Virat, M., et al, 2018: 4). The teachers were made aware that they should make their students to feel cared for and to develop some trust in their teachers; the teachers themselves had to learn how to have accurate cognitive understanding of the students. It was on that premise that they could become open and sensitive to their students’ needs. This relational approach proved to be beneficial to French students and enhanced their autonomous motivation for learning (Virat et al., 2018: 4).

A study by Bakadorova & Raufelder (2018: 57) focused on the effect of a positive teacher-student relationship on students’ learning in one German secondary school. As is the case with students transiting from rural schools to university, this study focused on students who were transiting from one level of education to another. The students’ transition involved encountering an entirely new school environment (including new rules, classes, learning demands, daily rhythms, etc.), which was shaped by new social relationships with both peers and teachers (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2018: 57). Such a transition made students feel vulnerable.

Bakadorova & Raufelder (2018: 57) utilized the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to determine to what extent the role of the teacher-student relationship enhances the students’ learning. According to this theory, motivation for learning is based on three innate psychological needs, namely, competence, relatedness and autonomy (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2018: 57). The claim is that satisfaction of these needs enables students to adjust better to their new environment (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2018: 57) and to advance in their academic learning. For example, when students are provided with well-tailored and challenging tasks, given manageable responsibilities in class, assisted with tips to integrate into the new social surroundings and afforded boundless opportunities for receiving detailed feedback from each teacher, their competence becomes unstoppable (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2018: 57).

With regards to relatedness, the findings of Bakadorova & Raufelder’s (2018:58) study suggest that “positive teacher-student relationships promote a feeling of security and warmth, which support a sense of relatedness and, thereby, the students’ motivation and engagement.” The students enjoy an increased feeling of being personally accepted and cared for by others and this enhances their motivation to be committed to their studies.

Finally, a positive teacher-student relationship seems to usher students into an experience of autonomy, which is pronounced as “the developmental demand to self-regulate an activity so that it becomes intrinsically important to an individual” (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2018: 58).

Similarly, drawing from a sample of middle and high school students in the USA, a study conducted by Brinkworth et al. (2018: 24) also focused on the impact of teacher-student relationships on the teaching and learning (Brinkworth et al, 2018: 24) and established that students’ performance improved significantly. The researchers learned that in order to help the students to improve their performance, teachers had to identify students’ interests, to develop interventions and to assess the effectiveness of these interventions (Brinkworth et al., 2018: 24). More importantly, the study found that when teachers were keen to promote students’ social emotional learning in addition to traditional outcomes such as grades, test scores and graduation rates, “students’ academic achievement affects behaviour and motivation improve[s].” (Brinkworth et al., 2018: 25).

Similarly, in the urban universities in Cambodia, Sovanak, Vouchsieng and Navy (2018: 94) emphasised the need to assist students through a transitional bridge in order to curb academic learning frustrations encountered by students from rural to urban universities. In their view, the bridge would assist students to overcome the learning challenges such as “poor academic performance, language barriers, financial constraints, adjusting to an urban lifestyle, difficulty in making friends and living alone” (2018: 94).

Maxwell and Mudhovozi (2014) write about the challenges that students experience in their transition from rural high schools to the University of South Africa. They posit that “[t]ransiting from rural high school to university is stressful enough but enrolling into a suitable degree programme is even more demanding in this era of heightened competition for places at institutions of higher learning” (2014: 3). They further argue that encounters such as inadequate places in tertiary institutions, failure to satisfy the minimum choice requirements as well as financial trials are more prevalent among the learners from the rural areas (Maxwell & Mudhovozi, 2014: 3). These scholars add that the bulk of matriculants tend to come from humble backgrounds and that “rural school leavers who succeed to get into universities usually have troubles attaining high academic achievement even though intellectually they are no different from their urban peers” (Maxwell & Mudhovozi, 2014: 4). They claim that the

“learners often state that their high school coursework was not challenging enough” (Maxwell & Mudhovozi, 2014: 4).

