# Low-income rural youth migrating to urban universities in South Africa: opportunities and inequalities

Melanie Walker & Mikateko Mathebula

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

# Low-income rural youth migrating to urban universities in South Africa: opportunities and inequalities

Melanie Walker and Mikateko Mathebula

SARChI Research Programme on Higher Education & Human Development, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

**ABSTRACT**

In order to understand how students from low-income rural backgrounds in South Africa experience higher education and the opportunities and obstacles they encounter, the paper draws on two waves of interviews with 30 students currently studying at three large urban universities. Using concepts of capabilities and functionings, monetary resources and 'capitals', the paper outlines common factors which shape rural students' well-being and their agency in accessing an urban university. Student voices indicate the particular importance of being able to exercise the functioning of navigating and manoeuvring through unfamiliar and often intimidating institutions. The discussion also indicates that it is the intersection of rurality and low income which shapes, even if it does not over-determine, their lives at university. It is suggested that universities could do more to support these students' well-being, and to recognise the agency and admirable determination which students bring to the challenges they face.

## Introduction

Internal migration from rural areas to opportunities in urban areas typically constitutes the largest movement of people within developing countries (Harttgen and Klasen 2011). In South Africa, internal movement has a long and continuing history of economic drivers and migrant labour into towns and cities (Ross 1999), while the second most common reason for migrating in temporary rural–urban migration is education (Kok and Collingson 2006). Moses, van der Berg, and Rich (2017, 16) suggest that there are four ways in which youth from low-income households can gain entry to the upper end of the labour market: (1) through attending more affluent schools; (2) through attending one of the few better performing schools serving poorer communities; (3) entering the labour market at the lower end and progressing upwards; and (4) through children from lower quality schools performing well enough in Grade 12 to gain entry to university. It is this fourth category that our paper focuses on. Importantly, 'urban' and 'rural' are not mutually exclusive categories (Todes et al. 2008, 2). Although the students in our study have moved from their rural homes to

the city, there remains an element of fluidity and the journey to the city does not signal a neat break with their rural past and present. Rather, there are complex rural–urban circuits. What complicates examining the lives of rural students is the extent to which the issue is one of low income, or one of rural background. The influence of the latter on students' achievement and participation in higher education is not always clear-cut, and we explore this through our data.

At first glance a concern with higher education may seem misplaced in a country where the majority of public schools provide low-quality education for around 80% of young people, such that students from low-income backgrounds mostly will not make it past Grade 10 (Spaull 2014), let alone into university. Yet in South Africa, access to higher levels of education and stable labour market income appear key to individual households achieving economic security over time (Sulla and Zikhali 2018). Added to this, the private returns on higher education are very high; indeed Cloete (2016) argues they are the highest in the world. Moses, van der Berg, and Rich (2017) found that on average, tertiary education graduates in South Africa have an employment probability of nearly 90%, compared to 55% for those completing 12 years of schooling. Thus higher education – more than school education – contributes to opening up social mobility pathways. It has the potential to break the links that bind together low income, inequality and unemployment. To achieve higher education, especially a degree quali-fication, is potentially a generative outcome not only for economic benefits and devel-opment, but also for individual well-being and social change by encouraging civic participation and critical agency. At the same time we recognise the reproductive effects of higher education so that who goes and what they experience once at university is then tremendously important. This is where our focus lies, with particular attention to students from low-income rural backgrounds.

To this end, we reflect on the lives of young people from rural areas and rural schools who have journeyed to two cities to access the educational opportunities provided by urban universities. We ask how students from rural backgrounds figure out (Holland et al. 1998) urban higher education, how this new world shapes how they make sense of themselves as students, and how they relate to people back in their rural homes. We document what this journey looks like, showing the complex challenges rural youth face once at university, and consider the trade-offs that need to be made. We focus on actual experiences of those migrating – the lives people can actually lead (Sen 1999) – and day-to day-realities to take account of how students themselves describe their own situations and what they have in common, without diluting what may be specific to one student compared to another.

## Context and trends

The context driving student migration is one of rural underdevelopment, inequalities and unemployment. A recent World Bank Report (Sulla and Zikhali 2018) confirmed that South Africa continues to be seriously unequal with regard to income, as well as wealth and intergenerational endowments; poverty is high for a middle-income country and mobility is low. Poverty has a spatial dimension and remains concentrated in previously segregated rural areas that were set aside for black South Africans along ethnic lines during apartheid (called 'homelands' by the apartheid government and

'tribal bantustans' by opponents) (Sulla and Zikhali 2018; Ross 1999). Each of the nine provinces has a different but shared history of colonial settlement, with the Eastern Cape in particular having a long history of colonial wars, of labour migration, and of apartheid resettlements to eliminate 'black spots' in designated white areas (Ross 1999). As a result, rurality as a concept reflects the broader history of colonialism and dispossession. For example, the rural provinces currently account for 61% of the poverty burden[1] (Moses, van der Berg, and Rich 2017). The Centre for Risk Analysis (CRA 2018) has produced a provincial quality-of-life score using Grade 12 exam results, expanded unemployment rate, monthly expenditure of ZAR10000 and above, household tenure status, household access to piped water, electricity for cooking, basic sanitation, waste removal, medical aid coverage and the murder rate. The results for the three provinces from which the project students come include the worst performing province out of all nine – the Eastern Cape at 4.9 – while KwaZulu-Natal is 5.4 and Limpopo is 5.0. The national average is 5.7. The rural context thus presents a significant challenge for students who may aspire to go to university.

