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Exploring Rural Students' Transition from High School to Private Higher Education Institutions in Zambia

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Abstract

The transition from rural high schools to private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in Zambia presents significant academic, social, and cultural challenges for students from rural backgrounds. Despite increasing enrolment of rural-origin learners, there is limited empirical evidence on how these students experience this transition, particularly within private universities. This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived academic experiences of sixteen participants from two Zambian PHEIs, focusing on their academic preparedness, adaptation to autonomous and technology-mediated learning, and access to institutional support. Guided by Chickering and Reisser's (1993) Psychosocial Student Development Theory and Perry's (1970) Cognitive-Structural Model, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis revealed that students face persistent educational inequities, limited digital literacy, social isolation from high school peers, and cultural dissonance in urban university settings. These challenges contributed to "learning transition shock" and initially hindered academic engagement. Despite these obstacles, rural students demonstrated resilience, gradually developing autonomy, decision-making skills, and personal growth. The study highlights the critical role of contextually responsive interventions, including bridging programs, culturally sensitive mentorship, psychosocial support, and digital literacy training, in facilitating equitable academic and social integration. Findings contribute to knowledge on rural students' experiences in Zambia's private higher education sector and provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Introduction

Background of the Study

The transition from high school to higher education represents a critical academic turning point for many students. For students from rural backgrounds, this transition is often marked by significant academic disruption due to disparities in educational resources, pedagogical practices, and exposure to university-level learning expectations. In Zambia, these disparities are particularly pronounced, as rural secondary schools frequently operate under conditions of limited infrastructure, shortages of qualified teachers, inadequate learning materials, and restricted access to digital technologies (Masaiti, 2018; Mboyonga, 2025; Mulenga, 2020). Such conditions shape rural learners' academic preparedness and influence how they experience the shift to higher education.

When rural students enter Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs), they are required to adapt rapidly to unfamiliar pedagogical approaches characterized by independent learning, critical inquiry, continuous assessment, and technology-mediated instruction. Empirical studies in Zambia indicate that many rural students struggle with academic writing, research skills, digital literacy, and self-directed learning during their first year of study (Masaiti *et al*., 2020; Ng'ambi & Kapembwa, 2021; Chanda & Musonda, 2023). These challenges reflect a misalignment between the largely teacher-centered instructional practices common in rural secondary schools and the autonomous learning culture dominant in higher education.

The rapid expansion of PHEIs following the liberalization of Zambia's higher education sector, initiated by the Educating Our Future policy (Ministry of Education, 1996), has increased access to tertiary education for students who might otherwise be excluded from public universities. However, evidence suggests that expanded access has not been matched by uniform

academic support structures, particularly for students from rural backgrounds (HEA, 2021; HEA, 2024). While some PHEIs offer orientation programs, bridging courses, and academic skills support, the availability and effectiveness of these interventions vary considerably across institutions.

Recent Zambian studies highlight that rural students' academic transitions are further complicated by limited prior exposure to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). UNESCO (2022) and the Ministry of Education (2023) report persistent digital divides between rural and urban schools, with rural learners entering higher education at a disadvantage in navigating learning management systems, digital libraries, and online assessments. This digital gap directly affects academic engagement, confidence, and performance during the transition period (Chanda & Musonda, 2023).

Despite these constraints, rural students in Zambia demonstrate notable resilience and commitment to academic success. Muyunda (2021) and Masaiti et al. (2020) observe that rural learners often view higher education as a pathway to socio-economic mobility and community development. However, Tinto's (1993) theory of academic integration cautions that motivation alone is insufficient if students are unable to meet the intellectual demands of higher education, particularly during the critical first year of transition.

While existing literature on higher education in Zambia has predominantly focused on issues of access, financing, and material deprivation, particularly in relation to rural-urban disparities (Masaiti & Shen, 2013; Mwelwa, 2014; Muyunda, 2021), there remains limited empirical research examining how rural students experience the transition from high school to Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) from a developmental and academic adjustment perspective. Most national studies prioritize enrollment trends, policy implementation, and funding mechanisms, with comparatively little attention given to students lived academic transitions, especially within the private higher education sector (HEA, 2021; Masaiti et al., 2020). Furthermore, qualitative evidence on how institutional practices such as orientation programmes, academic mentoring, and digital learning support either facilitate or hinder rural students' adjustment remains underexplored in the Zambian context (Mulenga, 2020; Ng'ambi & Kapembwa, 2021). Addressing this gap is critical, given Zambia's policy commitments under the Eighth National Development Plan (2022-2026), which emphasizes equitable access and quality learning outcomes, and Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and effective learning environments for all learners (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2022; UNESCO, 2022).

Against this backdrop, the present study explores rural students' transitions from high school to Private Higher Education Institutions in Zambia, with specific attention to academic preparedness, pedagogical adjustment, and access to institutional learning support. By centering rural students' experiences, the study contributes evidence to inform more responsive academic support frameworks within PHEIs, thereby advancing equity and student success in Zambia's higher education system.

Statement of the Problem
Despite increased enrolment of students from rural backgrounds in Zambia's higher education system,

empirical evidence on how these students experience the academic transition from high school to Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) remains limited. Recent national studies indicate that rural learners frequently enter higher education academically underprepared due to persistent disparities in secondary schooling, including shortages of qualified teachers, limited instructional materials, and minimal exposure to digital learning environments (Masaiti et al., 2020; Ministry of Education, 2023; Agumba et al., 2023). The Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2024) further reports that many first-year students from rural schools exhibit weaknesses in academic writing, independent learning, and digital literacy, competencies that are central to effective participation in university learning.

