

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

## Recounting the Learning Challenges Experienced by Students from Rural Areas in South Africa in the Context of a Pandemic

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### Abstract

Globally, the unprecedented onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has impelled students to transition abruptly from their traditional learning spaces to new learning conditions. To this end, universities were compelled to overhaul their existing institutional operations in conformance with the lockdown protocols enforced by the National Government. The sudden switch to an unplanned remote mode of teaching and learning becomes not only a lamentable reality for both academics but also a daunting challenge for many students. Concomitantly, this pandemic has rudely exposed a range of disparities that exist among tertiary students in South Africa. Consequently, many students of lower socioeconomic status lack the necessary resources and skills to succeed on a virtual platform of learning. Furthermore, during the lockdown period, many students were compelled to return to their rural towns and study in workspaces that were not conducive to learning, thus limiting their chances to engage optimally. This raises the question: How will students confined to their rural township homes that are not conducive to learning and do not have the efficacies to adapt to digital learning access, engage in, and successfully complete the current academic year? In fact, the digital divide widens the epistemic gap for most students from rural and vulnerable communities, diminishing their opportunities to access an inclusive and participatory education. Equally, COVID-19 forcibly sanctions that digital learning is no longer a privilege but a right to inclusive education. Consequently, this paper will highlight the vast chasms and challenges experienced by vulnerable first-year students of rural communities during the lockdown period, mostly highlighting the constraints on their epistemic access in the context of a pandemic.

**Keywords:** rurality; digital divide; epistemic access; digital access; connectivity

### Introduction

Globally, the unprecedented onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has impelled students to transition abruptly from their traditional learning spaces to new learning environments. The advent of the new Corona virus has affected every sector in every country, and its consequences will be felt for years to come. Previously, considerable time and effort were committed to transforming and improving higher education in South Africa, but now the caveat that COVID-19 will disrupt the sector with serious consequences prevails. To this end, universities are compelled to adhere to lockdown protocols enforced by the National Government, overhauling existing operations at their institutions. The sudden switch to an unplanned remote mode of teaching and learning becomes not only a lamentable reality for many academics but also a daunting challenge for many students. The pandemic has recently created opportunities for all higher education institutions (HEIs) to fast-track the potential and development of their Information Communication Technology (ICT) teaching and learning centres, as well as improve their ICT operations. However, many HEIs lack the infrastructure and resources to deliver their online programme offerings effectively and at full capacity. According to recent studies, a predominant measure to mitigate the risk and spread of COVID-19 is social distancing, self-isolation and refraining from gathering in large crowds (Krishnakumar and Rana, 2020). Consequently, many students from rural towns and remote areas will now be turned away from their student residences or funded accommodation and may have to return to their homes. In addition, COVID-19 has

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compelled students, mainly from their rural hometowns, to now access learning through online platforms that they have never been inducted into or introduced to secondary education. Consequently, such a situation leaves many rural students with a bleak alchemy of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty about how to access and engage in their physical places of learning in order to successfully complete the current academic year.

Concomitantly, this pandemic has rudely exposed a range of disparities that exist among tertiary students in South Africa. For example, in his budget address to Parliament earlier in 2020, the Minister of Higher Education, Blade Nzimande, confirmed that more than half of the South African students in higher education residing mainly in townships and rural areas stem from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. Subsequently, many of the students of lower socioeconomic status lack the necessary resources and skills that will advantage them on a virtual platform of learning (Letseka *et al.*, 2018: 129). Furthermore, many students during the lockdown period were forced to live in their rural towns at workspaces that were not conducive to learning, thus limiting their chances to engage optimally. Despite the transformation efforts in our democratic epoch, a nuanced lens that looks at how rural students access higher education is worth the attention and redress. The political agenda of the democratic government was to revise educational policies to promote and facilitate equal access and parity in the educational sector. Contrarily, almost three decades later, the cruel reality bears testimony that many South Africans remain excluded from the education sector as a result of one factor or another. Notwithstanding the progress in the government's transformation and educational reformation plans, minimum progress has been made concerning access to higher education institutions by students from rural and disadvantaged communities. South Africa can only justifiably talk about change when people of marginalised communities are awarded full recognition and inclusion in the decision-making process (Munaka, 2016: 33).