This context in South Africa has a negative impact on higher education access. The struggling provinces (from which our project all come) are KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and Eastern Cape with 62% of the country's school learners and both the lowest Grade 12 results and the highest dropout rates (Metcalf 2019). Van Broekhuizen, Van Der Berg, and Hofmeyr (2016) show that the proportion of learners achieving an average grade of above 50% in Grade 12 varied widely: roughly 40% for the Western Cape, but less than 20% for both Limpopo and the Eastern Cape, both with large rural populations. The provincial differences in the proportions of learners who achieved an average Grade 12 grade of 60% or above are just as striking: roughly 21% of learners from the Western Cape achieved this grade, while only about 6% and 7% of learners from Limpopo and Eastern Cape did so. Given these provincial differences in Grade 12 performance, one might also expect provincial differences in university access and success. Thus, while Gauteng and the Western Cape have the highest access rates, Limpopo and Mpumalanga have the lowest. In terms of education outcomes as an indicator of the education resources in two districts from which students in our study come, in Joe Gqabi district (Eastern Cape) only 2.1% of youth aged between 20–24 have any tertiary education, while in Vhembe district (Limpopo) this is 5.8%, but still below the national average of 6.3% (Statistics South Africa 2016). Of course this does not mean that every individual is poor, or that every rural family is without experience of tertiary education, or that every student attended a low-quality school. It does point to the likelihood of the warp and weft of contextual conditions that may constrain individual agency to access and progress in higher education.

## Capabilities, monetary resources and capital

To understand rural students migrating to urban universities, we combine three complementary and intersecting ways of framing our interview data on student experiences and agency under new urban higher education conditions of possibility: capabilities; monetary resources; and navigational capital.

Firstly, understanding opportunities and outcomes is helped if we consider the capability approach (Sen 1999; Robeyns 2017) which provides a normative framework

for thinking about how higher education can support well-being across many valued education dimensions such as the cognitive, social, emotional and so on. The approach is grounded in a commitment to the expansion of people's capabilities (also called opportunities or freedoms) as a measure of well-being and development, and, in our case, normatively anchored to working for more real-world education-based justice. Unlike a uni-dimensional measure of development based on income and wealth, the approach sees well-being as multi-dimensional, with many dimensions that individuals may choose to be and do what they value. Achieved states of being and doing, that is, the actual choice and exercise of capabilities are called a person's 'functionings'. The goal is for people to lead free and dignified lives, and the assumption is that people flourish when they are genuinely free to choose how they want to function in all areas of life. Agency, whereby individuals are able to choose beings and doings that express their own values and well-being goals, is necessary to turn opportunities into functionings, to move from what is available to what is achievable in terms of prevailing social arrangements, or to reshape unfavourable conditions.

According to Robeyns (2017) the capability approach points to the effect of: (1) resources as the *means to achieve* (income, wealth, schooling and so on); and (2) each person's set of *conversion factors* (structural constraints such as social norms, others people's behaviours, race, class, schooling, university teaching arrangements and so on which shape the conversion of resources into *substantive freedoms* (capabilities). General conversion factors (that is, not specific to one person's circumstances) might include social welfare policies like pensions, or government bursaries for higher education, but also the historical effects of disadvantage. Other conversion factors might include the quality of the school attended, information resources and access to technology, family background, community environment and so on. These general factors work out as each person's specific conversion factors, shaping the capability set for that person. General factors of low income and rurality might be reshaped for an individual student in the form of a parent or extended family member with some post-compulsory education who recognises the crucial role schooling plays in social mobility and makes every possible effort and trade-off to support access to university. For others, there may be no knowledge or experience of higher education in the family, but a teacher may be supportive of high-achieving students in the school or one of the non-govermental organisations (NGOs) which support rural students to access and progress in higher education might visit the school to inform students about higher education possibilities, provide assistance in applying and with funding applications, and then offer post-access support as well. In all these cases, considerable student agency is still required in challenging contexts; such contexts are more than 'background noise', and are woven through university experiences. Nonetheless, our South African data reflects the determination of rural students to create their capability and choice pathways and to sustain high aspirations.

Secondly, we recognise that freedoms can be seriously compromised by 'poor living' (Sen 1987, 3) arising from low income (monetary resources) and the effects on the lives students are able to lead with regard to their basic needs. Sen acknowledges that a minimum of basic needs such as accommodation, food, health care, transport and learning materials need attention in a practical analysis of living standards for achieving educational well-being. Low income further affects social inclusion, that is, belonging

and taking a full part in the life of the university. Even though capabilities do not focus only on 'depleted wallets' (Sen 1987, 3), without adequate funding as a resource to be converted into higher education studies, students may struggle to acquire higher education capabilities because they must trade off transport to campus and food, or they worry constantly about how they will pay for their studies, as our research shows. Our data makes clear that students do not leave socio-economic inequalities behind when they come to university. Nor is this challenge confined to our project. The 2016 Student Engagement Survey (SASSE 2016, 2) across 15 universities in South Africa confirms that student poverty is a reality and it affects learning. We need to be clear on the role that money plays in decent living and that a monetary analysis is different from, but complements, the capability approach, with its focus not on resources, but actual livings.