The transition from structured, teacher-directed rural secondary schools to the autonomous and technology-mediated learning culture of PHEIs presents significant academic challenges. Empirical studies from Zambia and comparable Sub-Saharan African contexts show that rural-background students often struggle to adapt to learner-centered pedagogies, increased academic workloads, and continuous assessment systems during their initial year of study (Mkandawire, 2020; Mboyonga, 2025; UNESCO, 2022). In Zambia, these challenges are intensified within PHEIs, where e-learning platforms, online assessments, and self-directed study are integral to instructional delivery (Chanda & Musonda, 2023). Yet, few studies have examined how such transition-related challenges are experienced specifically within the private higher education sector, whose academic support structures and pedagogical practices differ markedly from those of public universities (HEA, 2021).

The absence of Zambia-focused empirical research on rural students' academic transitions into PHEIs constrains the development of evidence-based learning support systems and responsive pedagogical interventions. This gap persists despite strong national and regional policy commitments to equitable and inclusive higher education articulated in Zambia's Vision 2030, the Eighth National Development Plan (2022-2026), and the African Union's Agenda 2063, all of which emphasize improved learning outcomes and reduced rural-urban educational inequalities (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2022; African Union, 2022). Without a nuanced understanding of how rural students navigate the shift from high school to private higher education, disparities in academic adjustment, engagement, and progression are likely to continue.

Therefore, there is a critical need to explore how rural students in Zambia experience and negotiate the academic transition from high school to PHEIs. Generating such context-specific evidence is essential for informing targeted academic support strategies and strengthening the role of private higher education in promoting equitable student success and national human capital development.

Purpose of the Study
This study explored how students from rural backgrounds in Zambia experienced the academic transition from high school to Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs), with particular attention to their academic preparedness, adjustment to university learning practices, and access to institutional academic support.

Objectives
1. To explore rural students' academic transition from high school to private higher education institutions.
2. To propose a support framework for rural students' effective learning in Private Higher Education Institutions using Chickering's Seven Vectors of Student Development Theory.

Theoretical Underpinning
This study is informed by student development theories that explain how learners grow intellectually, emotionally, and socially within higher education. It integrates Chickering and Reisser's (1993) Psychosocial Student Development Theory and Perry's (1970) Cognitive-Structural Model to examine the academic and social experiences of rural students in Zambia's Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs). Together, these theories provide a holistic framework for understanding how students adapt to new academic environments, construct meaning, and negotiate identity within socially and academically complex urban-based institutions.

The psychosocial perspective emphasizes students' development across key domains such as competence, emotional regulation, autonomy, interpersonal relationships, identity, and purpose. These dimensions are particularly salient for rural students who often face academic underpreparedness, cultural transition, and challenges to belonging when entering PHEIs. Complementing this, Perry's cognitive-structural model (1970), focuses on students' intellectual and ethical development, explaining how learners progress from dualistic thinking toward more contextual and reflective ways of knowing as they encounter diverse perspectives and pedagogical practices.

Rather than treating these theories as separate, the study adopts an integrative theoretical model that conceptualizes student development as a reciprocal process. Psychosocial well-being, such as emotional resilience and a sense of belonging, enables cognitive engagement and reflective judgment, while cognitive maturity reinforces psychosocial stability through enhanced self-awareness and purposeful decision-making. This interaction is central to understanding rural students' transition and adjustment, as their ability to engage critically with academic content is closely linked to their emotional and social integration within the institution.
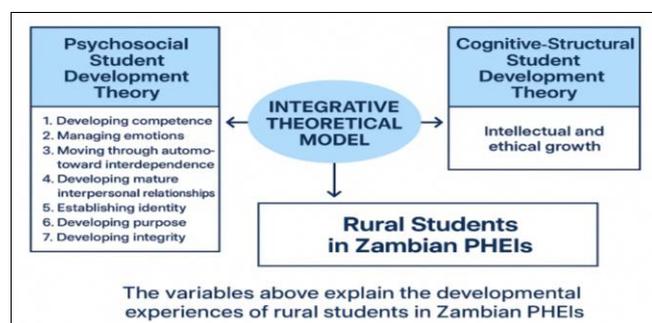
Source: Adapted from Chickering and Reisser's (1993) Psychological Student Development Theory and Perry's (1970) Cognitive-Structural

Fig 1: Integrative theoretical model

Figure 1 shows the integrative theoretical framework. The integrated framework guided the study's design, data collection, and analysis. Data generation tools focused on

constructs at the intersection of psychosocial and cognitive development, including emotional adjustment, interpersonal relationships, identity negotiation, and meaning-making in learning. Data analysis combined deductive coding informed by Chickering's developmental vectors and Perry's stages of intellectual development, with inductive themes emerging from participants' narratives. This theoretically grounded approach enabled the interpretation of how personal, institutional, and contextual factors interact to shape rural students' academic adaptation and developmental trajectories within Zambian PHEIs.

Literature review
The reviewed literature indicates that rural students encounter academic and social challenges when transitioning to private higher education institutions. It encompassed foundational theoretical works as well as relevant studies on rural students' experiences, academic adjustment, and support mechanisms in higher education.

Rural Students' Transition to Higher Education
The transition into higher education represents a critical developmental period characterized by significant cognitive, social, and emotional adjustment. For students from rural backgrounds, this transition is often intensified by longstanding structural inequalities in schooling, limited academic resources, and restricted exposure to independent learning practices. In Zambia and similar African contexts, rural-origin students entering Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) frequently encounter a misalignment between their prior educational experiences and the academic expectations of tertiary study (Mwanza, 2021; Mwewa & Siachiwena, 2019). Despite growing participation of rural students in PHEIs, their transition experiences remain under-researched, particularly within private institutional contexts.

Dominant scholarship largely frames rural students' transition through a deficit lens, emphasizing academic under-preparedness, weak foundational skills, and heightened vulnerability. Studies across Southern Africa consistently report challenges related to learner-centered pedagogies, limited mentorship, and inadequate orientation programmes (Sennett *et al*., 2003; Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013; Shipena, 2018). Similar patterns are evident globally, with research from the United States and Australia linking rural background to lower readiness for higher education, social isolation, and increased attrition risks (Perna & Titus, 2005; Buikstra *et al*., 2010). Collectively, this literature constructs rural students as structurally disadvantaged and academically fragile during transition.

