# The Implication of 'Rurality' in Terms of Higher Education in a Rural South African Context

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Students based in higher education institutions in rural settings are faced with various challenges. This literature study offers insights into the implication of 'rurality' in terms of Higher Education in a rural context, considering student well-being and social work training challenges. It stresses that the University of Zululand has put in place a number of initiatives to support teaching and learning considering the above. The authors present the defining characteristics of rurality and higher education, make a historical rural-urban comparison, and discuss social work fieldwork training challenges and wellbeing. Recognizing the challenges posed, some solutions are posited to mitigate them. The article also stresses the need to be cognisant of the fact that there is not only a problem of marginalization and privilege in rural settings, but also in urban settings where in less affluent areas, the facilities are inferior and numerous other disadvantages manifest. Thus, any desired upward mobility for students from impoverished areas is challenging to say the least. The work is not based on any intellectual framework or theoretical stance but is placed in the socio-economic structure of our South African society and what 'rurality' implies.

*Keywords:* rurality, higher education, South Africa, social work, disability

## Introduction

When one contemplates the notion of rurality, an image of the countryside comes to mind. One immediately thinks of indigenous cultures with all their accoutrements, including the philosophical notion of Ubuntu, and a wide array of African languages. For the most part, urban and rural areas are viewed as possessing particular distinct cultures and apprehensions that affect their priorities and needs, but this is entirely untrue and in any event, the "…realities faced by people in rural areas cannot always be addressed by policy made elsewhere and for everyone" (Hlalele, 2014). For the sake of clarity, rural areas in South Africa are, by definition, areas that are deprived of access to ordinary public services including inter alia water and sanitation and they are generally without a formal local authority. Communities tend to be sparsely populated with less density of population. The population is for the main part also homogenous when it comes to aspects such as culture, customs, language etc. The primary occupation is based on agriculture although some people may commute to towns or cities in relatively

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close proximity. In 2021, more than 67.85 percent of South Africa's total population lived in urban areas and cities, thus a sizeable percentage reside in rural communities.[1]

From the point of view of rural students there are however a myriad of challenges and hurdles to overcome. In South Africa, rural students have been disadvantaged for some time. At the outset there is a deficiency of information, vexing socio-economic barriers, remote geographic locations and endemic poverty. These all serve to make it very difficult for poor rural learners to access higher education. "Majority of these learners come from poor families who cannot afford to pay for costs associated with applying for higher learning such as application fees, National Benchmark Tests (NBT) fees, not to mention the cost of data. Paying for data necessary to send an online application cannot be prioritised over having food for many poor families, and that does not mean that education is not valued. The main challenge rural learners face is lack of information including information about different institutions of higher learning, different courses offered and available financial assistance. For many, access to information is important but understanding information is another thing. Language barriers and the standard of education offered in rural schools challenges many learners' understanding on basic information such as instructions on application forms" (Ramontja, 2023).

Scholars tend to disagree about the meaning of 'rurality'. As a result of this disagreement, there are at least three approaches to defining rurality. The most dominant approach is the functional approach which seeks to define rurality by breaking it down into functions. According to this approach, rurality simply means non-urban. Meaning that rurality can be defined it terms of lacking the characteristics that the urban area has, or rather, rurality can be defined in terms of having the characteristics that can never be associated with the urban area. In other words, what the functional approach suggests is that there is great distinction between how rural areas and urban areas function, hence the necessity of defining rurality as just non-urban. Therefore, as Weeks (2010, p. 34) defines urban as, "a place-based characteristic that incorporates elements of population density, social and economic organization, and the transformation of the natural environment into a built environment", it means that rural areas do not incorporate elements of population density, social and economic organization, and the transformation of the natural environment into a built environment. Hence the reason why Cloke, Marsden, and Mooney (2006, p. 20) seeks to define rurality in terms of areas which:

1. Are dominated (either currently or recently) by extensive land uses, notably agriculture and forestry.
2. Contain small, lower order settlements which demonstrate a strong relationship between buildings and extensive landscape, and which are thought of as rural by most of their residents.
3. Engender a way of life which is characterized by a cohesive identity based on respect for the environmental and behavioural qualities of living as part of an extensive landscape.

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[1]See Statista online at: https://www.statista.com/statistics/455931/urbanization-in-south-africa/.

This, supposedly, evidences that the way that rural areas function is distinguishable to that which the urban areas function. Therefore, according to the functional approach to defining rurality, characteristics or functions such as the extensive land use for agriculture and forestry, lower order settlements, and cohesive identity are enough to define rurality as they guarantee its distinction to urban areas with these functions only being relevant to rural areas and not in urban areas.

The question that might be asked against the functional approach is whether the characteristics that it depends on to define rurality can always guarantee its distinction to urban areas. This question is important because if the characteristics such as the extensive use of land for agriculture and forestry, cohesive identity and lower order settlements cannot guarantee rurality's distinction to the urban then, first, the idea that rurality can be defined in terms of its functions is put into doubt and, secondly, the idea that rurality refers to non-urban automatically becomes invalid. Put differently, for the functional approach of defining rurality to succeed, the functions that it relies on need to guarantee the distinction between rural and urban thereby validating the idea that the best way to define rurality is by breaking this concept down to its functions.