Thirdly, we consider the dynamics of 'capitals' (Yosso 2005) that students have and bring with them to university. This might include navigational, social, aspirational, familial, linguistic and resistant capitals. In this paper we focus specifically on navigational capital understood as a capability and functioning which enables students to manoeuvre through institutions not created with low-income rural students in mind and the risks this unfriendly environment poses to their academic achievement. Such navigational capability is dynamic and agentic so that the corresponding functioning can be further strengthened as students engage difficult university conditions. Students may draw on the personal conversion factor of resilience resources (Yosso 2005) formed through the challenges they have already faced in getting to university to recover, to keep going or to navigate a new route. The point is that students are not passive spectators or 'deficient rural students' – they have assets that they might mobilise if the conditions of possibility allow.

Rural students have to 'figure' out who they are (Holland et al. 1998) through activities in the university and in relation to and relationships with others who populate this world, as well as to the family and community they leave behind. One of the students in this study put it well when she said: 'Being in university is challenging, because it is where you discover yourself as an adult and figure out what kind of a person you really are' (Mashudu, Limpopo, Metropolitan).[2] Students may accommodate, resist or choose not to engage aspects of the urban university. They may choose to associate as far as possible with people from a similar background, or be open to new possibilities. They may even exclude others 'not like them', or be peripheral participants in higher learning.

## Method

Our analysis draws on the first two waves of in-depth qualitative interviews with 30 out of the sample of 65 students from the Miratho project,[3] conducted with young people from low-income rural homes attending three different urban universities in two cities. For the purposes of this paper we do not include those students at the two rural universities in our project because we are interested in this paper in transitions from rural to urban. Although both rural universities are situated in towns, they are still located much nearer to home in more familiar settings and in predominantly rural provinces. At the time of the interviews students were in their second (interview one)

and third years of study (interview two) and questions focused on how they had got to university, as well as their experiences once there.

Of the 30, 13 are female (somewhat less than the national demographic at university which is majority female); fourteen are the first in their immediate or extended family to go to university; and all speak an African language in the home. All attended quintile 1 to 3 non-fee paying public schools, with only one attending a quintile 4 school.[4] As noted earlier, students come from three rural provinces: Limpopo (Vhembe district) (14); the Eastern Cape (Joe Qwabi district) (13); and KwaZulu-Natal (Harry Gwala district) (3). Overall, the students we spoke to do not find much support in their communities for higher education, which makes a family member or teacher or NGO especially important in fostering aspirations.

Using capabilities, monetary resources and navigational capital we use this interview data to tease out low income and rurality to understand both the inequalities experienced by individual students and to reflect on the opportunities that transitions to university and the city (potentially) open up. We are careful not to homogenise rural backgrounds, although generally rural areas are neglected in terms of development and the growing emphasis on cities as economic hubs of opportunity. A number of common and intersecting themes emerge which shape students' well-being and their agency: navigational capital/capability; financial circumstances including inclusion and exclusion; academic learning and achievement; and connections to their rural homes. We look at these broad themes across the 30 students to illustrate the process of shaping a new identity and developing capabilities to access and progress in an urban university.

## Rural students' experiences

We use the notion of migration to indicate the deliberate move to a new area with the intention to settle temporarily or permanently; it captures upheavals, physical and emotional distance from the rural home and family support, and having to secure a new sense of place somewhere very different. Where students come from varies from deep rural villages with no roads or transport, to small rural towns. Across the 30 students, 11 already had a connection to towns and cities before they came to university, generally through a parent (or other family member) who had left home in search of work. Thus Anathi's (Eastern Cape, Provincial) mother works as a domestic cleaner in Cape Town, returning home three times year. Kamohelo's (Free State, Provincial) mother is a security guard in Cape Town and comes home once a year, while Maki's (Eastern Cape, Metropolitan) mother works in Johannesburg as a domestic worker. Kananelo (Eastern Cape, Metropolitan) has a cousin who lives in Johannesburg. One or two were born in a rural area but then moved to a city with a parent, as with Lungile (Limpopo, City) who now lives in an informal peri-urban settlement with her mother. Nyikiwa (Limpopo, City) grew up in a village but her father worked as a security guard in Johannesburg. The family would visit him once or twice a year and he 'would show us university buildings'. Nyiko (Limpopo, City) was born in Limpopo; his parents moved to Gauteng but then sent him back to Limpopo to be raised by his grandmother because the rural environment was seen as 'safer'. Bonani (Eastern Cape, Provincial) was raised by his grandmother, while his mother worked in

Johannesburg. The point is that circuits of internal migration are typically bi-directional; a long history of (often forced) labour migration and rural under-development since the nineteenth century means many families have links to cities.

## *Navigating access*

In embarking on this opportunity journey young people are typically encouraged by at least one significant person in their lives, namely a teacher, a family member or an NGO. Most live in extended families with siblings, cousins and other close relatives. For many, grandmothers who rely on the small social pension are the main caregiver. Family support for higher education is instrumental in so far as one child with a degree and secure job can improve life for the whole family and can help educate younger siblings. The intrinsic value of higher education is not mentioned by any of our informants. In Aphiwe's (Eastern Cape, Provincial) case her unemployed single mother and her unemployed aunt 'just want me to study and pass so I can also help them and help my younger siblings to study'. Her mother also helped by not expecting her to do household chores so that she could study. Nelisiwe (City) explained that her grandmother was the one who had encouraged her:

> She told me that without education then you can't find a sustainable job. . . . I would not be able to support myself. . . . she was the one who told me you have to go to university, get your education, get a degree so that you can get a well-paying job and you can support your family. And you know, looking at our situation at home, something had to be done . . . . I don't have anything now but in future I will have something that I will be able to support them with.

