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How rural students deal with 'stuckness' and enhance their opportunities in higher education

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This paper will be review of literature using academic adjustment, learning experiences and socio-cultural adaptation to understand how rural students in global north and south make sense of stuckness and to enhance their opportunities. Jefferson, Tuner & Jensen's (2019) discussion on stuckness which involves how an individual makes sense of confining dynamics and practices could help us to have in-depth understanding on their learning experience. During COVID 19, remote studying has been less accessible to rural students than to urban ones. The social restrictions on campus may also create social isolation and disconnections for students and make it more difficult for rural students to adapt to university learning approaches and urban culture. Future studies could investigate how students try to make use of university resources and network with fellow students through internal conversations when dealing with stuckness and constructing meaning in the new learning environment.

Full paper

The recent higher education expansion provides greater access to elite universities for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Lehmann, 2014; Marginson, 2016). However, rural students' lack of

various kinds of social and cultural capital accelerates their disadvantages in the process of studying in higher education (Li, 2013; Tsang, 2013). Studies mainly discuss how rural students face great challenges in academic adjustment, learning experiences, and socio-cultural adaptation, particularly in COVID context.

When discussing the learning experiences of rural students in higher education, some scholars refer to equal opportunities in education which aim to enable individuals to acquire knowledge and certain skills, and to cultivate certain capacities (Zalta, 2017). Jefferson, Tuner & Jensen (2019) discuss stuckness which involves how an individual makes sense of confining dynamics and practices. Lubkemann (2008) delineates how individuals try to create meaningful lives and embed themselves across spaces as much as within them. This paper will be review of literature using academic adjustment, learning experiences and socio-cultural adaptation to understand how rural students in global north and south make sense of stuckness and to enhance their opportunities.

In conducting the literature review, a set of keywords were selected: "higher education", "COVID-19", "learning experiences" and "inequalities" on EBSCO, ERIC and ProQuest. The time interval was set from 2020 to 2022. From an initial 1896 references, 106 empirically-based studies were reviewed for relevance and methodological rigor, resulting in 54 selections. We also have manual review in six key higher education journals using the same time interval criteria. Over 60 papers were finally included.

Academic Adjustment

Some studies point out that rural students demonstrate lower academic performance than their urban peers (Nonglait & Myrthong, 2021; Zhao, 2020). Due to their relatively low socioeconomic status and lack of educational resources (Xie & Reay, 2019), rural students encounter more barriers to studying and feel more anxious (Li, 2013). However, some scholars find no significant difference in academic performance between urban and rural students (Yan & Wu, 2020). Further, Hlinka (2017) found that some rural students could adjust their mind-set and overcome the learning barriers (Nonglait & Myrthong, 2021). Liao et al. (2013) found that rural students who entered by a special admission policy outperformed other students

and institutional measures could help students' adaptation.

Learning Experience

Rural students are more likely to enter "cold subjects" after which it is hard to find a high-paid job (Ma, 2012). They complete fewer credits, work more hours (Thering, 2011) and have higher financial debt (Rhodes, 2021). They participate in fewer extracurricular activities (Heinisch, 2017) and experience low levels of engagement, which generates depression and stress (Li, et al., 2021; Yan & Wu, 2020). However, Li et al. (2021) and Mgqwashu et al. (2020) note that higher education offers rural students a platform to mitigate constraints and some have transformative experiences (Reay et al., 2009; Nelson, 2016).

Socio-cultural Adaptation

Many studies have highlighted that as cultural outsiders, rural students struggle to adapt to the culture of urban and elite universities. Even though rural students obtain certain cultural resources but they are misrecognized by institutions (Mgqwashu et al., 2020; Xie & Reay, 2019). Yan & Wu (2020) point out a mismatch between these students' lifestyles and the "popular-urban culture" (Li, 2013). The difficulties in adapting to urban and university culture generate anxiety, ambivalence, insecurity, and uncertainty (Li, 2018; Reay et al. 2010). However, by navigating unfamiliar institutions (Walker & Mathabula, 2020), some rural students could have positive experiences by actively making new friends and taking advantage of the resources offered at their university (Chen, 2021; Li et al., 2021; Xie, 2016).

During COVID 19, remote studying has been less accessible to rural students than to urban ones (Devkota, 2021). A lack of learning spaces at home and a lack of early information and communication technologies learning experience at secondary school (Khan et al., 2021) can lead to insufficient self-control in e-learning (Czerniewicz et al., 2020), which in turn brings challenges for rural students' learning. The social restrictions on campus may also create social isolation and disconnections for students (Mishra et al., 2020) and make it more difficult for rural students to adapt to university learning approaches and urban culture.

Future studies could investigate how rural students employ various strategies to adjust to university learning practices as well as to urban culture. Further research should also explore how students try to make use of university resources and network with fellow students through internal conversations when dealing with stuckness and constructing meaning in the new learning environment.

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