## A South African Context

The question to be asked now is whether, in the context of South Africa, the above mentioned characteristics are enough to explain what rurality is, especially with respect to its distinction to urban. According to Metz (2011, p. 551 emphasis added) "…at the end of apartheid in 1994, nearly 90 per cent of land, especially the land for agriculture, in South Africa had been forcibly expropriated into the hands of white people who constituted about 10 per cent of the population", or as Atuahene (2011, p. 121) puts it, "Under colonialism and apartheid, the ruling white minority stole vast amounts of land from black Africans in Zimbabwe and South Africa". The reason for this expropriation of land was agriculture as, "…the country then was divided between provinces of the British Empire, states formed by Afrikaner settlers, and various native African states. All of these territories were dominated by farming cattle or cash crops such as sugar, coffee and wine. During the 19th century, urban areas were few in number and small in size" (Turok, 2014, pp. 4-5 emphasis added). During this period, it can be said that the maintenance of the urban areas was funded by agriculture. The 1980's saw a massive increase in urbanisation due to the mining boom in South Africa as the contribution of the mining sector to gross domestic product (GDP) was 22.2% (Macmillan, 2017, p. 273). The areas surrounding the land used for agriculture was used for mining and urbanisation. This effectively created a situation where agriculture and urban spaces can co-exist. It also created a situation where there was synonymity between agriculture, urban and white people as it is stated by Goodlad (1996, p. 1630; see also Lemon, 1991, p. 3) that, "By the end of the second decade of the 20th century, a spatial segregation of racial groups to mirror the class segregation of occupational groups was well advanced, especially in urban areas. White people

were already 55 per cent urbanised". This effectively shows that agriculture in South Africa is something synonymous with white people, of which the history of it is colonialism and apartheid policies. Even more significantly, it shows that in South Africa the extensive use of land for agriculture is the characteristic not only associable rural areas but also urban areas.

The point being made here is that there is a limitation to the functional approach to rurality. The limitation is that one of the characteristics it relies on, the extensive use of land for agriculture, can never be the sufficient condition for defining rurality because it can also be found in urban areas, thereby failing to guarantee the distinction between rurality and urban.

In the early 1990s just under 60 000 white-owned farms accounted for about 70% of the total area of the country. Today there are under 40,000 farming units covering about 67% of the country (StatsSA, 2009). The agricultural quality of this land varies, with only 13% classified as arable and over a third located in the arid Northern Cape where just 2% of the population resides. Most farmers are white but small numbers of blacks with access to capital are acquiring land through the market independently of land reform (Walker & Dubb, 2013).

In other words, in order to know if the extensive use of land for agriculture is one of the sufficient conditions to maintain the idea that rurality simply means non-urban, we first need to look at who owns most farms in South Africa. As already stated, about 67% of the farms in South Africa are owned by white people, necessitated by colonial and apartheid policies. We certainly know that these farms are not located in rural areas because they are owned by white people and the majority of white people in South Africa do not reside or do their business in rural areas, but rather in urban or rather semi-urban areas. Hence the synonymity between agriculture, urban areas and white people. In the 1980's, "urban agriculture was placed on the policy agenda by the emphasis accorded to strategies for 'sustainable development' in general and 'sustainable cities' in particular" (Rogerson, 1992, p. 21). This policy was exclusively to the benefit of white people. Therefore, perhaps the question that ought to be asked is, if it is true that the extensive use of land is a characteristic not limited to rural areas but also found urban areas, are other said characteristics of rurality, extensive use of land for forestry, cohesive identity and lower order settlements, enough to maintain the idea that rurality simply refers to non-urban. Can the functional approach survive independent of the extensive use of land for agriculture as a function for defining rurality?

Another familiar idea for defining rurality is the political-economic approach. According to this approach, functions that are said to be characteristic to rurality such as the extensive use of land for agriculture and forestry, cohesive identity, and lower order settlements exist to maintain an economic and political system where there is private ownership of the means of production and their operation for profit. Thereby, this approach suggests that there cannot be a distinction between urban and rural because central to both these areas is maintaining the price system, private ownership, property rights, capital accumulation and keeping the markets competitive. Similar to urban "…rural is best regarded as the outcome of a variety of economic, social and political processes and that these might usefully be observed from the vantage point of land development" (Murdoch,

1993, p. ix). Therefore, "…capitalism has dissolved the identity of the rural areas, so that the concept of rurality no longer has a distinctive, coherent real object, only imaginary ones" (Sayer, 1984, p. 279 emphasis added). Thereby, the political-economic approach makes clear the relationships that help structure forms of capitalism in the so called rural areas and helps map out the limits on local capacity. At the same time, "the forms taken by bonding, bridging, and linking capitalism in the different villages help explain differential levels of villager capacity to resolve local livelihood and governance problems" (Bebbington, 2006, p. 1972). As Cloke, Marsden, and Mooney (2006, p. 231) further asserts, "For more than two decades social scientists have considered how nature is drawn into systems of capitalism and, in particular, the historical political-economic processes through which capital has come to appropriate and, in many cases, exploit different natural resources (soils, minerals, water, and so on)". In other words, the functions associated with rurality would be sufficient in defining rurality if they were ends in themselves but, as the political-economic approach argues, these functions are merely means towards a particular economic and political agenda which is capitalism.