Pheko et al. (2014) conducted a study in which they also have a record of students from the rural areas that went to study at the University of Botswana, in an urban area. They indicated that some of the problems that students struggle with include the “perception of rudeness, reactions to dressing styles, views on greetings and salutations, experiences of stress associated with separation from family, challenges with using public transport and the use of English language” (Pheko et al., 2014: 313).

In conclusion, the case studies above provide concrete evidence that NUL’s admission of students from rural educational backgrounds, in tandem with their challenges of transition into the urban learning institutions, is no exception. What is even more fascinating is that these case studies avail best practices that have worked to assist students to improve their academic performance in spite of the learning challenges in the new environments. The practices include:

- a) Compassionate love (Virat et al., 2018: 4) and positive teacher-student relationship (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2018: 57; Brinkwortha et al., 2018: 24).
- b) Personalized attention (Guiffrida, 2008: 2).
- c) Friendly, safe and fair teaching and learning environment (Guiffrida, 2008: 2; Bleiker et al., 2018: 28).
- d) Creating teachers’ awareness that students from the rural backgrounds need an extra hand (Marcus, 2018: 3).
- e) Listening to and respecting the needs of students (Bleiker et al., 2018: 29).
- f) Engaging students in curriculum design, course outlines, teaching methods and assessment (Bleiker, et al, 2018: 29).
- g) Crafting teachers’ self-awareness (Bleiker, et al., 2018: 29).
- h) Producing well-tailored and challenging tasks (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2018: 57).
- i) Promoting student independent and social emotional learning (Brinkwortha et al., 2018: 24).
- j) Building a bridge to circumvent language barriers and facilitate a better transition from rural and secondary to tertiary education (Sovanak, Vouchsieng & Navy, and 2018: 94).

With respect to the issues of rurality, an attempt has been made to respond, through the literature, to the question as to whether coming from the rural secondary education has an impact on studying at an institution of higher learning. There is a consensus among the authors such as Guiffrida (2008), Maxwell and Mudhovozi (2014), Pheko et al. (2014), Marcus (2018, Liphoto (2018) and Bleiker et al. (2018) that there are challenges which students encounter when they study in universities in the urban areas. The following are examples of the identified challenges: a stressful life that is caused by experiencing a new environment, the students’ inability to enroll into a suitable degree programme, the students’ inability to attain a high achievement, problems to cope with new teaching methods and assessment, learning demands, as mentioned in the review of literature section. However, some authors indicate that, in the current phenomenon, no institution worthy of its mandate can remain indifferent to the question of rural-urban disparity in the higher education institutions (Bakadorova and Raufelder, 2018; Marcus, 2018). According to (Vouchsieng and Navy, 2018), Students who are transiting from rural schools to urban universities require a transitional bridge in order to reduce academic learning problems. It is against this background that the present study attempts to find out the nature of the impact of rurality on students’ learning at the institutions of higher learning, in this case, the NUL. The findings might act as the awareness strategy to the university and a way of finding solutions that may assist the students in their learning.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Research Design*

This paper is based on a student survey that adopted a qualitative paradigm. The basic assumption for using this paradigm was that a qualitative study “describes what is” (Kahn and Best, 1993: 105). The qualitative approach adopted for this study is a case study research design. According to Mertens, 2005: 229) case studies ‘study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them’ Based on the description of Mertens, a case study approach seems to be appropriate for finding out the information regarding the impact of rurality on students’ studies at a university. The data for the study was collected through students’ autobiographies and then analysed thematically. That is, the attention was focused on the themes that arose from students’ autobiographies which featured their own experiences of secondary education

and their transition to higher education. The themes were grouped for the purpose of identifying similarities and differences.

A total of eleven (11) students formed a sample for the study. They were drawn from the deep rural areas of Lesotho. The focus was placed on the students who were in the third and fourth years of study at NUL. It was assumed that the students in those years of study are well experienced, have knowledge and better understanding of the two worlds – rural secondary school education and transition into higher education. Such students could identify the similarities and differences of the two worlds. They could also identify the nature and impact of the transition such as the mode of teaching and learning. For example, they could identify the mode of communication, the quality of teaching, resource accessibility, information communication as well as technology and computer literacy.