Contradictory Evidence and Rural Student Agency
In contrast to dominant deficit narratives, a growing body of research highlights rural students' agency, resilience, and adaptive capacity. Zambian studies reveal that some rural students demonstrate strong discipline, intrinsic motivation, and persistence, challenging assumptions that rural origin uniformly predicts poor academic outcomes (Mbozi, 2018). Comparable findings from Namibia and Uganda suggest that rural students' strong work ethic, collectivist learning habits, and familiarity with constrained environments contribute positively to academic adjustment (Haipinge, 2017; Mukamana, 2020).

Comparative Southern African evidence further complicates deficit-based interpretations. While learner-centered pedagogies pose difficulties for some rural students, others adapt rapidly due to prior exposure to multi-grade or improvisational teaching approaches common in rural schools (Tlale, 2015). In South Africa, Wilson-Strydom (2011) demonstrates that rural students who engage in community-based preparation programmes often enter university with heightened academic resilience and stronger social support networks than their urban peers. Similarly, Shikalepo (2020) reports that rural students in Namibia frequently exhibit strong collaborative learning behaviors, contesting assumptions that they lack the academic habits required for university success.

Globally, Byun *et al*. (2012) challenge the association between rurality and underachievement by showing that rural students in the United States often outperform urban peers in self-regulation and persistence when institutional support is equitable. Australian studies also report higher levels of academic satisfaction and commitment among rural students, underscoring the role of contextual and institutional factors rather than background alone (James & McInnis, 2004; Fraser *et al*., 2019).

Psychosocial Adjustment and Social Integration
Psychosocial adjustment constitutes a central dimension of transition to higher education. Much of the literature frames rural students' experiences as marked by social displacement, cultural dissonance, and emotional strain (Briggs *et al*., 2012; Yorke & Longden, 2008). African studies similarly report feelings of alienation and identity disruption among rural students navigating urban and institutional cultures that differ markedly from their home environments (Chanda & Mumba, 2022).

However, counter-evidence suggests that psychosocial outcomes are neither uniform nor inevitable. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that rural students may integrate more effectively into campus life due to interpersonal skills developed within close-knit communities. Zambian research by Zulu (2019) demonstrates that rural students can experience increased confidence and strengthened academic identity when supported by inclusive institutional environments. Canadian studies further indicate lower attrition among rural students when targeted psychosocial and academic support programmes are implemented (Sharpe & Coates, 2015). These findings suggest that psychosocial adjustment is highly contingent on institutional practices rather than rural origin per se.

Technology, Resources, and Adaptive Practices
Digital exclusion and limited access to learning technologies are frequently cited as barriers for rural students. Studies from Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria highlight ICT deficits, linguistic challenges, and uneven digital literacy among rural learners (Timmis, 2020; Adom & Mensah, 2022; Olatunde & Adebayo, 2018). Yet, opposing evidence demonstrates that rural students often adopt adaptive strategies to mitigate these constraints. Research from Kenya and Ghana shows rural learners effectively utilizing mobile technologies, community ICT hubs, and donor-funded laboratories to support learning (Mugo, 2019; Owusu-Boampong, 2020). Such findings challenge deficit assumptions by foregrounding rural students' technological agency and resourcefulness.

Theoretical Perspectives on Transition and Development
Developmental frameworks such as Chickering's Seven Vectors of Student Development and Perry's Cognitive-Structural Theory conceptualize transition as a progressive journey of identity formation, competence development, and meaning-making (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Perry, 1970). While influential, these models have limited empirical application within African rural contexts and are increasingly critiqued for their Western-individualistic assumptions.

Alternative theoretical perspectives challenge linear and universal interpretations of development. Baxter Magolda (2001) argues that developmental trajectories are non-sequential, allowing students to demonstrate advanced identity development despite academic gaps. Sociocultural scholars further contend that collectivist orientations prevalent among rural African students may produce developmental patterns that diverge from dominant Western models. This critique underscores the need for contextually grounded frameworks that integrate both structural conditions and student agency.

Resilience, Equity, and Structural Responsibility
Although resilience is frequently highlighted in rural student literature, some scholars caution against its uncritical application. Schultz (2004) and Morton *et al*. (2014) demonstrate improved academic adjustment when institutions recognize students' existing knowledge systems. Conversely, Manase (2016) warns that overemphasis on resilience risks obscuring structural inequalities and shifting responsibility for poor outcomes onto students. In Zambia, while mentorship programmes have been shown to enhance rural students' confidence (Mwanza, 2021), other evidence suggests that such initiatives may disproportionately benefit students who already possess higher levels of confidence, often from urban backgrounds (Kunda, 2018).

Synthesis and Research Gaps
Overall, the literature reveals two competing narratives. Dominant research emphasizes academic under-preparedness, psychosocial strain, and structural disadvantage, while opposing evidence highlights resilience, adaptability, and, in some cases, superior academic outcomes among rural students. These contradictions demonstrate that rural students are not a homogeneous group and that deficit-based frameworks inadequately capture the complexity of their transition experiences.

Notably, there remains limited research examining rural students' transitions within Zambian PHEIs through an integrated developmental and strengths-based lens. There is also scant application of theories such as Chickering's Seven Vectors in African rural contexts. Addressing these gaps requires context-sensitive analyses that move beyond deficit assumptions and recognize both structural constraints and rural students' diverse developmental trajectories during transition to higher education.

Methodology
This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived academic experiences of rural-origin students in Zambia's private higher education institutions (PHEIs). Guided by an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm and a relativist ontology, the research employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyze

data collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document reviews. Sixteen purposively selected participants, including twelve rural students and four institutional key informants from two PHEIs, participated. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, reflexivity, member checking, and audit trails.

Study Findings
The study interpreted rural students' transition to urban private universities using cognitive-structural theory and Chickering's Seven Vectors to examine identity, competence, relationships, and meaning-making during academic and personal development experiences. Major findings are presented below.