Mgqwashu (2019: 65) opines that rural students, one of the most marginalised groups, have attracted little attention in widening participation research to date. South Africa's historical legacy places it in a unique position compared to the rest of the world. This paper aims to fill part of this gap by observing the effect of COVID-19 on rural students in higher education. Similarly, other studies confirm that historically, students from rural contexts remain one of the under-represented groups entering higher institutions and have encountered various forms of hindrance as a direct result of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid (Timmis *et al.*, 2019: 77). Hence this paper will explore and highlight the vast chasms and challenges experienced by vulnerable students living in underserved areas such as rural communities during the lock-down period. Further to this, the discussions raised in this paper are intended to appeal to the different leaders of higher education institutions, policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders to reflect on them and identify how best they can be better prepared to address such gaps. To this end, COVID-19 has raised a call for an inclusive approach to pedagogies that speaks to the lived realities of students from rural dwellings. Ultimately, this paper aims to explore the challenges rural learners experience when accessing higher education institutions during a pandemic with the hope that this will help inform change in the higher education system, which will ultimately lead to meaningful transformation and inclusivity in learning.

## **Rurality in South Africa**

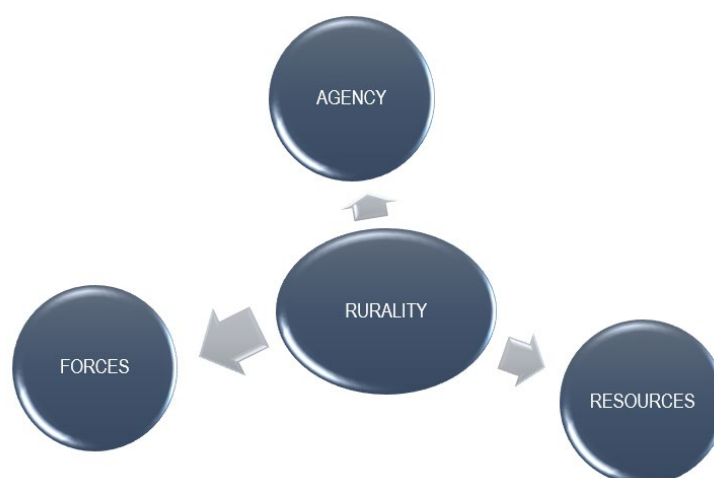
Across the world, education has been recognised as a basic human right; however, the urban-rural divide continues to exist even in a country like South Africa. A number of government initiatives were initiated to narrow or even close the urban-rural void. On the contrary, COVID-19 further depicts the geographies of apartheid, which unfortunately continue to reflect a myriad of inequalities that persist in the South African education system. Historically, Gardiner (2008: 8) confirms that urban areas will include the cities and towns that were declared by the origins of apartheid to be the domain of whites (who also owned 87% of the country's land). According to the racial policy of apartheid, all African people belonged to one 'homeland' (as in the context of rural areas) or another, all of them living some distance from urban areas. In reference to the education policy and its implementation, there is no 'one size fits all' approach since the lived realities faced by students dwelling in rural areas cannot be ignored. The researchers, acknowledging the ramifications and damaging effects the digital divide has on marginalised groups, have inferred that the phenomenal gap is a critical issue for social justice in the modern era (Resta and Laferrière, 2015: 745).