The concern with the political-economic approach might be that if we think about rurality only in terms of political economy we would then be missing out on so much in terms of what the rural actually is. The basis of this concern is that central to rurality are people rather than the system, thereby suggesting that the political-economic approach reduces rurality to 'peoplelessness'. Therefore, the political-economic approach is. Written in such a way that rural landscapes are either deserted of people…or occupied by little armies of faceless, classless, sexless beings dutifully laying out Christaller's central place networks, doing exactly the right number of hours of farm work in each of Von Thunen's concentric rings, and basically obeying the great economic laws of minimising effort and cost in negotiating physical space (Philo, 1992).

This criticism can be summed as, the limitation to the political-economic approach is that it seeks to define rurality independent of what is key to it, the people. Rurality is something which, "represents a sense of security, identity and history, rather than being just an asset to be used for capitalism alone" (James, 2001, p. 93 emphasis added). In other words, independent of the people, rurality cannot be imagined hence the limitation to the political-economic approach which seeks to do the opposite (Mbiti, 1969).

Other scholars have contended that rurality is not something that exists in objective reality but instead only exists as an idea that has been created and accepted by the people in a society class distinction. As Woods (2011, p. 9) asserts, "rurality is understood as a social construct…an imagined entity that is brought into being by particular discourses of rurality that are produced, reproduced and contested by academics, the media, policy-makers, rural lobby groups and ordinary individuals. The rural is therefore a 'category of thought'". Cloke, Marsden, and Mooney (2006, p. 19) adds that, "rurality is characterized by a multiplicity of social spaces overlapping the same geographical area, so while the geographic spaces of the city and the countryside have become blurred it is in the social distinction of rurality that significant differences between the rural and urban remain".

The idea being put forward here is that the reason that we have something that we can point towards as rural is that people tend to be preoccupied with social classifications. However, independent of this preoccupation with society class distinction something as rural, even urban, does not exist. The criticism with the social constructionist idea of rurality might be, if rurality does not exist then what is it that actually exist? If the ideas of rural and urban are merely illusions of human consciousness, what are we then left with? The social constructionist approach does not answer this question. In other words, this approach seems to be limited as it does not attempt to go beyond and substantiate the claim that rurality is merely a social construct rather than something that exists in objective reality as characterised by characteristics such as the lower order settlements, cohesive identity and extensive use of land for agriculture and forestry, as asserted by the functional approach, or only existing as means to maintain capitalist political-economic system, as the political-economic approach asserts.

The appropriate way to finding out what is meant by rurality, or if rurality is a social construct or something that exists in objective reality, might be to think of why is there migration from places characterised by mostly the extensive use of land for agriculture and forestry, cohesive identity and lower order settlements to places characterised by mostly higher order settlements and diversity in economy and population. This should be able to assist in trying to define what rurality is, even urban, as it might reveal the factor that unifies the traits or characteristics that we normally associate with rurality such as the extensive use of land for agriculture and forestry, cohesive identity and lower order settlements, or at least why it has never been attempted to define rurality in terms of traits such as higher order settlements and diversity in economy and population. Or, in the case of South Africa, why it was important for the Apartheid government to reserve urban areas for white people at the exclusion of black people, as asserted by Wilson (1972) that, "The native should only be allowed to enter the urban areas, which are essentially the white man's creation, when he is willing to enter and to minister to the needs of the white man and should depart therefrom when he ceases so to minister". What is that factor that led to this exclusive reservation of urban areas for white people?

The answer to this question seems to concern accessibility. In other words, what seems to separate between rural and urban is that the areas that are characterised by agriculture, forestry, cohesive identity and lower order settlements have no, or rather limited, access to opportunity in terms of employment, services, health, infrastructure, security, and etc. as opposed to areas characterised by towns, suburbs, diverse population and economy. So, the factor the unifies the traits that are commonly associated with rurality is none, or limited, accessibility. As Brovarone, and Cotella (2020, p. 1) assert, "Rural territories are worse equipped than urban ones in terms of accessibility to services and opportunities, due to their scattered development and peripheral character". Thereby, the reason that people tend to migrate from rural to urban is to seek access to opportunity. As stated by Qiu, Yang, Zhang, and Ma (2011, p. 6), "People migrate to cities for better job opportunities and higher incomes, and to assist their families economically", which all can be reduced to access to

opportunity. Therefore, rurality is something that cannot be imagined independent of access to opportunity and this is what tends to separate it from urban.

## The Urban-Rural Divide and Inequality

Graetz et al. (2018) contend that there are indeed extensive disparities between urban and rural populations. It is evident from the literature that students living in rural settings are increasingly disaffected and sense that they have been relegated to such a degree that they fail to fully appreciate the immense importance of the knowledge and skills that they acquire as having a meaningful impact in the rural communities in which they reside as well as beyond. In the majority of rural areas there is limited infrastructure and basic amenities are generally lacking such as inter alia running water, electricity, transport, and of course basically essential for students in the era of 4IR, access to low cost internet. They are equally challenged in terms of financial constraints which are exacerbated by the often lack of access to apposite technology as they take on a curriculum (Graetz et al., 2018; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Cuervo, 2016; Alston & Kent, 2003).

Inequality is increasingly demonstrated inside 'regional proximity' (Horner, Schindler, Haberly, & Aoyama, 2018) and the sustainability of rural communities is greatly diminished when young adults leave their rural areas (Cuervo, 2016). There is of course evidence from even G7 nations that many students in urban areas are not as privileged, and in fact often more challenged than rural students. Thus, privilege and marginalization are also found to exist in urban areas (Jones, Ewald, & McKown, 2017). This is not generally the case in South Africa and the rural communities are hardest hit. This suggests that for example, school education for African students is better in urban settings than in rural settings, despite there being poverty. There are also more opportunities for upward social mobility in cities in South Africa, although of course, not for all (Kok & Collinson, 2006).