Many fathers are absent and many students have half siblings. Lungile (Limpopo, City) explained that her parents had separated when she was four; she has a strained relationship with her father. Her mother is therefore 'a mother who's a mother and a father who's also the breadwinner'. She was expected to take care of her younger brothers: 'I was a mother to my boys because in the morning before I go to school I had to wake up, cook for them, and prepare my younger boy.' In such contexts students have to learn how to make their own way, to be resilient and resourceful. We can extrapolate that already having this navigational capital is the basis for an important capability and functioning which students exercise agentically in the face of constraints. As Phusu (Limpopo, Metropolitan) put it: 'Life doesn't give you a lukewarm situation. You just need to grab all opportunities that come your way.'

Although they showed great tenacity once opportunities became clear to them, very few of the group had formed early aspirations to go to university. This is not necessarily an issue of rurality, however, as other research with urban students indicates a similar pattern (Walker 2019). Their choices seem quite serendipitous: a bursary funder (usually government and usually for teacher education) came to the school; an NGO gave a talk and helped with applications; or a teacher encouraged them in a subject in which they were doing well. For example, Kananelo (Eastern Cape, Metropolitan) heard some friends at school talking about university, but was not particularly interested himself because 'he did not have much knowledge about what was happening at university.' Nonetheless, following his friends' example, he applied to three universities

and ended up enrolling at Metropolitan, although he cannot explain why he made that choice. Pathways are circumstantial rather than planned and linear and we do not find the more typical long-term aspiration of middle-class families where it is assumed that university is the next step after school. Unusually, although Mashudu (Limpopo, Metropolitan) comes from a 'deep rural village' from which hardly anyone has been to university, both her parents are university educated and they helped her to 'see out of the village'. Also somewhat unusual, Ntsako (Limpopo, Metropolitan) decided at age 13 to go to university after watching graduation ceremonies on television and learning that 'graduates get careers and are financially independent'.

Rural schools are also less likely to be visited by urban university recruiters and are anyway too far to attend city-based open days (even if they could afford this). As a result, rural students lack good information about which university to choose or which career path or how and where to apply for funding. This does appear to affect rural students more than urban low-income background students. As Ndiyafihe (Metropolitan) explained, she had assumed that when she got seven distinctions,

> bursaries will just call me and say 'Come here.' I always thought that was the way those things worked because that is the way you are made to think things are. And I think that is a problem because many people think that after getting those seven distinctions, bursaries will identify you, they already have your marks, you don't know that you actually have to submit things to them.

Menzi (Provincial) similarly explained that:

> We don't have that much of a research towards what's higher education and how can we access higher education. It's easy for those who are already around higher education. I find it is as if higher education has built a wall that those who are inside should access it much better than those who are outside.

A few have access to a smartphone but access to technology in rural areas is limited if one cannot afford one and, even then, mobile phone air time is expensive.[5] The result is that many students find themselves unprepared once they get to university for the degree and career path they have 'chosen' because 'we were never told.'

While students may worry about the long journey to cities, they demonstrate great determination to get there and formidable navigational skills. For example, Khuzani (KwaZulu-Natal, Provincial) had never been to the city in which Provincial is located and did not know how far away it was, but when he was offered a place he borrowed the bus fare from a teacher, got himself there and sought help from the local police station before finding accommodation. Overall, coming to cities can be daunting, exacerbated by expensive transport to get home and the difficulty of calling home regularly. Menzi (Eastern Cape, Provincial) describes how scared he felt on his first day at Provincial. He did not know his way around and he did not ask other students in case they thought it was 'typical of someone from a village'. He did not go to class that first day because it was 'too huge'. Maki (Limpopo, Metropolitan) said that during her first weeks at Metropolitan she was excited, but also scared. She had no friends and 'it was the worst three weeks of my life, because I was alone and far from home.' Kananelo (Eastern Cape, Metropolitan) deals with living in a big city by staying on campus in a university student residence. He says that he and other students from similar backgrounds were advised by a senior student to 'just live our lives, don't try to adjust to

anything, don't try to fit in and stuff like that'. Nyikiwa said that when she first started at City, 'I was lost that day. But I was happy, that finally I am here.' Moreover, towns and cities have many attractions as reported by the students: everything from running water to much better transport (multiple taxi ranks as opposed to one local taxi), many shops, health centres, protection services, sporting facilities, different kinds of accommodation, the internet, and, of course, more jobs. These attractions were highlighted by Malusi (Kwa-Zulu Natal, Provincial) when he spoke of the privilege of having WiFi, or how he enjoyed having running water: 'The shower, I remember, we gave it a name, we say it's indoor raining ... it was something new. Everything is here, hot water, running water, it's a privilege.'