Globally, scholarly findings suggest that students from rural backgrounds are generally identified as students of lower socioeconomic status and are faced with a greater risk of meeting their academic and social goals in higher education (Czerniewicz and Brown, 2014: 1). The concept of rural or rurality is complex as it holds multiple interpretations and is understood differently by various scholars. Various scholars have adopted a range of definitions for rural; for example, Avila and Gasperini (2005: 22) refer to rural as a composition of human

settlements in remote areas, isolated from urban areas; rural dwellers live nomadic lives, and their main economic activity is agricultural production. Whereas Paxton (2015: 27) implies that rural refers to the geographical periphery in that the location of rural communities is isolated from the hub of government, academic and business activities. Moreland *et al.* (2003: 56) concur with the latter researcher; however, they add that rurality is defined empirically as having sparsely populated areas and ontologically as a category and a set of experiences.

A number of discourses on rurality research are premised on a range of theories that portray the lived experiences of those inhabiting rural geographies. For example, Cloke (2006) offers three central lenses that shape our understanding of the constructs of rurality. The first lens presents the functional elements of rural existence. According to the second lens, the political and economic influences on the position of rurality are exemplified. Finally, the third lens offers an understanding of the social constructions of rurality, which include postmodern and post-structural ways of thinking. On the other hand, Marsden (2006) interprets rurality as being transformative since it has a direct influence on how people in rural areas behave. Aligned to the discussion of this paper is the generative theory of rurality developed by Balfour *et al.* (2008), which is situated within the context of rural education. According to advocates of rurality education, Balfour *et al.* (2008: 101), their generative theory of rurality provides a framework for encapsulating 'rurality' as a dynamic concept. It is dynamic owing to the complex and multi-layered nature of the lived experiences of those who identify as being rural. Subsequently, the scholars Balfour *et al.* (2008: 102) offer two explanations why the generative theory of 'rurality' is significant. The first reason offers researchers an improved understanding and interpretation of the results of their work in rural contexts. The second reason allows for people in rural contexts to be represented as both subjects and transformative agents of change in their environment.

Furthermore, Balfour *et al.* (2008) developed the fundamentals for the generative theory of rurality and contextualised the theory in relation to this paper, elucidating the lived experiences of learning in rural contexts. Furthermore, the aforementioned theory offers a dynamic conceptualisation of 'rurality' owing to the multi-layered complexities of the lived experiences and core identities of those recognised as being rural. According to Figure 1 below, the framework recognises three dynamic constituents of rurality, namely, forces, agencies, and resources.



**Figure 1:** Variables of rurality

Forces that speak to the construct of rurality include three constituents, namely, place, space, and time. Balfour *et al.*'s (2008) generative theory of rurality further draws from the previous theories of Gallagher (1993) and Gruenewald (2003) that exemplify space, place, and time in the context of rurality. Firstly, space can be described as the habitus that emphasises social factors that may give rise to variations in behaviour which may question identity and roles and their loyalties to their origin (Weber in Balfour *et al.*, 2008: 104). For example, in the context of this paper, having to attend higher education in urban geographies may give rise to changed identities and assumed roles of the rural students. The second constituent of forces is place. According to Budge in (Balfour *et al.*, 2008: 104), six habits signpost place, namely, being connected, cultural identity, relationship with the land, spirituality, ideology and politics, and activism and engagement. Finally, the third constituent of forces is time. Time is interpreted as how long it will take to move from one locus to another in space. The second variable of rurality is agency, which is inclusive of individuals, the community, and the state. According to Balfour *et al.* (2008: 104), agency has the propensity to control space and time. Furthermore, agency may yield forms of activism,

conformance and disorderliness and ensure a sense of will towards both ends (Balfour *et al.*, 2008: 105). In a rural context, agency is key to altered trends in the determinants of space and time. In fact, a significant feature of agency is being able to disrupt the relationship between space, place, and time.