A one question questionnaire was designed to source information on students' experiences. The question requested them to narrate their experiences of transiting from the rural secondary education to study at the NUL, an institution of higher learning. The question read as follows: What are your experiences of studying at the NUL after transiting from the secondary education in the rural areas?

In a seminar, the objective of the study and the question to which the students were to respond were presented. They were provided with guidance to respond effectively and were guided to determine which aspects of their narratives were essential for the purpose of this study. They were each afforded ten days within which to complete the assignment. Since the initial presentations of the narratives were quite lengthy as students still struggled with making the choices pertaining to which areas of their stories could be shared and which ones could be left out, specific days were scheduled in which students would present their written stories. They were at liberty to present as they pleased. The team of researchers and students would comment and ask questions for clarity after each presentation. The team later provided assistance in editing the students' stories

### 3.2 Analysis of Data

A thematic analysis was used in accordance with the one question, as indicated on page 4. Similar themes were grouped together and were further supported by excerpts drawn from the students' transcriptions. A thematic analysis is recommended by Strauss and Corbin (2008) because it discovers concepts and relationships in raw data. It then organizes data into categories to derive grounded theory. Thus in this study, concepts and categories were organized to form themes from which theories could be derived. Three themes have been analysed through the use of descriptive and interpretative analyses to indicate the results of the study. A few students' excerpts are quoted to support the themes that have been raised. The collected data was also analysed and interpreted in relation to the problem and review of the relevant literature. The idea of a joined research study was also important in sharing the understanding of the emerging themes and reaching a consensus when analysing the data as well as drawing conclusions.

### 4. Ethical Consideration

It was essential to request permission from a selected number of students to participate in the study on rurality and learning at NUL. Students were grouped and informed about the nature of the research study, the length of time to be spent on the project, the objective and the significance of the study and the procedure to be adopted for data collection. It was further indicated that they were allowed to withdraw from the study, should they wish to do so. This project had an informed consent and approval of the University Centre of Teaching and Learning (CTL). The students wrote out their autobiographies and were expected to share their experiences of studying at NUL. In a seminar, all the attendants, inclusive of students and CTL staff commented on the individual presentation. At the end of the presentation, an analysis of the autobiographies was done in order to draw conclusions on the nature of rurality and students' learning. Every participant was allowed to know the results of the other. Permission was requested and granted of publishing the findings in a journal.

### 5. The Findings

As indicated earlier, the major purpose of the study was to explore the impact of the students' transition from rural secondary schools to higher institutions of learning. The students' attitudes, perceptions and views were explored to determine the extent to which studying in the rural areas affects their transition into NUL. In this study, the question put to the students was: *What are your experiences of studying in the rural secondary schools, and what was the nature of your transition from there to NUL?* In responding to the question, students' were requested to write autobiographies. According to Walker (2017: 1896), autobiographies 'reflect a set of values, rules, and norms that govern a person's learning and sense of logic and, "enable people to tell the stories of their storied lives" (Ibid: 1896-97).

From the students' autobiographies, a number of themes such as the challenges with the use of English Language, communication skills, the selection of the curriculum of study, the use of technology, new teaching methods, the library use, low self-esteem and not coping with many assignments were identified. However, for the purposes of this study, only three of these themes are considered. The three are determined by condensing two or more themes that are related in order to end up with a smaller number, as indicated below:

- a) The use of the English Language and communication skills
- b) The selection of the curriculum of study and low self-esteem
- c) Problems with the use of technology and new teaching methods

### 5.1 The Use of the English Language and Communication Skills

It is evident from the students' autobiographies that there are more problems than benefits of transition from secondary schools to NUL. With regard to the use of the English language, students identified some pointers to the problems of understanding English as the medium of instruction on a daily basis. These problems include lack of communication with other students, lack of communication and participation in class, struggle with understanding assignments and problems with everything learned in English language. One student (S1) (the letter S represents the word student) expressed the view in relation to the use of English language in the following way:

**S1**

*English is a very big problem for me. It is the most dominant medium of instruction that teachers use when lecturing. I found myself compelled to major in Sesotho because of this. I thought this was going to be easy but it was even worse to do Sesotho assignments using English books...understanding meaning or interpretation...therefore having to do Sesotho in English was not helping because...when translating, there were no equivalent words due to language differences so much that I failed and supplemented three courses from the Sesotho curriculum.*

Another student elaborated on the idea of problems with English language use as follows:

**S2**

*English language usage has been a great challenge to me. The challenge lies in the way the university runs its activities in assignments through THUTO, email and through using the post to make announcements was a hard nut to crack.*

One student asserted that:

**S3**

*When I came to the university, language usage was a great challenge to me from arrival. This was because we were not forced to speak in English language in my secondary school. Other secondary schools encouraged their students to speak in English language at all times. If students failed to follow this instruction, they were punished.*

Another student added her views on the use of the English language in relation to communication skills:

**S4**

*But here at the university, things are different, everything is learned in English and I had to memorise everything in order to pass. The big problem came when I had to communicate with other students. I would agree with everything they said because I did not know how to reply. As a result, I would spend the whole day being quiet.*

It is evident therefore, from students' perspectives, that the key factor that caused inadequate use of English language is their previous secondary school practices and the school administration. Teachers in the rural secondary schools appear not to have been committed to speaking English. They even failed to make students feel committed to the language, yet it is well known that the use of English language is mandatory in institutions of higher learning.

### 5.2 Selection of the Curriculum of Study

On the examination of the data collected from the students' autobiographies, three types of views are revealed about the Selection of the Curriculum of Study: (i) students land in the study programmes which are not of their preferences; (ii) the university is not effective in exposing the students to all the programmes of study because the assumption is that the students have already made their choice when filling in the application forms. (iii) As a result, some students regret their choice. The excerpts below reflect the students' experiences in this regard.

S7

*I had an application form of course, but I was not in a position to choose what I really wanted to be. That only came to my mind when I was about to step my foot at the administration office. I said to myself, "maybe, I could be a teacher so as to fulfill my mother's dream.*

S3

*In the second year, I encountered a challenge in having selected my majors. I ended up taking the courses that I did not really want to study.*

S2

*I could not focus in class because I had selected what I was not interested in. I did not like it. I was always depressed; sometimes I would cry and become inattentive. Ultimately, I failed the programme and started selecting the one that I liked in the following academic year. It means that I had wasted one year already.*

S11

*I also felt like withdrawing from the University when I realised that I had chosen a curriculum that was not of my preference. I saw my peers selecting it and I thought that it must be very good, only to find after three months that the curriculum that I require was available. I wanted to withdraw from the university that year and re-join it the following year. But I was warned that I might not get the sponsorship. So, I have to continue with the programme that I had previously selected.*

The above views illustrate that there is a need, at NUL, to have preparation of the new students prior to their curriculum selection. The fact that the students make mistakes in their curriculum selection is indicative of the unavailability of university academic structures that can be used to expose students to the understanding of the University curricula. Being exposed to broad base curricula would facilitate better choices while still bearing in mind the requirements of each curriculum. Based on the students' comments, it appears that the University should develop a cross-over bridge that can allow students to have an easy way to the university systems.

### 5.3 Problems with Technology Use and University Teaching Methods

The frequent problems that the eleven students encountered were based on the computer and library use. They further, commented on the University teaching methods which they had never been exposed to before. Their failure to use the computers and the library resulted from the fact that these facilities were not available in their secondary schools. Secondly, the lecturers used learner-based teaching methods that were unfamiliar to what they experienced in the secondary schools where a teacher played the dominant role and never promoted an interactive way of teaching and learning. The following are the remarks that indicate the various problems that they encountered when they moved into the NUL systems of operation.