## *Navigating resource challenges*

Rural students' experiences of getting to and getting into university are shaped by access to income (or the lack of it) and the resources money can enable, including accommodation, food, transport, clothing (especially for the cold winters) and toiletries. For the students this is the greatest inequality they experience; it is historical, contextual and intergenerational, but not typically rural. Nonetheless, unlike low-income urban students, they no longer have their families or their teachers close by to provide some kind of support. Some experience real hardship and stress – being locked out of accommodation because they could not pay the rent on time (all of the Provincial group in their first year at the university), often going hungry, in one case relying on a charity for food every day. They cannot afford their own laptops in most cases and must rely on overcrowded university computer laboratories. Books are expensive, printing assignments costs money, transport is a challenge, and many eat only once a day, seldom buying the more expensive food sold on campus. Students living away from home often feel alone in these struggles to survive. Student tenacity does not remove the uncertainty of their material circumstances or the impact on their learning.

Even where basic needs are in place, students may lack adequate material resources to be accepted and recognised as equals in the life of the university. From our field observations at at the five case study universities, urban universities generally recruit better-off students. While 90% of the students in a rural university may be low income, this is not the case for Provincial or City, and even less for Metropolitan. Malusi (Kwa-Zulu Natal, Provincial) described his confusion when he first saw a fellow student who had a car worth five times that of his mother's, a primary school teacher. To cope in the face of this visible wealth Malusi says:

> Basically, I don't care, I don't care about them, I don't care what they have, I don't have, I wear these clothes and when I am amongst them I look normal, they don't know my background, they don't know my situation and I'm not going to explain it to them, I don't owe it to them.

But Anathi feels alienated culturally and socially because she cannot afford what most other students have and this restricts her valued functioning of appearing in public without shame and being socially included. She explained that,

for my first year, since I didn't have those expensive clothes, expensive things, you see how people dress on campus and stuff. I would feel so small. I would just sit in the corner and be like no, what am I doing here? I am just fooling with myself. I don't belong here . . . . It's not actually nice . . . it was kind of difficult for me to ask for help, because I see people, I view them as they are different from me. Like, they won't understand even though I ask for help, so I just do things on my own . . . I still feel like that. It hasn't changed. I still feel like that. Whenever we are going to class and then I see these girls talking and stuff and laughing and they talk about something I know, I still find it difficult for me to talk because it's like they are not there and they don't notice me. I don't know what I should improve, or I should improve my wardrobe or what, for them to notice me.

Anathi may value belonging at university, but is restricted to finding friends who are 'like her'; they share whatever they have and she has learnt that to navigate university you need friends. These relationships and values are important in her life but do also exclude Anathi (as is also the case with Malusi) from experiencing the diversity of the campus and learning to confidently negotiate social, cultural and class boundaries on her own terms rather than the terms of others with more resources and more power. Phusu (Limpopo, Metropolitan) also said that she fitted in with her friends who shared the same background as her, 'just these people from poor backgrounds', but not with 'rich kids . . . [because] you only have one pair of shoes that you wear every day. Other kids have like loads of shoes and they change.' Yet she was impressed with the student diversity at Metropolitan and open to it. On the other hand, campus can be a place of security and calm compared to living in a turbulent city township as in Lungile's (Limpopo, City) case. She spends as much time on the City campus as she can. Moreover for her, fitting in is straightforward. Having been accepted into the University she feels she belongs and deserves to be there even though she sometimes struggles with the academic work. For her, 'I've just said goodbye to a lot of things and I said hello to a whole new world. I said goodbye to discouragement [in the township].'

There is no singular narrative, but across the stories belonging and recognition (being regarded as an equal to other students, being included) and relationships of mutual care and support in the university community seem to matter to all the students. However this is worked out in each person's life, these capabilities and functionings are valued by all students in the data set. Yet, for all of the group, notwithstanding exercise of their agency, recognition by other students and the university ('we are the invisibles') is thin, while reciprocal care and support is primarily provided by students like themselves to each other, or by the NGO which may have helped them access university.

### *Navigating academic achievement*

The key purpose for these students in coming to university is instrumental: to get a degree and then a secure job. All of the students desperately want to succeed at university in order to contribute to the well-being of their families, in the first instance, but also to the development of their communities. Typically, they say: 'I am my family's provider.' Family expectations of their success are high. In this respect urban universities are perceived as having the edge over rural universities so that Aphiwe (Eastern Cape, Provincial) said: 'When you have studied at Provincial University it is easy for

you to get a job.' They value this outcome above any intrinsic goods, although they do also talk about valued non-cognitive goods such as learning to be independent, becoming more mature, and so on. To graduate they must pass all their modules, so academic learning and achievement looms very large in their lives and is not helped by their prior schooling in nearly all cases. They all have in common that they are hard-working, spending long hours studying and very little time on leisure activities. They talk a lot about wanting to achieve distinctions even though not all of them manage this. One of the NGOs, which supports most of the students in some way, has as its slogan 'let your marks pay your fees', and students take this seriously.

Students exercise their agency but, as noted earlier, they do not do so on a blank contextual and structural slate which shapes, even if it does not entirely determine, what they can do and be. As Sen (1999, xi–xii) explains, there is a 'deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements' and 'individual freedom is a social commitment'. Absent such a social commitment, students certainly exercise agency but under constrained conditions of possibility. They struggle with the demands of suddenly having to learn and study only in English. The linguistic challenge may apply more to rural students who will have heard very little English in their neighbourhoods and are more likely to have been taught most of the time in an African language at school, even though English is the official language of instruction. Here rurality may factor in far more for rural students than for urban students. Suddenly they find themselves catapulted into a wholly English language environment in which they must navigate not only teaching and learning, lecturers and peers, but also administrative staff. For example, Khethiwe (Eastern Cape, Provincial) explains how he found it challenging to adapt to having white lecturers and doing everything in English; he reports that it took him about five months until he felt that 'I've got this.' While all the students are skilled across many African languages (it is not uncommon for students to be proficient in around three or more African languages), they struggle with the sudden demands of English, the accents of the lecturers and the speed at which they speak. This means they are unwilling to ask questions in classes or contribute in discussions. Students have valuable linguistic capital (Yosso 2005) which serves them well socially, but this capital is not valued for formal learning at the university.