The final constituent of a generative theory of rurality is resources (Balfour *et al.*, 2008: 105). Similar to forces and agencies, the meaning of resources in a rural context is manifold. Resources are inclusive of material, emotional, physical and intangible resources. The disposition of resources is largely reliant on the influence of agencies and forces and the extent to which these might delimit not only their availability but also their use (Balfour *et al.* 2008: 105). For example, commitment and connection to a particular rural area reflect a promise to extend or improve access to resources, concomitantly altering the relationship between space and time (Budge in Balfour *et al.*, 2008:105). The face of higher education in South Africa mirrors students who are poor, black working-class youth stemming mainly from townships and rural communities. In addition, the World Bank (2018) indicates that 33% of the South African population may be classified as rural. This presents a financial burden to national governments in identifying viable and suitable plans that will provide quality and inclusive education that will service rural areas (Dube, 2020; Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019). While COVID-19 has propelled all students to a digital mode of learning, rural students feel alienated and excluded since they lack the ways and means to access online resources due to a lack of infrastructure. The unavailability of learning resources and digital connectivity, combined with their lived reality, and their lived reality further compounds this challenge. Furthermore, both secondary and tertiary education have failed in their endeavours to prepare students for this sudden and unprecedented mode of learning (Dube, 2020). In fact, the digital divide widens the epistemic gap for most students from rural and vulnerable communities, diminishing their opportunities to access an inclusive and participatory education. Equally, COVID-19 forcibly sanctions that digital learning is no longer a privilege but a right to an inclusive education.

### **Understanding the Territorial Digital Divide**

In recent years, the familiarity of the concept of digital inequity has gained traction, transforming it into a partisan topic resulting in a political impasse. The evolution of digital technology has spurred a notable increase in its role in social, economic, political and cultural trajectories (Evans, 2019) and has influenced almost every part of the world. However, in developing countries, the digital divide mirrors geographical differences in technological infrastructure and strategies as well as differences between urban and rural areas (Pick and Nishida, 2015; Robinson *et al.*, 2015). Internationally, Philip and Williams (2019: 307) refer to the digital divide as the economic gap between individuals and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels and the opportunities they have to access information and communication technologies. Yet, from a rural economic development perspective, the potential and advances in digital telecommunications are promising, yet little is known about studies relating to connectivity in rural economies (Whitacre *et al.*, 2014: 1013). In fact, scholarly findings on the digital participation of individuals who are not digitally engaged have mainly favoured urban studies—research conducted in geographical areas where infrastructure is current and reviewed and updated on a regular basis (Philips and Williams 2019: 316). On the other hand, Ngubane-Mokiwa and Letseka (2015: 129) define the digital divide as rural areas that are by nature poor and excluded from the mainstream economic benefits of modernisation. Most recent studies (Soomro *et al.*, 2020: 3) refer to the digital divide as the gap between the subclasses of a population in which one who has easy access is able to reap the benefits of technology juxtaposed to those having zero or limited access to ICT.

In South Africa, the communication infrastructure remains a complex issue. Studies confirm that most rural areas within the borders of South Africa lack network coverage, which makes it extremely difficult to access the internet as compared to those students living in urban areas. In addition, the cost of internet facilities and digital communication may be less affordable to those who dwell in such areas. Even though it is possible to have access to internet facilities in rural schools, regardless of their geographical location, it is still implemented on a rather limited scale (Mireku 2016: 4). On the other hand, Oyedemi and Mogano (2017: 7) refine the digital divide as a digital inequality inferred from both the limitations of access and the skills of digital technologies. For example, it is meaningless if a student has access to technology but does not possess the required skills to adapt to the relevant technology. Given that the role of technology in education has made notable strides in improving the engagement and quality of learning (Domingo and Garganté, 2016), numerous studies have favoured the role of ICTs as a means to advance their pedagogy and delivery of instruction whenever possible (Voogt, 2012; Owens, 2019). However, owing to the country's geographical hegemony, the prevalence of digital exclusion hinders many students' affordances and benefits of online learning.