Nonetheless, to many young rural adults, it is deemed essential to obtain a place in higher education as it allows them to acquire at least a measure of independence as they seek a better life and job opportunities. Very often this drive is also geared towards helping sustain their rural family economically. Many thus tend to leave as they believe that they cannot obtain their desired education or later employment opportunities once they do qualify in a desired field of study (Kenway, Kraack, & Hickey-Moody, 2006). The need for personal and professional development generates a desire to seek 'greener pastures' as it were given that in mainly rural areas people have problems in finding employment and there are also very low levels of household income (Kamvasinou & Stringer, 2019).

During the apartheid era in South Africa, education was compromised in traditionally black higher education institutions (HEIs), as they were generally very poorly resourced (StatsSA, 2003). Such institutions included those institutions existing in rural areas in the so-called 'Bantu homelands' and they were for the most part deprived of needed resources (Atkinson, 2014). This uneven distribution of resources severely impacted student access to higher education and the subsequent career choices of students. Today, the Constitution of South Africa and

numerous education policy documents stress that all South African students should have access to a single quality of learning and teaching driven education, comparable facilities and equivalent educational opportunities but this is not yet the case. We cannot ignore that there are glaring inequalities in standards of living, availability and access to resources and even shorter life expectancy, in countries where colonialism manifested and socio-economic growth has been thwarted due to its mainly negative legacy (Dados & Connell, 2012). Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) stress that the manner in which students' previous involvements and their rural cultural backgrounds inform their learning and also the relationships they develop in higher education.

There is no doubt that both one's family background and the community in which students live ultimately influence their identities, agency and their sense of belonging as they move into higher education. In examples from Australian higher education, it was found that increased participation of rural youth into higher education addresses social justice issues (Gale & Tranter, 2011) which also applies in a South African context. Trahar, Timmish, Lucas, and Naidoo (2020) assert that rurality be a useful construct for investigating life and education in rural areas and it can also enable comparative analysis of rural-urban divides, whilst providing greater insight into the broader issues of what 'local' implies when it comes to higher education.

Cairns (2017) argues that young adults' mobility decision-making processes are supported or constrained by existing household resources which exist outside economic, and likely also social and cultural capital. They include fundamentally unconscious prospects and possibilities within which they operate (Cairns, Growiec, & Smyth, 2013). The disparities in especially rurality tend to mediate access to higher education and ultimately to gainful employment (Akala, 2017). There is also indication from other countries, arguing that a dearth of resources and opportunities reinforces the inability of young adults to leave their rural communities (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). When it comes to equitable education, rural people generally continue to be ignored (Stelmach, 2011).

## The Need for Decoloniality

For the most part, the curricula, endure infusion with colonialism. These need to be "…reimagined and reconfigured to build on and value all (including rural) HE student experiences" (SARiHE, 2019). There is also indeed great complexity when it comes to future decision-making by rural young people as a whole and this includes some subtle and also systemic barriers faced by rural students (Fleming & Grace, 2014). Naidoo et al. (2020) also argue that there is a juncture between race and ethnicity in South Africa and indeed the wider Southern African region and an interchange of decoloniality and curricular fairness relating to student co-researchers' previous experiences and their encounters with higher education curricula. They also stress that the legacy of colonialism continues to affect the lives of students and specifically those emanating from rural communities. Many changes needed if rural-based universities are to become catalytic agents of

sustainable development (Nkomo, 2007). It is sadly the case that many students in rural milieus in South Africa endure side-lining despite various post-1994 democratisation policies being developed to promote even-handedness, admittance to ultimately retention in higher education institutions.

### The University of Zululand as a Highly Positive Example

Given the inequities experienced by most students from rural contexts in accessing higher education the University of Zululand has put in place a number of initiatives to support teaching and learning. It recognises that its typical student has certain characteristics which place them at a disadvantage when compared to most urban students. The issues faced include students emanating from a rural area that is deficient in apposite infrastructure. The students often have no access to basic amenities such as electricity, water and decent sanitation and reside in poor families. They have challenges in that they may be from the first generation in the family to attend a tertiary education institution and may accordingly have naïve expectations of the nature and outcomes of higher education, In addition, they may have attended an under-resourced school and require assistance with study skills and language skills (given that isiZulu is not the language of instruction but rather English. They may also require assistance with digital literacy and lack adequate technological ability and equipment such as a smartphone or laptop- thus digital inequality is widespread. It is also likely that some students may have interrupted secondary and higher education for financial or other causes; and they may have completed some post-secondary education.[2]

To mitigate and alleviate challenges, the University of Zululand now has a deputy Vice-Chancellor with responsibility for teaching and learning. There is a Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning, a Director of Teaching and Learning, and Deputy Deans are in place in all four faculties with responsibility for teaching and learning. The teaching and learning project is derived from four key goals in the strategic plan. Critically important are the scholarship and professionalisation of teaching and learning, student support, and e-learning. The university is also aligning the teaching and learning strategy with what is happening on the ground. "The policy and regulatory landscape in the institution for teaching and learning are now consolidated and have a coherent framework to assist academics, to regulate their practice, and to deal with the emerging landscape outside of the institution. The faculties of the university have been actively focusing on the practice of teaching and learning as well as on the development of students and staff to deliver the desired high quality outcomes.

