

## **Mobilities of rural youth to and through urban universities in South Africa: Persistent inequalities and new opportunities**

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Relevant conference aims:

- Education: opportunities and challenges in cities

Internal migration, often from rural areas to opportunities in urban areas, typically constitutes the largest movement of people within developing countries (Harttgen and Klasen 2011). South Africa is typical in this regard. It is a highly unequal country with wide-spread poverty. Moreover poverty also continues to have a strong rural dimension with the four most rural provinces (out of 9) accounting for 61% of the poverty burden (Moses, van der Berg, and Rich 2017). It is thus common for young people growing up in rural areas to journey to cities to achieve social mobility through labour market possibilities and better access to services, including education. Considering temporary migration, Kok and Collingson (2006, 12) showed that education was the second most common reason for migrating, after work. Added to this, in the South African context, the private returns on higher education are very high, indeed Cloete (2016) argues they are the highest in the world. Moses et al (2017) found that on average, tertiary education graduates in South Africa have an employment probability of nearly 90%, compared to only about 55% for those completing 12 years of schooling. However, also critical, is the quality of education, and South Africa has a notoriously dualistic school system with the minority of young people attending high quality schools (10-15% of schools), and the majority attending low quality schools. Drawing on their helpful model illustrating the complex dualisms of both the South African school system and labour market, Moses et al (2017,

p. 16) argue that there are four ways in which children from poor homes (which includes the majority of children growing up in rural areas) 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 upwardly, and (4) through children from weaker schools performing well enough to complete Grade 12 and gain entry to university. It is this fourth category that our paper focuses on.

The trends briefly discussed above provide important perspectives. However, they tell us little about the actual experiences of those migrating, of the day to day realities of what it means to travel as a young person from a low income rural home to a city university. This is where a human development and capability approach informed understanding is particularly valuable. As Sen (2009, 18) reminds us, “justice cannot be indifferent to the lives that people can actually lead.” In this paper we reflect on the lives of young people from rural areas who have journeyed to two cities in search of educational opportunities provided by urban universities. The paper explores why rural young people make the decision to travel long distances to cities for higher education. We document what this journey looks like for young people, showing the precariousness of life at urban universities and consider the complex trade-offs that need to be made. Importantly, we also show that, as noted by Todes et al (2008, 2, see also Kok and Collingham 2006), “that ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ are not mutually exclusive categories: boundaries are blurred and there are many interlinks.” 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.

Our analysis draws on life history interviews, conducted in 2017 and 2018 with 30 young people from rural homes attending three different urban universities in two cities, to document both the inequalities experienced by individual students and to reflect on the opportunities that transitions to the city (potentially) open up. We show that inequalities experienced by individual students from rural areas in large urban universities are complex and multi-layered and often persistent. Juxtaposed though, are new opportunities provided by both the university and the urban environment. We thus examine how higher education expands and/or diminishes the capabilities of these rural students and how such capabilities might shift dynamically over time in the light of significant conversion factors such as the university environments, economic capacities and families. This more fine-grained, qualitative understanding of student lives adds an important explanatory dimension to the existing research documenting social mobility trends and points towards interventions that universities might consider in order to reduce the persistent inequalities identified.

## References

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