Notwithstanding South Africa's digital inequalities in access to ICT and learning in higher education (HE), there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of the digital divide among students who live in urban geographies as compared to those living in rural homelands (Lembani *et al.*, 2020: 72). In South Africa, many students are only familiarised with information technology (IT) and internet skills when they first enter university (Naidoo and Raju 2012). This means that during the lockdown period of the pandemic, many students had to gamble with their limited IT skills, resources and knowledge in order to stay engaged and focused on their studies. Clearly, the skewed patterns of access from home to online learning signify a social stratification of two classes of young South Africans: the digitally privileged and the digitally disadvantaged (Oyedemi and Mogano, 2017). The social class of those who are digitally privileged is determined by their digital wealth, which is measured in terms of the IT skills they acquired in primary and secondary education. Students emanating from this social class have the advantage of attending some of the top quintile schools in the country or ex-Model C schools, which have prepared them sufficiently to access online learning.

Furthermore, rural areas in South Africa are less attentive to the social and economic viability required to improve technological improvement and sustainability (Mireku, 2016: 4). To this end, many students coming from rural areas often find themselves at a disadvantage when trying to access or optimise the benefits digital learning has to offer juxtaposed to their urban counterparts. To date, COVID-19 has further exposed the digital inequalities of students who received secondary education in urban schools compared to students who went to schools in rural areas. The curricula of the latter place poor emphasis on technology, which inadvertently positions students from such schools at a disadvantage. Similarly, Townsend *et al.* (2015: 175) concur that most people living in rural areas often lack the necessary digital literacy and skills that may be required for e-learning during the COVID-19 period. Subsequently, for many rural students, this drawback manifests itself in poor access to HE learning when compared to their counterparts from urban schools that are better resourced with the required technological and ICT resources (Koranteng, 2012: 26). Given the 'digital divide' between rural and urban education in South Africa, it can be argued that students hailing from urban areas generally outperform their rural counterparts, attributable to the different findings from various studies in the aforementioned sections.

Recognising that rural students also have the potential and right to succeed in higher education is crucial not just to negate historical injustices but equally as a means to value human dignity and inclusivity. Apart from the digital divide, which presents the main challenge to accessing learning during a pandemic, studies further confirm that there are other challenges that deny students from rural contexts access to inclusive learning. This will be discussed in the next section.

### **How other Background Factors Challenge Rural Students' Learning during COVID-19**

Apart from the basic infrastructure (in rural areas) required for students to stay academically engaged, COVID-19 further exposes that the households of most students living in South African rural communities lack conducive learning spaces. While students from urban middle- and upper-class households have managed to seamlessly continue with learning during the period of COVID-19, the homes of many rural students raise questions about basic resources such as electricity, running water, sanitation and physical spaces that enable students to engage and learn favorably. Furthermore, one of the outcomes of the evil of apartheid reveals that most of the parents of students from rural areas are first-generation students (Du Plessis, 2014; Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019). Consequently, such parents often attach lower priority and importance to education support and guidance for their children. As a result, many of these students may lack academic guidance and support or the learning resources required for conducive learning. Students would need to tap into a variety of resources that are accessible to them to engage and learn effectively. Once again, the rural-urban divide surfaces, cutting even deeper the gap of inequality and privilege as far as educational resources, support and guidance are required.

A number of studies show that HE students living in student residences that are closer to their institutions of learning offer students a range of benefits that will promote academic engagement. (Eccles and Wang, 2012; Mdepa and Tshiwula, 2012). Other studies (Siyengo, 2015: 27) further confirm that students living on campus are more likely than those living off campus to have greater opportunities to interact with their academic leaders and maximise the potential of academic resources. Hence, student residences provide students with an array of opportunities and advantages that will enable their academic success. However, the eviction of students from university accommodation in light of the COVID-19 outbreak has denied rural students access to such resources since they are now engaging remotely from their rural homes. Since students are no longer at the residences, they miss the active and collaborative type of learning and engaging with their peers and tutors (Siyengo, 2015: 30).