The Teaching and Learning Centre is embarking on a major strategic review, to ensure that it will align its work with the institutional strategic direction, but also with what is happening nationally. The University also has a compulsory induction programme for new academic staff".[3] Curriculum transformation within Higher Education has invariably been an enduring process within post-Apartheid South

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[2]University of Zululand, 2021: http://www.unizulu.ac.za/2021/#.
[3]University of Zululand, 2021: http://www.unizulu.ac.za/2021/#.

Africa Universities. The COVID-19 Pandemic has illustrated very clearly that there are numerous challenges for the higher education sector around the world, especially for disadvantaged universities (Ndebele & Mlambo, 2021) and their students, most of whom are in rural settings. If rural students are not deficient and passive they can certainly add value in their communities and far beyond (Walker & Mathebula, 2019). A final challenge faced by rural universities is the retention of academic staff. New academics often receive mentorship and lecturing skills while completing their own doctoral studies. With this experience and qualification, they are then poached by urban-based campuses that offer more family friendly amenities and schooling.

## A Historical Rural-Urban Comparison

In 1994 the Rhodes University social work programme was relocated from the main campus in the rural town of Grahamstown (now called Makhanda) to the university's coastal satellite-campus in the city of East London. The rationale at the time, was that the rural town simply did not have the needed training infrastructure, primarily in the form of fieldwork placement hosts, that would be needed to increase the number of students in the University's social work department. East London, was preferred as it has many Government Departments and NGOs that employ social workers, and thus would have a greater number of options for student fieldwork placements, internships and work integrated learning opportunities. In 2004 the Rhodes University's East London campus was then incorporated into the University of Fort Hare (UFH) (RSA, 2003, pp. 11-12). The result was that Rhodes University lost its social work programme and has elected not to establish it again at its rural campus. Fort Hare already had an existing social work training programme at its main campus in the rural town of Alice. This means that the University of Fort Hare now has a social work programme that is offered on two sites, one in a rural context and one in a city context.

One of the authors of this paper was employed as a social work academic at UFH for 18 years and was also the Head of Department. He recently moved from UFH to the University of Zululand, which is based in the rural town of KwaDlangezwa, to assist in relaunching its four-year professional Bachelor of Social Work degree. The other authors have also previously worked at urban-based universities and are now also based at the rural campus of the University of Zululand. It is against this background that we provide our insights into the implication of 'Rurality' in terms of Higher Education in a rural context, considering student well-being and social work training challenges.

## Social Work Fieldwork Training Challenges

Social work training, is fieldwork intensive. From their second year, students register with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) as 'student social workers'. The training requires students to have fieldwork

placements under the mentorship and supervision of a professional social worker in a social service setting. This culminates in a half-year block placement in the fourth and final year of the social work degree.

The relocation and subsequent closure of the Rhodes University social work programme hints at the systemic and institutional challenges that rural-based universities might face in training social workers. The major challenges relate to the limited number of formal fieldwork and work integrated learning opportunities and the greater distances that students need to travel between campus and host organisations.

While most fieldwork placement organisations and community projects are based in urban areas, the majority of poor people live in rural areas (Gray, Agllias, Mupedziswa, & Mugumbate, 2017). Students from urban-based universities are often reluctant to take on placements in rural settings because the conditions are too demanding. They find that rural communities are "riddled with a myriad of social problems such as unemployment, high poverty levels, early school dropout, alcohol abuse, early marriages, gender based violence, HIV/AIDS etc. (Gray, Agllias, Mupedziswa, & Mugumbate, 2017, p. 631)". Ironically, this is actually one of the advantages of the University based in a rural setting; it is surrounded by relatively poor homesteads that rely on basic subsistence farming, seasonal agricultural work and government grants for survival. These are ultimately the kinds of people who social workers are called to serve.

### Rural Social Work Training Challenges

Shokane, Nemutandani, and Budeli (2016) reported on the challenges faced by fourth year social work students during fieldwork practice at the University of Venda, another rural-based university. Their findings indicated challenges related to limited or inadequate fieldwork orientation and induction, and agency supervision resulting in poor student-supervisor relations. Other challenges included a lack of opportunity to integrate theory and practice, the lack of resources and limited funding for fieldwork placements. Coincidently, Professor Shokane is now also based at UNIZULU in KwaDlangezwa, whereas the Deputy Dean of Research and a Professor of social work she is using the experience gained in one rural context to strengthen social work training in another rural-university setting.

The lack of resources is a common challenge faced by social workers who do not always have adequate access to the 'tools of the trade' needed to perform their duties. These include, poor office infrastructure, lack of private confidential spaces, limited telephone and internet connectivity, and car and computer sharing. These restrictions are magnified in rural contexts where the vast distances between settlements, rough roads and poor connectivity make home visits and accessing clients more of a challenge. The poverty that is endemic to this kind of rurality inhibits the personal agency of those in need of welfare services as money for transport is often directed to daily subsistence.

Based at the rural and historically disadvantaged University of Fort Hare (UFH) in Alice, Tanga, Ndhlovu, and Tanga (2020) reviewed emergency remote teaching and learning of social work training during COVID-19. They found that COVID-19 highlighted the inequalities in South African universities. It was evident that some previously white universities based in urban areas were far ahead in delivering emergency remote teaching and learning, while rural-based universities, like UFH lagged behind. This was potentially disastrous for final year students who had to complete their agency fieldwork block placements and research projects during the time of a national pandemic lockdown.