We see in the students aspirations combined with the hope that they can construct a higher education pathway to success, without necessarily being well placed to do this. They face academic uncertainties and obstacles, for example never having seen or used a microscope, or done a technical drawing, or finding themselves in programmes they would not have chosen but for which they had the qualifying admission points. For example, Phusu (Limpopo, Metropolitan) struggled with mathematics and technical drawing because:

> I have never done drawing ever in my life and so the lecturer would be so fast and he thinks we have done drawings. He's talking about all these fancy words that they use for drawing … they're so fast, they don't care, and their English is just on another level and everything is just something else.

Numbers-based subjects like accountancy seem more straightforward and students who have good science grades, even if they did not study accountancy at school, seem to cope well. Pressure to do well is understandably a source of stress, as Maki (Eastern

Cape, Metropolitan) explained: 'I was doing well academically but sometimes I felt like, I can't do this, I can't anymore, the pressure and the fear of failing, no one wants to fail in the first year.' To add to this, students who are not studying a programme of their own choice may initially be pleased to be admitted to an urban university, but as this wears off they either 'make peace' with the programme, or discover that they are satisfied with the choice made for them, or a small number struggle to stay motivated.

There is a combined challenge presented by the language of instruction and of access to higher learning in the light of dominant experiences of rote learning and drill and practice in their schools (typical also of urban low-income schools). This is exacerbated by the taken-for-granted assumptions on the part of lecturers that students are familiar with laboratory work and can do basic tasks like making microscope slides, have read at least some Shakespeare at school, and so on. Furthermore, computer literacy and familiarity with computers is assumed by the universities, yet rural students have little or no familiarity with computers. Suddenly they find they have to word process and print assignments and use technology such as Blackboard to access learning materials. Rural students tell us that they had restricted or no access to the internet at home, and indeed the reach of technology is limited. Yet in one of the three universities, all notices to students are done online and registration at the beginning of each class requires access to a smartphone. Here resources and participation come together. It is not that students do not have agency in this, but the demands on them are significantly greater than for better-off students, for example, getting to campus by 6.00am to access a computer lab. Prior schooling, technology and English as medium of instruction operate as conversion factors intersecting with personal biographies. Again, students are not over-determined: they do work incredibly hard, but they also struggle.

In Bangeni and Kapp's (2005) study too, rural-origin students battle to be recognised and valued as successful learners by the institutions. They find themselves constantly having to reaffirm their self-worth to themselves largely through affirming peer interactions and friends like themselves. We think this struggle is partly because they have come from hierarchical schools where passive learning has been the norm, leaving them ill-prepared for university or to find their own voices. When this combines with rurality, they suffer social exclusion, capability deprivation and resource-based deprivations. Their university lives are then impoverished because they cannot undertake important activities that they may want to choose, but cannot. They may share this form of exclusion with low-income urban township students.

## *Navigating connections with home*

Although rural–urban circuits are fluid, nonetheless there is a gradual shift in what and where constitutes the notion of 'home' – in the case of our study, a shift (not neat and clear-cut) between the rural and the urban home and the making of an urban identity. Although students in the project do not seem conflicted about their attachment to university or by their desire to remain in urban areas which offer low-income students far more opportunities, there is nonethelesss some ambiguity about their changing relationships with their rural homes. Thus, while belonging and finding your place in this new environment is a challenge, so is continuing to belong in their rural homes. Connections work differently for different students: they plan to go back (usually the future teachers) and

remain quite connected during university; or they plan to contribute in some other way (most students) but are becoming less connected and envisage working in an urban area; or they see themselves as disconnecting (only a few) from ties to their rural community, outside of close family (usually a mother or grandmother).

Moreover, students' rural homes are some distance away, for some a whole day by bus. Transport is expensive, so they generally only manage to get home twice a year and of course their families cannot afford to visit them or talk on the telephone. This physical and communicative distance distinguishes them from low-income urban students. Inevitably the city becomes their main home. For some like Nyiko (Limpopo, City) home is 'boring' with no internet access. For others there is the ambiguity of how peers back home respond to them. Aphiwe's (Eastern Cape, Provincial) friends think she is 'boring' and a 'snob' now and they do not want to listen to her talk about university. Maki (Eastern Cape, Metropolitan) put it this way when speaking of her rural community: 'Our language is not the same anymore.' Wanga (Limpopo, Metropolitan) describes how her friends at home, 'don't want to be with me because I went to university and left them at home'. Others like Malusi (KwaZulu-Natal, Provincial) manage the separation better and are adept at moving between their different worlds. He explains:

> My roots, I value them because I have seen on TV people coming from where we come from to these kinds of places and all of a sudden they're different people. So I try by all means to remain the same person to them, although it is sometimes difficult to communicate because sometimes someone is totally on a different direction, but then I try to maintain the relationship, by all means, with my friends and my family. Well, I just be me.