Consequently, while on lockdown, students living in their rural hometowns lack the opportunity to engage in critical and robust dialogues with their peers and respected members of the academic community. Furthermore, being away from campus deprives them of the continuous emotional support and empathy their peer and academic communities may offer in times of their learning struggles. While on campus and at residence, students perceive peer networks as beneficial to their learning. Peer networking is mainly common among first-year students since they depend on the academic support and guidance their peers may have to offer. Subsequently, collaboration allows students to engage in meaningful learning, especially when they do not understand abstract concepts or difficult tasks; collaboration with peers does, in fact, deepen their learning (Dukhan, 2020: 48). Apart from the cognitive domains of learning students acquire through peer networking, the closer proximity to their peers further taps into the affective domain of their learning. Consequently, students perceive that their place of learning (residence) together with the collegial care and support they receive from their peers further builds persistence, commitment and loyalty among students. However, this may not be the case during the COVID-19 lockdown, as many first- and second-year students are confined to their rural learning spaces away from student residences.

In reference to Bourdieu's (2011) field of power, rural communities lack the different forms of capital, such as economic, social, and cultural, that are of great value in the wider South African context. The absence of such capitals renders students with limited epistemic choices in accessing education during the unprecedented COVID-19 lockdown. In addition, due to learning in isolation, the employment of a variety of skills and abilities that will enhance epistemic access may challenge many students living remotely in their rural hometowns. These skills may include collaborative skills, information literacy skills, academic literacy skills and ICT skills. For example, when students are studying, researching, or inquiring with their peers, they can make use of their collaborative skills. This may allow students the opportunity to listen to their peers critically, reflect, reason with others, and communicate effectively through a range of digital and social media platforms (Chinapah and Odero, 2016). Many of the first-year students may lack information literacy skills that will allow them to identify and recognise a range of sources of data or the efficacy to access, evaluate and apply these skills when answering assignment questions or academic activities assigned to them during remote learning. The aforementioned sections also point to the lack of ICT skills, which many of the first-year rural students do not possess. For instance, such skills allow them to apply a range of technologies in order to research, organise, collate and evaluate information when preparing for assignments. Many of these students may be challenged to adapt to or best use smart technology or technological devices such as laptops or tablets (Dias and Victor, 2017).

Many students, from a tender age, conform to the expectations of their rural elders, who often direct them to a strong commitment towards collective responsibility (Moletsane, 2012; Timmis *et al.* 2019: 87). For example, in a rural context, it becomes imperative to acknowledge that children and young people are positioned in very particular ways, such as prioritising expected domestic tasks or pastoral duties required by their elders when living in their rural homes or villages. For instance, male students may have to first complete their agricultural chores before going to school or attending any academic self-study. (Munaka, 2016: 21) On the other hand, female students have to take care of their household and younger siblings or walk miles to fetch water since their homes lack running water or nearby water supplies. Subsequently, trying to find a balance and negotiate academic focus with domestic chores presents many rural students with onerous workloads (Makhubu and Mbongwa, 2019: 12). Most students in rural geographic areas lack the required threshold level of English proficiency to be able to effectively engage with the curriculum (Probyn, 2009: 129; Soudien, 2004). In South Africa, although English is the language of instruction in most tertiary institutions, it is the home language of only 10% of the South African population (Gardiner, 2008: 20).

Earlier studies reveal that multiple vernacular African languages are mainly spoken at home and within the community and are frequently the informal lingua franca in the township and rural schools. In addition, many of these students attending such schools are usually seen as under-appreciated knowers who have a lower proficiency in the English language. Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) aver that most students in rural areas perceive English as a foreign language and at most, they barely interact with the language in school since the majority of the teachers have English as their second language, or third language in some instances. Hence, most students, during remote learning may be confronted by barriers to interpret text presented in an unfamiliar language; limiting their opportunities to engage meaningfully and optimally with the curriculum. Equally, students who have a limited opportunity to live, think and work academically in a language environment beyond that of their mother tongue presents a further daunting challenge to most students in rural areas. For example, Boughey and McKenna (2016: 4) contend that language is often seen as neutral and separate from the social context in which it is produced and

does align itself to the background of the students. Their study signifies the ways in which students are expected to engage in higher education contexts fail to acknowledge who they are and where they come from, especially, with reference to students' backgrounds such as their historical context, culture and language.