Carrying Rural Educational Gaps into University Life
This study's findings reveal a dominant and recurring theme of enduring educational inequities rooted in the rural backgrounds of the participants. This theme captures the shared challenges rural students faced in their formative years, which continued to affect their academic and social experiences as they transitioned into private universities.
Participants in the study came from different rural regions, yet they reported remarkably similar high school experiences marked by limited exposure to technology, inadequate infrastructure, and socioeconomic hardships. For instance, *Tewete* reflected:

> Growing up in the village has been difficult for me… in terms of school. We were not exposed to technology… as those in urban areas. My hometown is in the old-fashioned phase compared to the university environment!

This lack of technological exposure created a stark contrast for students upon arrival at university, where digital tools are central to academic success. *Funyayo* echoed this disparity when she recounted:

> Schools were very far away from my place! …where I would walk for more than 2 hours. …And the education system itself was very poor! I literally had no experience with technology before I came to this university.

Beyond distance and technology, participants also cited poor infrastructure and under-resourced teaching staff in their high schools. *Pelekelo's* words were especially telling:

> Growing up in the village was difficult because things were not okay. For instance, at a school I was in in grade 9, we had no computers! …but we were expected to write computer studies final examinations in grade 9.

The participant's account highlights the educational challenges and resource deprivation experienced in rural schools. The absence of essential learning resources, such as computers, despite the inclusion of computer studies as an examinable subject, underscores the systemic inequities within Zambia's education system. This statement reveals the mismatch between curriculum expectations and available learning facilities in rural contexts. Consequently, the student's remark, *"we had no computers… but we were*

expected to write computer studies final examinations," reflects feelings of frustration, exclusion, and disadvantage, as rural learners are compelled to compete under unequal conditions with peers from better-resourced schools.
Milika similarly realized the depth of the educational gap only upon entering university:

> I grew up with my siblings! …and I attended government schools. …I had no idea how regressive I was… in terms of technology… before I arrived at this university!

The participant's reflection illustrates a realization of prior technological underexposure resulting from attending government schools in a rural setting. The phrase *"I had no idea how regressive I was… in terms of technology…"* suggests a moment of self-discovery and comparative awareness that emerged only after exposure to the technologically advanced environment of a private university. This awareness points to the digital divide that separates rural and urban learners and how it shapes students' academic self-perceptions. The statement also conveys the participant's process of identity reconstruction and adaptation as they navigate new learning environments and technological expectations in higher education.
Geographical isolation added another layer of difficulty. Many students spoke of the long distances traveled to attend school, and the impact of seasonal inaccessibility:
Vikumbutso shared,

> …during the rainy season… it was difficult to cross the bridge! …we did not manage to go to school for some days because of the rain.

In addition to logistical and academic barriers, the financial struggles that characterized many rural students' upbringing significantly affected their education pathways. *Enelesi* became emotional while recalling:

> …it was difficult in terms of financial support for my mum to provide for me! Usually, my aunt stepped in to provide for my high school.

These verbatim accounts offer rich, compelling narratives that strongly align with the study's title. They underline how persistent inequalities, technological, infrastructural, and financial, shape the learning experiences of rural students, and continue to affect their ability to adapt and succeed in private higher education institutions in Zambia.
This thematic interpretation not only brings coherence to the diverse challenges cited by participants but also foregrounds the need for targeted policy interventions and institutional support systems that bridge the rural-urban educational divide.

Transitioning Challenges from Rural High Schools to Urban University Life
This study established that rural students transitioning to urban private universities in Zambia experience significant academic and social challenges due to drastic environmental and cultural changes between their rural upbringing and the urban university setting.
The study reveals that for many participants, attending university was their first time living in a major city like

Lusaka, away from home and family. This geographical and emotional relocation brought with it deep uncertainties and anxieties. Participants were often unsure of what to expect in university, both academically and socially. The lack of prior exposure to city life and institutional autonomy proved disorienting.

Pelekelo's statement exemplifies this confusion and the longing for structured support:

> ...when I was in high school, a lot of things were done differently! The university environment is somewhat different! …in that here, we do not have parents to guide us! But in high school, we had teachers to supervise us, unlike here, where not even lecturers or tutors can tell you what to do!

This sentiment underscores the abrupt shift from the highly supervised rural high school environment to the autonomous university setting, where students are expected to take responsibility for their own learning and decisions without external prodding. The participant's narrative reveals a shift from dependency to autonomy in their educational journey. In high school, learning was characterized by close supervision, guidance, and external regulation from teachers and parents. However, the university environment demands self-direction, independence, and personal responsibility for learning. The statement "we do not have parents to guide us… not even lecturers or tutors can tell you what to do" underscores the student's struggle to adjust to the less structured and more self-managed learning culture typical of higher education.

Moreover, the academic pressure at the university level left many participants feeling unprepared. *Tewete* described the steep learning curve:

> Transitioning into this university was indeed difficult for me. The university environment and the high school environment… are totally different. The mode of learning at university …and the way we used to learn in high school is different. …It is more like everything we were covering in 3 years; here we cover it in 6 months …and are expected to write exams.

Such reflections point to a gap between the curriculum and instructional methods in rural high schools and those in urban universities. The acceleration and intensity of university education not only shocked the participants but also placed them at a disadvantage compared to their urban peers, who may have had better academic preparation. This experience highlights the gap between prior academic preparation and university expectations, particularly for students from rural or government schools who may not have been adequately exposed to independent learning methods. The participant's struggle signifies a form of academic culture shock, reflecting difficulties in adapting to new pedagogical approaches, assessment standards, and workload intensity.

Similarly, another participant lamented the challenges they faced in accessing reading materials in the library. *Mukuka* had this to say:

> When I came to this university, I struggled a lot. I grew up in the village, so I am not used to these big buildings and digital facilities. Sometimes I find it

difficult to access digital library books because I don't know where things are. Even using the library computers is hard for me. Other students move fast because they already know these things, but for me, everything is new. I feel shy to ask for help, and I feel left behind.