## Capabilities and functionings that matter and the role of the university

The multi-dimensional capability set (all the capabilities matter) which the students value most highly – based on their accounts – incorporates: (1) *being included* (respect and recognition by all members of the university community; good friendships for emotional support, leisure and for peer study support, being able to navigate the university); (2) *mutual care and reciprocal support* in their university community, including help in navigating the university; and (3) *academic achievement* (gaining distinctions, passing each year, getting a qualification, navigating a path to success). But these capabilities and corresponding functionings are unevenly fostered and realised under university and social uptake conditions. We might describe them in Nussbaum's (2000) terms as 'internal capabilties' rather than as her 'combined capabilities', which require both internal capacities and external conditions coming together. Rural students' agency is evident throughout our data; it is not free-floating but constrained by conversion factors of money, university ethos and culture, technology competence, language and prior experiences of learning at school. Students who do not have secure bursaries talk at length about the financial challenges they face and the worries this generates. They bring impressive navigational resources to bear on these constraints but cannot entirely overcome them. While the students we interviewed have mobilised the functionings they do have of achievement in Grade 12, hard work, perseverance, and so on to pursue their aspirations, this tenacity does not entirely overcome the inequalities they face.

It is not that universities in their ethos and practices directly aim for social exclusion of rural low-income students. But as Sen (1999) notes, the absence of direct aiming does not absolve universities from responsibility for the social exclusion of some students and the reproduction inside the university of social class inequalities. It is also salutary that the introduction of fee-free higher education for youth from low-income households in 2018 arose from student protest rather than university lobbying. Higher education as the Miratho students experience it is not fully inclusive and universities need to ask who has the opportunity to develop a wide 'combined capability' set (such as the one outlined earlier) to enable access and subsequent success, and then act on the answer. Too often student agency is missed by universities in the same way as navigational capital is overlooked as a resource on which university support and attention could build. Universities need to take into account the implications of funding and money on students' peace of mind.

While universities cannot do everything to compensate for a highly unequal society, based on what the students tell us, they ought to improve their core function of teaching and learning and pedagogies for all students and not just those from middle-class backgrounds. While some of the students recount experiences of good teaching, this is not common across all fields, and some teaching quality as told to us is problematic. Curriculum and pedagogies ought to recognise and mobilise the considerable agency and determination of rural and other low-income students in order to foster their valued capabilities so that they are not marginalised. If universities want to take advantage of technology for learning, they should not take for granted that all students have easy access to technology or that incoming students are familiar with computers. Both administrative and academic staff should be made fully aware of the implications of such a diverse student body and work at social and education relations, which value all students. Rural students should not be made to feel that they are 'invisible' in the university. In most instances, the struggle to belong and students' academic struggles seem to spur them on to work harder, to deepen their resolve and their self-determination to figure themselves as students who can in such a way as to claim the future they imagine and hope for.

## Concluding thoughts

By the time of the second interviews in 2018 none of the 30 students had dropped out – all had kept going. For the most part these students are neither wholly alienated from dominant institutional cultures nor uncritically assimilated into them. Rather, they find their way as best they can, with whom they can. The students fluently cross ethnic differences and learn new African languages to communicate with new friends. They seem much more at ease with language identities than Bangeni and Kapp's (2005) students and this may have something to do with the majority African black student populations at the three universities.

It would be true to say, however, that this group of students lives more on the margins of university life. Several of them experience 'unbelonging' at university, some of which is income-based (worries over fees, not having a laptop or suitable clothes or enough food), but some is also down to their experiences of teaching and learning and relational exclusions operated by well-off students. It is less about being from a rural

background or about home-not/home connections. The issue is rather the middle-class assumptions that they encounter at the university and in academic learning and how they negotiate these, intersecting with their financial struggles. On its own the rural–urban transition may be less significant than low-income and prior schooling, given the history of movements into and out of urban areas for many of these students, and also historically. It is tricky, we think, to disentangle rurality, low-quality school, low-income, English language competence and confidence, and university. Monetary or financial resources are an issue, even if money is only one means to good living. It can enable full participation in higher learning because a student has peace of mind when freed from money worries, has enough to eat, can afford textbooks, and so on. Still, there are specific areas which affect rural students more: their familiarity with English, the information they had about university, the physical and emotional distance from home, and being able to draw daily or often on family support.

In the paper we have described how inequalities experienced by individual students from rural areas in large urban universities are complex and multi-layered and often persistent using our lenses of capability set, monetary resources and navigational capital as both a conversion factors and a 'sub-capability'. Juxtaposed though, are new opportunities provided by both the university and the urban environment. We thus examined how higher education expands and/or diminishes the capabilities of rural students at this point in their lives. This more fine-grained, qualitative understanding of student lives adds an important explanatory dimension to the existing research documenting social mobility trends (or lack thereof) and points towards interventions that universities or policy might consider in order to reduce persistent inequalities that affect rural but also low-income students generally. Rurality in itself is not necessarily a disadvantage, but when it intersects with low income (rather than high income and historical privilege) it manifests as a challenge in students' lives and the making of their new urban university student identity. Rural students' navigational capability and their resilience once at university should not absolve universities from providing the educational and social support to foster the capabilities students have reason to value, to enable them to succeed by gaining a degree, and to learn from them about what makes for a human development-facing university, which would work to reduce rather than sustain inequalities. In the space of the university it is the combined capabilities of rural low-income youth that practice and policy should aim towards.