The students at the rural universities come from poor socioeconomic and disadvantaged backgrounds with limited access to basic services and student support which the pandemic has intensified. Access to the internet became a major challenge in many rural settings, this was amplified when the electricity supply was not stable, and this had a negative impact on supervision and virtual class room attendance. Great flexibility was needed and programmes had to consider the risk profile of each student and client group, and fieldwork training activities had to be done with all COVID-19 safety protocols in mind (Tanga, Ndhlovu, & Tanga, 2020).

Life in a rural environment can be very challenging; "some compounding socioeconomic risk factors affecting rural students include poverty, illiteracy, a high crime rate, violence, HIV and AIDS and orphanhood" (Machimana, Sefotho, & Ebersöhn, 2018). In addition, students at rural universities sometimes face language limitations, high university application competition, limited student funding, student protests, erratic electricity, water and internet supply, and inadequate access to computers.

High quality fieldwork experience and supervision is essential for producing quality social work graduates who will enter the social work profession (Schmidt & Rautenbach, 2016). Since there is a dearth of rural-based social service organisations within reasonable proximity to the rural campus, there is also a paucity of professional supervisors. There are examples where supervisors with very little experience are used to supervise students, simply because there are so few fieldwork placements available (Schmidt & Rautenbach, 2016).

### School Social Work as a Possible Solution to Some of the Challenges

There is a growing recognition of the need for social workers to be employed in schools as social workers, as part of all children's right to education (Reyneke, 2018). School social workers are seen as part of the solution to the challenges facing learners in at the pre-tertiary education level, especially in rural schools that face crumbling infrastructure and very limited social services (Pretorius, 2016). There are many rural schools within the catchment area for the rural university and they act as feeder schools to the university for future students.

To maximise fieldwork opportunities, the university has to look to rural-based schools to serve has fieldwork hosts. While 'school social work' is now officially recognised as a speciality (DSD, 2020, p. 74), school social work is still in its

infancy in South Africa and is mainly starting in urban and privileged schools, and mostly funded by wealthy governing bodies. Many school learners face psycho-social challenges that negatively impact on their learning and many school teachers carry the burden of care for the learners, and this detracts from their primary role as educators facilitating teaching and learning. The Provincial KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education, has a unit called the Special Needs Education Services (SNES).

Through their psycho-social services they focus on "addressing the emotional, behavioural and social support needs of learners that are at risk of learning breakdown, educational marginalization and school dropout" (SNES, 2022). The university considers SNES to be an important symbiotic partner to facilitate the placement of student social workers and even unemployed social work graduates in rural schools. In order to compensate for the lack of onsite social work supervisors at schools, other universities often assign university-based supervisors to settings with limited student supervision capacity (Schmidt & Rautenbach, 2016). This will certainly be the case for the majority of placements in rural-based schools.

## The Notion of Wellbeing

Similar to rurality, scholars tend to disagree about what is meant by wellbeing. Commonly, scholars tend to talk about the notion of wellbeing in two ways, namely, subjective wellbeing and normative wellbeing. However, within these notions there is a scope of disagreement. A general idea of wellbeing is that it is a matter of how well one is faring in life or how well life is faring for her (Lin, 2022; Burns & Crisp, 2021). However, the disagreement starts with what is important in measuring how well one is faring in life. In other words, the disagreement about the concept of wellbeing has to do with establishing what is that condition that is sufficient for determining that one is faring well in life. Even though there is a disagreement about what wellbeing means, but there seem to be an agreement about what wellbeing should be about. As Crisp (2001) asserts, "Well-being is most commonly used in philosophy to describe what is non-instrumentally or ultimately good for a person" and, "When something is directly or non-instrumentally good for a person, it increases that person's level of well-being simply in-and-of-itself" (Raibley, 2013, p. 470). This means that wellbeing ought to be the highest good, it ought to be something that is valuable for its own sake rather than the sake of other things. The value of wellbeing, whatever it may turn out to be, as the ultimate good is that it is:

> …what an egoist or purely selfish person always tries to promote for herself, and what the altruist tries to promote for others. It is what one knowingly fails to promote for oneself when engaging in self-sacrifice. It is what one tries to promote for another against her wishes when acting paternalistically. It is what is affected, for better or for worse, when one has good or bad luck. It is something that we seek to affect when we reward and punish (Campbell, 2016, p. 3).

This means that in order to know that what we have defined is wellbeing we need to observe whether that thing is something good for its own sake or something good for the sake of other thing, if the former condition is met then that what was described is wellbeing. Describing wellbeing is describing that reason that makes us to seek and secure things.

Student wellbeing is essential and many do not have this sense in a rural context and must consequently deal with the great expectations that higher education necessitates for a country which has great poverty and rife unemployment. Many students also tend to believe that obtaining a university education is essential for them to escape impending hardship. Students from non-westernised cultural backgrounds are often disadvantaged in these contexts. African students who attend universities are generally instructed in a language other than their mother tongue and this places huge stresses on them and many become extremely anxious. Some scholars tend to explain the notion of wellbeing using self-reported measures. These scholars tend to, "…define well-being as relative to the individual's experiences or desires" (Wasserman & Asch, 2014, p. 143).