This experience signifies that the participant faced difficulties adjusting to the university environment because they grew up in a rural setting with limited exposure to modern facilities. They feel lost, overwhelmed, and unfamiliar with things like campus buildings, library systems, and technology. The participant also feels embarrassed or shy to ask for help, which makes it even harder. Overall, the complaint shows that the student is struggling with environmental, technological, and social adjustment due to their background.

Beyond academics, the transition also triggered cultural strain. Students felt lonely and alienated in a new environment where social norms, language, and even fashion felt unfamiliar. *Milika's* story powerfully conveys this distress:

> When I arrived at this university…, I felt neglected… isolated… because it was difficult to form new friends. The people I found… had a different dress code…, language… and way of doing things.

Such testimonies highlight the profound social disconnect and culture shock experienced by rural students. The unfamiliarity of the urban culture contributed to a sense of exclusion and emotional withdrawal, deepening their challenges in adjusting to university life. The participant's reflection illustrates the social adjustment difficulties experienced upon transitioning into the university environment. Feelings of being *'neglected'* and *'isolated'* point to a sense of alienation and exclusion, often resulting from differences in socio-cultural norms, language use, and lifestyle practices between rural students and their urban peers. The mention of a '*different dress code, language, and way of doing things'* highlights the cultural gap and identity tension that rural-background students encounter in adapting to the social environment of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs).

This experience signifies not only a lack of social belonging but also the emotional challenges tied to navigating unfamiliar cultural expectations and peer dynamics. It reflects the broader issue of cultural incongruence that may hinder rural students' integration and participation in campus life.

These findings are central to this study as they demonstrate how rural background and limited exposure to urban life influence students' learning experiences. The narratives of *Pelekelo*, *Tewete,* and *Milika* illustrate the complex intersection of academic under-preparedness, lack of guidance, and emotional dislocation, which collectively affect how rural students engage with and adapt to university education. The transition is not merely geographical; it is deeply psychological, social, and academic, demanding a multifaceted support system to help students thrive.

Facing a New Academic World: Challenges for Rural Students

This study revealed that rural students experience academic challenges when transitioning from rural high schools to urban private universities in Zambia. These challenges stem from a significant shift in institutional culture, academic expectations, and a lack of support systems.

The study established that rural students experienced profound academic transitions as they moved from the structured and supportive environment of rural high schools to the more independent and impersonal atmosphere of urban private universities in Zambia. This shift, described as frightening, tough, and strange, also revealed significant challenges in self-management, time discipline, and personal responsibility. In rural schools, learning routines were closely supervised by teachers, but in university settings, students were expected to manage their own study schedules, meet deadlines autonomously, and navigate coursework and assessments with minimal guidance. For many, this sudden demand for independence intensified their adjustment difficulties, as they struggled to organize their work, plan effectively, and take full responsibility for their academic progress. For example, Enelesi shared:

> …here! …I have to take everything seriously, and lecturers and tutors do not offer support and attention to us the way teachers in high school did. Here we do everything on our own.

This verbatim illustrates the abrupt change in pedagogical approaches. In high school, students were closely guided, but in university, they are expected to be self-directed learners, often without emotional or academic support. The participant's account reveals a strong sense of academic self-reliance necessitated by the university environment. The expression 'lecturers and tutors do not offer support and attention to us the way teachers in high school did' highlights the student's perception of limited academic guidance and mentorship compared to the more supportive and structured secondary school context. The statement 'here we do everything on our own' points to the need for greater self-management, time discipline, and personal responsibility in navigating coursework and assessments.

This experience signifies the student's confrontation with the autonomous nature of higher education, where success depends on internal motivation and independent learning skills. It also indicates possible adjustment challenges, especially for rural students who may be unfamiliar with self-directed learning approaches.

In view of the above experience, one university document reviewed clearly stated that, *'Students are expected to manage their own learning schedules, me*et al*l assessment deadlines independently, and seek academic assistance proactively when required'* (Academic Regulation and Policies, 2023, p. 14).

This excerpt reflects the institutional emphasis on self-directed learning and academic autonomy. The language positions independence as a normative expectation rather than a developmental process. For rural-origin students, transitioning from highly teacher-directed secondary schooling environments, such expectations may represent a significant shift in learning culture. The document does not explicitly acknowledge differing educational scaffolding for students who may require additional academic guidance.

Furthermore, some participants expressed dissatisfaction with the manner in which certain lecturers administered continuous assessments through digital platforms, as these methods posed significant challenges for them. For instance, *Funyayo* strongly lamented that:

> I usually have problems with the online quizzes and tests that some lecturers give us. I grew up in the village, and we never used computers like this. Sometimes the system just confuses me. I don't even know where to click. When the lecturer says, 'Write the quiz on the portal,' my heart starts beating fast because I am not used to it…. Even when I try, the internet is always cutting out. Before I finish answering, the page goes off or freezes. Sometimes the quiz closes before I submit. I feel very stressed because it looks like I am failing, not because I don't know the work, but because I don't understand the online system…. I want to do well, but these online things are too hard for me. I am still learning, but the university is too fast. I wish they could also give us paper quizzes or teach us slowly how to use these online platforms.

The participant's narrative reflects a significant gap in digital literacy stemming from their rural schooling background. Their unfamiliarity with computers and online learning platforms creates anxiety whenever online assessments are announced. The student experiences difficulty navigating the university's virtual learning environment, leading to confusion and a lack of confidence. Additionally, unstable internet connectivity further disrupts their ability to complete quizzes and tests on time. These technical barriers cause the student to feel disadvantaged, as their performance does not reflect their academic ability but rather their struggle with the digital tools required for assessment. The student expresses a desire for more support, including alternative assessment methods such as paper-based quizzes and gradual training on how to use online platforms.

Overall, the interpretation highlights how digital exclusion and insufficient support systems within private urban universities negatively affect the academic adjustment of rural students.