## Notes

1. In 2015, 59.7% of the poor were in rural areas. Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo were consistently the three poorest provinces between 2006 and 2015. The Eastern Cape also had the highest SAMPI score (see Sulla and Zikhali [2018]).
2. Pseudonyms used for the three urban universities referred to in this paper are 'Metropolitan', 'City' and 'Provincial'. All student names are pseudonyms.
3. See www.miratho.com. Our mixed methods four year project (2016–2020) focuses on 'inclusive higher education learning outcomes' for rural youth from low-income households, and is led by the University of the Free State.
4. School quintiles are a rough if imperfect proxy for socio-economic conditions and quality of schooling. The quintile system ranks schools in five bands according to their infrastructure and location. Formerly white schools (model C) fall into quintiles four and five

and charge school fees. Fees-free public schools (quintiles one to three) serve low-income communities and lag behind well-off schools in learning outcomes so that Grade 9 pupils in poor, mostly black schools have a backlog of approximately three and half years relative to those in well-off schools (see Moses, van der Berg, and Rich [2017]). Van Broekhuizen, Van Der Berg, and Hofmeyr (2016) claim that many of the patterns of university access are strongly influenced by school results: 53% of learners attending quintile 5 schools achieved university passes, but only 8% of learners from quintile 1 schools.

5. Access to the internet at home was highest among households in Western Cape (23.6%) and Gauteng (14.8%), and lowest in Limpopo (1.6%). See https://www.htxt.co.za/2017/05/31/number-of-south-africans-with-access-to-internet-grows-to-60/.

## Acknowledgements

## Disclosure statement

## Funding

## References

Bangeni, B. and R. Kapp 2005. "Identities in Transition: Shifting Conceptions of Home among Black South Africa Students." *African Studies Review* 48 (3): 1–19. doi:10.1353/arw.2006.0004.

CRA (Centre for Risk Analysis). 2018. *Fast Facts, November 2018*. Johannesburg: CRA.

Cloete, N. 2016. "Free Higher Education. Another Self-Destructive South African Policy". Cape Town: Centre for Higher Education Trust. July 10. http://www.chet.org.za/files/Higher%20education%20and%20Self%20destructive%20policies%2030%20Jan%2016.pdf

Harttgen, K. and S. Kalasen 2011. "A Human Development Index by Internal Migrational Status." *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 12 (3): 393–424. doi:10.1080/19452829.2011.576819.

Holland, D. W. Lachicotte, Jr., D. Skinner, and C. Cain1998. *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Kok, P. and M. Collingson. 2006. "Migration and Urbanisation in South Africa". *Report-03-10-062015*. Pretoria, South Africa: Statistics South Africa.

Metcalf, M. 2019. "Forget the Matric Ballyhoo and Focus on the Real Issues that Need Fixing." *Sunday Times*, January 6. 9

Moses, E., S. van der Berg, and K. Rich. 2017. "A Society Divided. How Unequal Education Quality Limits Social Mobility in South Africa. Synthesis Report for the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD)." Stellenbosch, South Africa: University of Stellenbosch.

Nussbaum, M. 2000. *Women and Human Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Robeyns, I. 2017. *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined*. UK: Open Book Publishers.

Ross, R. 1999. *A Concise History of South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sen, A. 1987. *The Standard of Living. The Tanner Lectures on Human Values.* https://tannerlec
tures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/s/sen86.pdf

Sen, A. 1999. *Development as Freedom.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

SASSE (South African Survey of Student Engagement). 2016. *Engaging the Student Voice: Annual
Report.* Bloemfontein: University of the Free State.

Spaull, N. 2014. "Education in SA – Still separate and unequal." acccessed 15 November 2016.
https://nicspaull.com/2014/01/12/education-in-sa-still-separate-and-unequal-extended-ver
sion-of-citypress-article/

Statistics South Africa. 2016. "South African Community Survey 2016. Statistical release P0301."
accessed 30 September 2018. http://cs2016.statssa.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/NT-30-
06-2016-RELEASE-for-CS-2016-_Statistical-releas_1-July-2016.pdf

Sulla, V., and P. Zikhali 2018. *Overcoming Poverty and Inequality in South Africa: An Assessment
of Drivers', Constraints and Opportunities (English).* Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.
accessed 10 July 2018. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/530481521735906534/
Overcoming-Poverty-and-Inequality-in-South-Africa-An-Assessment-of-Drivers-Constraints-
and-Opportunities

Todes, A., P. Kok, M. Wentzel, J. van Zyl, and C. Cross. 2008. "Contemporary South African
Urbanisation Dynamics." UNU-WIDER Conference: Beyond the Tipping Point. African
Development in an Urban World, Cape Town.

Van Broekhuizen, H., S. Van Der Berg, and H. Hofmeyr 2016 "Higher Education Access and
Outcomes for the 2008 National Grade 12 Cohort". Stellenbosch Working papers 16/6,
University of Stellenbosch.

Walker, M. 2019. "The Achievement of University Access: Conversion Factors, Capabilities and
Choices." *Social Inclusion* 7: 1. doi:10.17645/si.vXiX.1615.

Yosso, T. 2005. "Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community
Cultural Wealth." *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 8 (1): 69–91. doi:10.1080/
1361332052000341006.