Consequently, students with different backgrounds, knowledge or practices risk being positioned as 'other' (Morreira, 2017) and are fraught with an imposition on identity and alienation (Boughey and McKenna, 2016: 4). In addition, poor language proficiency also contributes to poor writing skills. For instance, Du Plessis and Gerber (2012), reveal that students from rural contexts often require assistance with improving their writing skills and students expressed their difficulties in articulating their thoughts and ideas since they were not accustomed to being taught in English during their years at school. Consequently, for students who are studying remotely and independently accessing academic resources and materials that are presented in English text presents a daunting learning challenge for most of them. Globally, the concept of rurality is associated with being poor (Hlalele, 2012: 114), since on average, the rate of child poverty in rural communities is said to be much higher than in urban areas. Students who live in rural areas often lack proper or adequate housing and access to quality health care and proper nutrition. Statistics conducted by StatsSA (Statistics South Africa, 2014: 33; Mabaso, 2017: 20) show that poverty levels in rural areas were estimated at 68.8%, concluding that rurality and poverty usually intersect. The White Paper for post-school education and training (CHE, 2013: 5) affirms, in its social justice agenda towards promoting equal opportunities for the previously disadvantaged, that education must be recognised as a way out of the poverty debacle. Conversely, for many Black South Africans, especially from rural communities, equality of opportunity and meaningful access to quality tertiary education are often denied owing to the legacy of apartheid.

### **Addressing the Challenges**

Despite the different social justice initiatives, the government has implemented the findings from the different scholars discussed in this paper, making the case that progress to date does not fully include access to learning for most students living in rural areas. Given the insights in the foregoing sections, what steps or recommendations can the government, and academic and community leaders take and enables epistemic access and learning success of rural students? An inclusive approach should be adopted to ensure student inclusivity, one that is flexible to accommodate the diverse needs of learners and enables epistemic access and academic success. Subsequently, the following section proposes thematic suggestions that may be considered to address the bleak learning realities confronted by many students from rural homelands.

#### ***Building infrastructure and improving resources in rural areas***

As stated in the aforementioned paragraphs, the pandemic has now intensified the need to make the shift from the traditional structure of teaching and learning to a digital and virtual mode of pedagogy (Chinapah and Otero, 2016). Hinging on this notion, greater attention needs to be devoted towards building and developing an ITC structure that will be viable and practical for all those living in rural areas (Dzansi and Amedzo, 2014). Suitably qualified teachers who specialise in ITC are deterred from applying at rural schools due to poor infrastructure and poor service delivery (White and Van Dyk, 2019). Apart from improving capital infrastructure, the urgency to create and increase bandwidth and connectivity should become a priority and be made available and freely accessible to all students at the soonest, so that no student gets left behind. This becomes the first step in closing the digital divide. It is worth mentioning that while on lockdown during the pandemic, most digital service providers were committed to offering zero-rating, mostly for teaching and learning initiatives. However, in the longer term, it becomes imperative for the government to intervene in such initiatives and offer more sustainable long-term projects that will bring a sense of digital hope and inclusion to many students living in rural areas. Such projects may include the creation of ICT models (Egbe and Mutanga, 2016: 2) that are adaptable and conducive to rural settings and may include the following:

- i. *Offer real-time technical support* that is user-friendly and accessible to all students.
- ii. *Ongoing ITC upgrade and maintenance*: it becomes imperative to ensure that digital infrastructure is continuously upgraded and in keeping with cutting edge technology.

#### ***Building digital capacity and digital equity by promoting digital capital in rural areas***

Roberts and Townsend (2015: 202) refer to digital capital as the resources and benefits that can be applied by communities in need of ITC infrastructure. This may include online information, modes of online communication and online tools, as well as digital literacy and skills. As mentioned earlier, most people living in rural areas lack

such resources. In order to address this gap, it will mean building or developing community centres that afford people from rural areas the opportunity to freely access digital technology and connectivity. Concomitantly, adult basic education should be seen as a spin-off to promote digital literacy, mostly for those who have zero skills, in an attempt to build digital capacity. Such an initiative will perpetuate digital capital in homes, increasing the usage and familiarity of online learning and access so that students are able to discover it more easily.