Another participant, *Zindaba,* expressed similar sentiments:

> My experience transitioning from high school into university was problematic because the environment I was used to when it came to high school was totally different from the university environment. So, it was difficult for me to adapt to the new changes. The university environment is way more developed compared to our high school environment.

This testimony reveals that the level of infrastructural and technological advancement in urban private universities overwhelmed students from rural backgrounds, creating emotional strain and difficulty in adaptation. *Enelesi's* experience highlights academic independence as a shock factor. The withdrawal of familiar teacher-student support systems left her feeling alone and overburdened by new expectations. *Zindaba's* reflection underscores the cultural and structural gap between rural and urban educational institutions. His use of phrases like *"problematic"* and

"*totally different*" shows a dissonance between past experiences and current realities.

These findings closely align with the study's central focus on understanding the learning experiences of rural-background students in private higher education institutions. The accounts of *Enelesi* and *Zindaba* reveal how transitional challenges shape their academic journeys, offering valuable insight into the ways rural upbringing affects students' adjustment and performance in urban private universities. The findings also highlight the importance of examining both the educational and psychosocial aspects of rural students' experiences in higher education.

Expectations vs. Reality in the Transition to University Life

This study revealed a significant gap between rural students' expectations of university life and the actual realities they encountered upon entering private higher education institutions in Zambia. The shift from familiar rural high school settings to the complex, self-directed environment of urban universities often brought about disorientation, surprise, and adaptive challenges. The expectations-reality dichotomy emerged as a central pattern, affecting students both academically and socially.

Rural students anticipated a continuity of support structures similar to those found in high school, only to discover that the university system requires more independent learning and self-direction. This abrupt shift in learning methodology was disorienting, particularly for students accustomed to more guided instruction.

Vikumbutso lamented:

> The methodology used by teachers in high school is very different in that… here, most of the things should be done by the students. This is somehow difficult for people like me.

Vikumbutso's reflection illustrates the struggle with academic independence. The transition from teacher-led instruction to student-led learning demanded a steep learning curve, reflecting a broader issue of preparedness among rural students entering urban universities.

Social and Cultural Disorientation

Upon arriving at university, students were met with unfamiliar urban social norms, including fashion, language, and general lifestyle differences. These cultural contrasts heightened feelings of alienation and social difficulty, particularly in forming new peer relationships.

Mukuka alluded:

> It was difficult to blend with the new environment, in that the dress code of students was a bit of a shock to me… looking at the environment I grew up in and what I found at the university. Even making friends here was difficult in the early days, in that the people I found here, in terms of dress code and language accent they were way advanced.

Mukuka's testimony highlights the sociocultural shock experienced by rural students. The drastic contrast in norms and behaviors between rural home environments and urban university settings created an initial barrier to social integration.

The participant's account reflects the challenges of adjusting to a new and unfamiliar university environment. The cultural contrast between their rural background and the urban university setting created feelings of discomfort and exclusion. Differences in appearance, language, and social behavior contributed to a sense of being out of place, which made it difficult to form friendships and feel accepted. This experience illustrates how cultural disparities can hinder both social and academic adjustment, as feelings of isolation and self-consciousness may affect confidence, participation, and overall engagement in learning activities.

Emerging Autonomy and Personal Growth

While participants reported difficulty adjusting, there were also positive growth experiences recorded. Exposure to the university environment fostered new life skills, such as decision-making and responsibility, which were previously managed by family structures back home.

Funyayo reflected:

> Enrolling in this university has taught me about responsibility. For instance, back home, my parents used to think on my behalf, but in this environment… I am alone… I have to know what is right for me and what is not.

Funyayo's perspective demonstrates the transformative potential of the university environment. Although initially challenging, the transition also catalyzed maturity and self-reliance, a key indicator of successful adaptation.

The participant's reflection illustrates a growing sense of personal responsibility and independence developed through university life. The transition from a family-supported environment to one that requires self-management signifies an important stage of maturity. This experience demonstrates the shift from dependence on parental guidance to independent decision-making, where the student learns to take ownership of choices and actions. It highlights the development of autonomy and self-discipline, which are essential for effective learning and personal growth in higher education.

The expectations vs. reality theme captures how learning extends beyond the academic domain into the emotional, cultural, and developmental aspects of student life. The findings suggest that while rural students may face significant barriers in transitioning to urban university settings, they also develop resilience and self-efficacy through exposure to new challenges.

The study uncovered that rural students encounter a profound shift when transitioning to university life, characterized by unmet expectations, cultural dissonance, and initially overwhelming independence. However, over time, some students like Funyayo leverage these challenges to foster personal growth. These findings underscore the need for targeted transitional support programs to bridge the gap between rural schooling and urban tertiary education environments.

Social Isolation from High School Peers

The study found that rural students experienced social disconnection and a deterioration of relationships with high school peers following their transition to private higher education institutions. This social isolation was marked by a noticeable shift in communication, emotional distance, and a

perceived change in identity or social status. For instance, *Mukuka* passionately expressed this disconnection:

> My interaction with my peers back home is different! One thing I have come to discover is that mostly, the high school friends I had are no longer my friends, and the interactions are not the same… You find that just the way of doing things has changed.

This statement reveals not only a breakdown in communication but also an emotional rift, where shared norms and values no longer align due to the university experience. Mukuka's use of "the way of doing things has changed" underscores the evolving identity that often follows rural-to-urban transition.

Similarly, *Pelekelo* remarked:

> High school friends feel uncomfortable having a conversation with me the same way we had before I entered university.

This quote suggests a perception of social disparity that the university experience has introduced a status change or sense of difference, creating discomfort among former peers. The relational discomfort illustrates the emerging disconnect between the student's new identity and their past social environment.

Tewete added a different dimension, revealing a sense of being emotionally abandoned:

> Well… my interaction with my peers back home has changed in that they feel as if I am not available.