A familiar self-reported measure of wellbeing is hedonism. According to hedonists, "What is intrinsically good for someone is (just) the pleasure they experience; what is intrinsically bad for someone is (just) the displeasure they experience" (Dietz, 2021, p. 387). This means that wellbeing is a matter of avoiding unpleasant mental states and having positive ones. On this theory, "Happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence" (Aristotle, cited by Kesebir & Diener, 2008, p. 69; see also Prinsloo, 2013, p. 44). Therefore, pursuing happiness is not only something good in and of itself but it is something that gives meaning to life. It is something that defines what life is all about. In other words, for hedonists, the purpose of life is to be happy and independent of happiness the purpose of living is lost.

Another familiar theory which tries to explain wellbeing using self-reported measures is the desire-fulfilment theory. According to this theory, "an agents wellbeing is constituted by the obtaining of states of affairs that are desired by that agent" (Murphy, 1999, p. 247). This means that wellbeing is a matter of getting what you want and if you are not able to get what you want it means that you are not faring well in life. In other words, for the desire-fulfilment theorists, the purpose of living is fulfilling your desires and if you cannot fulfil your desires it means that your life is not faring well for you. Therefore, the whole purpose of living is fulfilling your desires, and failure to do this it means that you have failed in life itself.

Other scholars tend to explain the notion of wellbeing in terms of social attributes and material resources. As Barnes (2016, p. 108) explains, "there are some features your life can contain that are objectively valuable or good, and which objectively make your life go well, regardless of the attitudes that you have those features". This means that the judgement on whether one has achieved wellbeing dependents on particular life indicators rather than her self-evaluation. The most common idea which tries to explain wellbeing in terms of social attributes and material resources is the objective list theories. According to this

theory, wellbeing is about, "…objective measures, such as household income, happiness, achievement, educational resources and health status" (Statham & Chase, 2010, p. 2 emphasis added). On this theory, the purpose of life is being happy, getting income, being healthy, getting personal achievements and etc, otherwise the meaning of life would be lost. Achieving these life checklists is by itself something good as it defines what life is all about.

Another idea which tries to explain wellbeing in terms of social attributes and material resources is perfectionism. According to this theory, "the best life is determined by the core account of what it means to be human. Developing and exercising those properties or capacities that form what it means to be human yields a good life for a human" (Dorsey, 2010, p. 61; Hurka, 1993, p. 3; Molefe, 2020, pp. 196-197). This means that what is ultimately good for a person involves developing and exercising capacities that are deeply characteristic of human nature. Therefore, the value of perfecting your capacities and humanity is not only that it is something good in and of itself but it is also something that defines the purpose of life. In other words, without pursuing to perfect your capacities and humanities the purpose of life would be lost.

As most ideas of wellbeing, especially in Western philosophy, tend to explain wellbeing as something particular to the individual, in Africa there seem to be the idea that wellbeing is something not particular to the individual but to the community. As Menkiti (1984, p. 171) asserts, "in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory", thereby, "…it is fair to conclude that the Western is individualist and that the African is communitarian" (Metz, 2015, p. 1175; Maybee, 2019, p. 289; Nicolaides, 2015, p. 196; Nicolaides, 2022, p. 2). Ake (1993, p. 243) adds that, "Africans do not generally see themselves as self-regarding atomized beings in essentially competitive and potentially conflicting interaction with others. Rather, their consciousness is directed towards belonging to an organic whole". This means that in an African setting, the notion of wellbeing is understood in relation to the social relationships rather than as tied to things that are particular to the individual such as personal income, health, achievement and desire-fulfilment. The basis of this idea is that, "the self should not and cannot meaningfully separate from social relationships because they constitute an essential part of what defines it" (Molefe, 2020, p. 64). Hence, in an African setting, "the individual can only say: I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am. This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man" (Mbiti, 1982, p. 109), thereby members of the community are expected to possess the communal values such as solidarity, interdependency, mutual trust, mutual help and cooperation. What this community based idea of wellbeing implies is that the highest good, at least in Africa, is maintaining social relationships.

The criticism with the communal idea of wellbeing is that it tends to ignore what is central to the idea of wellbeing by exaggerating the significance of the community. The point here is that

Besides being a communitarian being by nature, the human person is, also by nature, other things as well. By 'other things', I have in mind such essential

attributes of the person as rationality, having a capacity for virtue and for evaluating and making moral judgments and, hence, being capable of choice. It is not the community that creates these attributes; it discovers and nurtures them. So that if these attributes play any seminal roles in the execution of the individual person's life style and projects, as indeed they do then it cannot be persuasively argued that personhood is fully defined by the communal structure or social relationships (Gyekye, 1992, p. 113).

This means that the communal notion of wellbeing overstates the role of social relationships as it seeks to assert them as the ultimate good. As Agada, and Egbai (2018, p. 149) assert, social relationships play an instrumental role as catalyst and as prescriber of norms however it is the individual's responsibility to actualise these values, Shutte (2001, p. 24) adding that, "I only become fully human to the extent that I am included in relationships with others", maintaining social relationships may be central towards securing wellbeing but it can never be that they are what wellbeing is all about as that neglects the idea that relationships are meant to secure the interests of the individuals rather than maintaining them for their own sake.