#### ***Including e-learning in the curriculum and providing digital resources***

It now becomes imperative for education ministers and leaders to shift their focus to rigorously incorporating ITC learning into the curriculum (Huang *et al.*, 2021; Kapur, 2019) so that learners are more confident and better prepared to access virtual learning in HE. Notwithstanding this intervention, it also becomes incumbent on HE to further perpetuate e-learning interventions as part of their orientation and induction programme for all first-year students prior to registration. This may include e-learning induction into the university's management software systems, virtual learning platforms such as Moodle and Microsoft Teams, and other requirements that will adequately prepare students to easily navigate and access virtual learning. This exercise may also serve as an indicator to assess the student's digital literacy skills, which may warrant further intervention. During the lockdown period of the pandemic, it was identified that many students, mostly from rural contexts, lacked learning devices such as a laptop or even a smart cellular phone to facilitate and enable their learning. Hence, it becomes mandatory for every student to be provided with a laptop or tablet at the start of their first year of study, which may sustain them until the end of the qualification. Concomitantly, students should also be workshopped on how to utilise these resources, which will give them the necessary confidence and motivation to apply these tools more effectively and decisively.

#### ***Promoting technology in schools and reforming rural schools***

It becomes necessary to foster pedagogical drives that are intended to improve the efficacy of teaching and learning delivery so that students are able to access learning via remote modes. Furthermore, it is imperative to identify a range of interventions that will speedily strengthen the digital capabilities of educators that will be able to leverage online resources to support learners (Munaka, 2016: 33). The teachers at schools (preferably from the primary school level) should also be engaged in e-learning pedagogies that will enhance teaching and learning. At the same time, schools and learning institutions should also reap the benefits of free internet connectivity and accessibility. Media and technological initiatives should be promoted in schools so that both teachers and learners understand and are able to engage with a range of technological tools that will enhance teaching and learning.

### **Conclusion**

Rurality in itself should not necessarily be perceived as a drawback, but when it intersects with poverty and inequity, it manifests as a challenge in students' lives and identities as they struggle to access HE (Walker and Mathebuta, 2019: 14). This challenge to be part of the mainstream only compounds their academic access to work even harder than their urban counterparts. These encounters are premised, firstly, on their geographic location in an under-resourced, rural area in a country where "the relationship between geography and racialised privilege endures" (Cele, 2016: 20); secondly, on socio-economic circumstances that adversely impact access to digital resources and infrastructure, as well as high-quality linguistic input; and thirdly, on the lack of commitment from government leaders to improve and acknowledge underserved communities. Certainly, in recent years, the wide spread of information technology and digital access has encompassed the majority of urban areas, but regrettably, minimal attention is given to rural areas. More importantly, the pandemic has now created an unsettling urgency for broadening the scope of how we access information, think, learn and act digitally. Echoing the words of former American President Barrack Obama, "the internet is no longer considered a luxury but rather has become a necessity".

The pandemic brings to the fore the need for students to access remote and digital learning, which certainly shows no respect for geographical boundaries. Indeed, COVID-19 has compounded the struggle, which is far from over, for both access to learning and digital inequity in education. The exponential advances in technology are considered a double-edged sword since, on the one hand, they have proven extremely useful for current and emerging pedagogies, but on the other hand, they rudely expose inequity and exclusion. This paper underscored the silent voices of many marginalised students from rural communities during the time of a pandemic. Subsequently, it sheds light on the multi-layered complexities that exist within our society, which do not often



receive the attention they deserve. Equally, it must be cautioned that while HE institutions will want to explore the greater benefits of digital learning, they should take full cognisance that there is no 'one size fits all' solution (Walker and Mathebula, 2019). As the trajectory of higher learning dawns into the 'new norm', no student should be left behind at the end of this.

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