This reflects a two-sided isolation, while the student may not feel distant, peers may assume otherwise due to physical relocation, perceived academic superiority, or misinterpreted lifestyle changes.

However, not all participants viewed their social status conclusively. *Enelesi* offered a nuanced perspective:

> …on the aspect of my peers back home. I feel something has changed because they feel I am at a different level and thus, they avoid me! …but I still communicate with one friend from high school.

Here, the participant recognizes a subtle social shift attributed to perceived status elevation. However, unlike other participants, Enelesi maintains at least one meaningful connection, suggesting that partial social continuity is still possible, though rare.

These findings highlight how rural students' transitions to private higher education in Zambia profoundly impact their social landscapes, especially the erosion of previously close peer relationships. As students adopt new roles, academic identities, and cultural norms associated with university life, they often find themselves socially alienated from former circles, reinforcing feelings of loneliness and dislocation.

The theme of social isolation is thus tightly interwoven with the central concern of the study: exploring learning experiences of rural students. It reveals that learning in higher education is not just academic, it is deeply social and emotional. The loss of familiar peer support systems can create psychological burdens that affect the overall university adjustment and learning experience.

Thematic analysis reveals "*Social Isolation from High School Peers*" as a dominant theme. It captures the emotional disconnection, identity shift, and status-based alienation experienced by rural students transitioning to urban private university environments. This isolation is both a symptom and consequence of broader cultural and environmental adjustments, highlighting the need for institutional support mechanisms that recognize and respond to the unique social challenges rural students face in higher education.

Motivations for University Enrollment Among Rural Students

This theme captures the diverse yet interconnected reasons rural students enrolled in private universities in Zambia, ranging from social influences to perceived quality and legacy of the institution.

Rural students enrolled in university without a clear personal reason, mainly influenced by friends or peers from high school who were also enrolling.

Tewete added that:

> Well! …for me, I chose this university because I heard my high school friends had been enrolled at this university.

This suggests a decision-making process that is externally influenced, rather than internally driven. For such students, the desire to maintain social connections or not be left behind socially plays a key role. It reflects a limited career-guidance infrastructure in rural areas and highlights the importance of peer influence in educational transitions.

Others enrolled due to the reputation of the university or because of a familial connection to the institution.

Madalitso elaborated that:

> Umm…I chose this university because it is known to be the first private university in Zambia, and because most of my siblings attended this university.

This reflects decisions based on perceived prestige and trust, often passed down through family experience. It also demonstrates how family influence, particularly siblings, shapes educational aspirations for rural students.

Some participants were attracted by the academic credibility or educational standards at the university.

Funyayo added that:

> Basically, …I got attracted to this university considering that it had what I needed and that even the quality of education was commendable…

This shows a more intentional and informed decision. These students viewed the university as offering academic value and alignment with their personal goals. It indicates a developing sense of agency among rural students in selecting institutions based on merit.

Others were motivated by the specific programs or fields of study offered.

Milika mentioned that:

> I chose this university because I wanted to do a health-related program. Moreover, our neighbor's daughter was at this university.

This highlights a goal-oriented perspective where students make choices aligned with career aspirations. The mention of the neighbor's daughter also shows how community-level networks provide informal but impactful guidance in the absence of structured career counseling.

This study seeks to understand the broader educational journey of rural students. These findings connect directly to the study by offering insight into how and why rural students first engage with these institutions. Motivation for enrollment is a foundational component of the broader learning experience. Understanding what draws students into these institutions, whether social pressure, family legacy, perceived quality, or specific programs, reveals early expectations and potential satisfaction or mismatch later on.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings around the emergent themes are discussed in the sections below.

Academic Unpreparedness and Learning Transition Shock

The findings reveal that rural students entering urban Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Zambia experience significant academic unpreparedness, manifesting as difficulty adapting to self-directed learning, critical inquiry, and independent academic management. While some studies contest the assumption of rural academic deficit by demonstrating that effective secondary-school mentorship and learner-centred pedagogy facilitate successful transition (Nkomo & Moyo, 2018; Akinsola & Oladejo, 2019), the present findings indicate that such enabling conditions are largely absent in Zambian rural schooling contexts. Consequently, rural students encountered what can be described as "learning transition shock," consistent with Mulenga and Kabombwe (2019) and Spaull's (2013) observations regarding persistent rural–urban inequalities in educational quality.

These experiences align with global literature on academic mismatch, which shows that students from under-resourced schooling backgrounds often struggle to meet university expectations due to structural disadvantage rather than individual incapacity (Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Unlike earlier Zambian studies focusing predominantly on public universities (Musonda & Kasonde, 2021), this study extends the discourse to private institutions, demonstrating that flexible admission policies do not compensate for insufficient academic scaffolding. Theoretically, the findings resonate with Chickering's vector of Developing Competence, as students struggled with academic writing, critical thinking, and independent research, reflecting delayed intellectual competence development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Digital Assessment Challenges and Academic Preparedness

A notable finding of this study is the difficulty rural students experienced with digital assessment platforms. This contrasts with West African literature that reports increasing digital readiness among university students due to improved ICT infrastructure and orientation programs (Agyeman, 2019; Adomi & Esew, 2016). In the Zambian PHEI context, however, limited prior exposure to computers, unfamiliarity with virtual learning environments, and unstable internet access heightened anxiety and impeded academic performance.

While Njovu (2020) argues that rural learners demonstrate adaptive digital capacity through informal exposure to mobile technologies, the current findings suggest that such adaptability does not automatically translate into competence within formal digital assessment systems. Instead, digital learning environments became sites of exclusion, reinforcing structural inequities. These findings challenge deficit-based interpretations of rural students' digital skills and instead support arguments that institutional support and pedagogical integration are critical to digital inclusion (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014).

Expectations versus Realities in the Rural-Urban Academic Transition

The study identified a pronounced gap between rural students' expectations of university life and the realities encountered upon entry into PHEIs. Students anticipated continuity in structured teaching, close lecturer supervision, and guided learning, reflective of their secondary school experiences (Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019). Instead, they encountered autonomous learning environments characterized by minimal academic guidance.