S9

*When I arrived, I had neither computer nor internet access. I found it difficult to employ digital resources such as YouTube for emphasis on what in class... Access to the internet in general was indeed another factor that affected me negatively because I did not even know wireless network and the learning management system (THUTO), a software platform where courses, assignments, 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 course that they were taking.*

Two examples that explain the problem with access to the Library are as follows:

S6

*At the University, we learn on our own, there is no longer a teacher running after you, telling you when to read. There is no specific tune selected to study as it was back in secondary schools. Assignments are piled one after the other. The worst problem is the big and complex library. I sometimes spend more than three hours looking for a single book.*

S2

*I knew nothing about the Library catalogue and websites. We were just told to search for books. Having to read a book on my own in the library was a problem. I could not understand a thing. I relied on my friends to help me make a meaning out of what I read.*



Two examples of the challenges of classroom teaching methods were as follows:

**S1**

*I often performed badly in tests and assignments because I did not understand how the lecturers operated. They would come and explain some points but would never go into the details on the content. Instead, they would end up saying that we should go and read for ourselves. I could not memorize what was taught in the classroom as I used to do at the secondary school.*

**S4**

*A power point was a big obstacle for me because when I tried to copy the points, the lecturer would have moved fast to other points. Some students used their cellphones to take photos of the slides. But I did not have any and I had to rely on those who had them. Our families are poor and they cannot afford to buy us cellphones.*

Some of the students from the eleven indicated that lack of exposure to the university teaching methods made them lose their confidence in learning. This is what they said:

**S10**

*This type of teaching at the University made me lose self-esteem. I used to think that I was brilliant but I scored low marks in every course. I even became reluctant to ask for help from other students because of the nature of the campus activities where everyone is in a hurry for something or the other. That contributed to the fear of asking questions. I was afraid to ask a student with a high ability, especially males because I thought that he might rape me if there were only the two of us.*

The impact of rurality on the students' performance is observable from their autobiographies. It appears that the students who prepare to go to the university need orientation regarding the university academic and non-academic activities. One might find it in order to introduce a bridge between secondary and higher education. The students believe that the recommendation mentioned above would make a difference when they get to the university.

## **6. Discussion**

The challenges which students from rural backgrounds experience in their transition from high schools to university, as depicted in literature, seem to resonate with those that students studying at NUL from rural backgrounds were grappling with. The students at NUL blame their academic inadequacy on their lack of appropriate study skills, on their inability to satisfactorily express themselves in written and spoken English language, on their struggle to adjust to sudden and unprecedented personal freedom engendered by their urban lifestyle, on the difficulty to make friends for the purpose of group assignments, on studying the courses which are at variance with their personal ambitions and on the teacher-centred lecture methods where the lecturers dictate, and students write notes and listen at the same time.

Just as it was noted that students in some universities in the USA were taken for granted and not furnished with extra assistance, it is possible that students at NUL are experiencing the same challenge. The teachers at NUL may not be aware of the students' needs, perceptions, expectations, frustrations and lived experiences, as highlighted in autobiographies. The literature pertaining to students' transitions from high school to tertiary institutions may have been helpful in highlighting the challenges that the students experience in different parts of the world but it seems to fail to concretize clear-cut strategies to reach out to students who are in dire need of academic and socio-emotional assistance.

Some of the challenges featuring in the autobiographies of students from NUL include low self-esteem and self-pity because of poverty, being unaccustomed to instructional technology, lack of study skills and the need for inspirational teaching. Reference is made to these challenges in order to point out that while the literature alludes to the benefits engendered by rural school environments such as teacher's personal attention to the students, relaxed, friendly and the collectivist nature of learning and teaching as well as the meaningful personal relationships among the peers and between teachers and students outside the classrooms (Guiffrida, 2008: 12). This literature has gaps in terms of what teachers and students may do to overcome the challenges that threaten the academic success of the students from the rural backgrounds.

## **7. Conclusion**

The study has highlighted the problems that the students from the rural areas met as they transited and studied with NUL. It can be concluded that autobiographical narratives are useful for getting information on oneself. The

students' narratives were detailed and stipulated various problems, namely, the challenges with English Language and communication skills, the selection of the curriculum and low self-esteem, problems with technology use and new teaching methods. It seems that these challenges may deter students' academic performance. One would assume that even those rural students who did not participate in the study experience similar problems. It calls for a great concern that warrants the university to provide mechanisms that could assist students to be at par with their colleagues from the urban areas.

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