The best way to describe what is meant by wellbeing, in terms of it being the measure of how well one is faring in life and being the highest good, might be to think about it in terms of factor that allows us to make a judgement about life going for ourselves and other people. The significance of this factor is that it will reveal why we actually value the things that we normally use to make a judgement on wellbeing. As others argue that wellbeing is about objective features such as personal income, education, achievement, satisfaction, capacity to perfect the characteristics that are core to human nature and subjective features such as happiness and desire fulfilment, what then needs to be done is to evaluate whether there is anything common about all these judgements on wellbeing. For Rawls (1971), a person's wellbeing is determined by what is for them, the most rational long-term plan of life given reasonably favourable circumstances. A rational plan is a plan of life designed to meet the person's desires and interests subject to the conditions he faces, it is a plan which can allow him the harmonious satisfaction of his desires. It is that plan of desire satisfaction which cannot be improved upon, it is the person's most preferable plan among other plans. To carry out our plans, there needs to be certain primary goods. Primary goods are necessary means for carrying out our plans.

Rawls claims that primary goods are things that a rational man is presumed to want whatever their rational plan in life is. Thus, what is good for a person is the satisfaction of their rational desire formulated by their rational plan of life through the utilisation of primary goods (Rawls, 1971, pp. 92-94). Primary goods involve rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth. With more of these goods, people can generally be assured greater chances of success in carrying out their plans (Rawls, 1971, p. 92). The question that Rawls seems not to consider is why should the person value that he or she has the most rational long-term plan of life. What is that condition that actually allows the rational long-term plan of life to manifest into satisfaction? The argument here is that there ought to be that feature that necessitates the things that we often judge as the measure for

wellbeing, and it is actually that feature which is the highest good, thereby what wellbeing is all about. Clearly, what matters about a strategy of life is not that it is the smartest, but rather that it would be one that is selected by the person whose life it is.

Life plans are not fixed and singular but are multiple and constantly shifting. He says that plans of life are a way of integrating one's purposes over time, and of fitting together the different things one values (Rawls, 1971). However, what actually gives value to the life plans as a way of integrating your purposes over time is the space or opportunity given to it. In other words, the space or opportunity given, particularly by yourself and sometimes by the community, is actually what makes it possible for a person to, for example, get personal income, be happy, be satisfied, have a desire to fulfil your goals and act on your capacities and humanity. When this space gets is closed, then it is where unhappiness, the interest in acting on your desires, capacity and humanity is abandoned. Thereby, by the virtue of that the space or opportunity that one or the society allows on herself is what actually causes the things the we normally associate with wellbeing to exist, it therefore need to be argue that if wellbeing ought to be understood as the ultimate or the highest good, then it is the space or opportunity that we allow or allowed to us that actually describes what wellbeing is about. In other words, it catches the essence of what do we mean when we say that one is faring well in life or her life is faring well for her.

South African rural students arriving at universities come in from positions of extreme inequality. This is for the most part based on their schooling status, race, social class and lack of financial and other needed resources. There is also a deficiency in the provision of quality teachers and related aspects so those from disadvantaged backgrounds have very little feeling of wellbeing. While the scenario is slowly changing for the better, education still continues to be structured on racial and class lines, because of the exposed economic and cultural status. Also the reason that students from rural areas tend to limit themselves in terms of what to study at tertiary level is because they have never been allowed to have the space to know and engage other options on what to study (Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011). In other words, the students, by virtue of them being from the rural areas are automatically disadvantaged in terms of accessibility.

## Conclusion

It is evident that Post-apartheid South Africa needs to provide an enabling environment for the realization of previously stifled potentialities including support for academic freedom, providing of space for creativity and innovation, progressive legislative and policy framework, opportunities to access technology that can break existing spatial isolation and above all a vision that encourages the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems and the creation of trust among all stakeholders. We need to also be cognisant of the fact that there is also a problem of marginalization and privilege in urban settings where in less affluent areas, the facilities are inferior and numerous other disadvantages manifest. Thus, any

desired upward mobility for students from impoverished areas is challenging to say the least. School social workers are considered to be a part of the solution to the challenges facing learners in at the pre-tertiary education level. We hope our brief discourse will serve in even a small way to add some value to the issues discussed and mobilize higher education to a necessary re-alignment in thinking on rurality and higher education and indeed all education. Positive changes need to come to education in rural areas and this should be in pioneering and useful ways. Thus, the education system for rural students must be improved. Education providers must be equipped with contemporary infrastructure, and innovative learning methods and the lack of resources available must be a priority of government. Quality education must be available and accessible to all rural students.

What has been argued above is that rurality can be defined in terms of accessibility, this may include opportunity, security, health, and services. As long as there is limited access or the access is non-existed, then we can describe that place as rural as opposed to urban. What has also been argued is that wellbeing is about the space or opportunity allowed or that one allows to his or herself which can then necessitate life satisfaction, income, desire-fulfilment, personal perfection, achievement and etc. If it is true that rurality means limited or none-accessibility and that wellbeing means the space or opportunity that one allows to herself, then what does it mean for rural students in higher learning. From these two premises the conclusion can be made that for rurality limits, even eliminate, the options that one or the society can open up the space or opportunity for. Meaning that, because rurality means limited or none-access, then the options that the student would have allowed herself the space or opportunity to be part of are limited or eliminated.

Finally, it "is imperative that higher educational institutions in rural-based universities should promote an environment that is conducive for learning to deal with the injustices of the past, which are a legacy of the history of colonialism and apartheid. This has to be ensured in order to respond to the local needs of students in rural areas" (Shokane, Nemutandani, & Budeli, 2016, p. 158).

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