This mismatch aligns with international findings that first-generation and underprepared students experience academic disorientation when exposed to unstructured learning environments (Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In African contexts, similar patterns have been documented in Nigeria (Ajayi *et al*., 2018) and South Africa (Bozalek & Leibowitz, 2012). However, unlike institutions in Uganda and Kenya that mitigate this transition through structured mentorship and induction programs (Mugume & Mugarura, 2020; Wambugu *et al*., 2022), Zambian PHEIs largely lacked intentional transitional support. Within Chickering's framework, this impeded progression along the vector of Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence, as autonomy was experienced as premature and overwhelming rather than developmental.

Sociocultural Transition and Student Adaptation

Beyond academic challenges, rural students experienced profound sociocultural dislocation in urban university settings. Feelings of isolation, cultural inferiority, and exclusion emerged due to differences in language use, dress, and social norms. These findings mirror studies from Ghana (Teye, 2019), South Africa (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014), and Australia (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009), which document rural students' struggles with cultural mismatch in urban higher education environments.

Within the Zambian context, prior research has largely emphasized economic and academic disparities (Chishimba & Makasa, 2017; Musonda, 2020). This study extends the literature by foregrounding sociocultural adaptation as a central determinant of academic engagement and emotional well-being. These challenges align closely with Chickering's vectors of Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships and Establishing Identity. The absence of culturally inclusive institutional practices limited opportunities for belonging and identity affirmation, reinforcing Bourdieu's (1986) argument that educational institutions often privilege dominant cultural capital.

Emerging Autonomy and Personal Growth
Despite initial challenges, the findings reveal that rural students gradually developed autonomy, resilience, and self-regulation. Over time, academic and social demands fostered independent learning strategies, decision-making capacity, and emotional maturity. This progression reflects movement along Chickering's vectors of Developing Competence and Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence.

This finding contrasts with deficit-oriented African scholarship that portrays rural students primarily as academically vulnerable (Letseka & Breier, 2008; Okeke, 2020). Instead, it aligns with studies suggesting that when students navigate adversity, they often develop strong adaptive and coping capacities (Wangenge-Ouma, 2020). However, unlike Western contexts where autonomy is scaffolded through structured support systems (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), rural Zambian students achieved autonomy largely through necessity rather than institutional design. This highlights both their resilience and the inequities embedded in private higher education structures.

Theoretical Implications
The findings affirm the analytical usefulness of Chickering's Seven Vectors while exposing its contextual limitations. The model presumes the presence of institutional support systems that facilitate developmental progression (Komives & Woodard Jr., 2003). In resource-constrained Zambian PHEIs, these conditions are often absent, delaying or distorting movement through key developmental vectors. Thus, the study advances the contextualization of Chickering's theory within Sub-Saharan Africa, demonstrating that student development is contingent upon institutional responsiveness to structural and sociocultural realities.

A Proposed Framework
The proposed framework integrates Chickering and Reisser's Seven Vectors with the identified academic, social, and technological support needs of rural students in Zambia's private higher education institutions. Grounded in equity and context-specific evidence, it aligns targeted institutional interventions with developmental vectors to promote holistic student development outcomes.

Fig 1: Framework for the support mechanism of rural students in private universities

Having presented the visual framework, it is essential to unpack the logic behind each of its components. The explanations below elaborate on how the study's findings are mapped onto specific support mechanisms and Chickering's vectors, and how these relationships shape the developmental outcomes and policy implications.

This framework applies Chickering and Reisser's Seven Vectors to address the multidimensional challenges faced by rural students in Zambia's private higher education institutions, while acknowledging variation in rural educational experiences reported in existing literature.

Consistent with this study, gaps in academic writing, research skills, ICT competence, and independent learning were evident among many rural students. However, evidence from Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda shows that rural academic preparedness varies by school quality, teacher capacity, and contextual support (Oviawe, 2018; Nakabugo et al., 2019; Mwaura & Wanjohi, 2020). Vector One, therefore, supports targeted bridging programs to systematically strengthen intellectual, practical, and interpersonal competence.

Although this study found that rural-urban cultural transitions produced anxiety and alienation, other African studies highlight rural students' resilience and social adaptability when peer networks and social capital are available (Adebayo & Ogunleye, 2020; Mphahlele & Mabunda, 2019; Njoroge, 2021). Vector Two addresses these emotional challenges through culturally responsive orientation, mentoring, and counselling that strengthen emotional regulation and coping.

Difficulties with self-directed learning identified in this study contrast with evidence from South Africa, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe showing that structured early support enables rural students to develop autonomy effectively (Akinsola & Oladejo, 2019; Chikasha et al., 2020; Nkomo & Moyo, 2018). Vector Three emphasizes guided autonomy, mentoring, and scaffolded learning, while also highlighting how inadequate financial aid and accommodation in Zambia restrict students' progression toward interdependence (HEA, 2013; Republic of Zambia, 2016).

Feelings of inferiority and relational insecurity reported in this study align with some literature, yet other studies demonstrate rural students' capacity to form strong peer networks when institutional environments are inclusive (Kudzanai & Chabaya, 2019; Mwangi, 2017; Sefotho & Nyelele, 2020). Vector Four supports identity-affirming peer systems that foster mature interpersonal relationships.

Rural identity suppression observed in this study contrasts with findings from South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria showing that cultural affirmation strengthens belonging and self-esteem (Letseka & Maile, 2008; Owusu-Mensah & Obeng, 2019). Vector Five emphasizes identity integration, enabling rural students to view their backgrounds as assets rather than deficits.

Uncertainty about academic purpose and career direction identified in this study is consistent with Zambian research on limited career guidance for rural students (Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019), though contrasting evidence shows that mentoring can enhance goal clarity (Boakye & Ampadu, 2017; Byun et al., 2012). Vector Six supports structured career guidance to strengthen motivation and persistence.
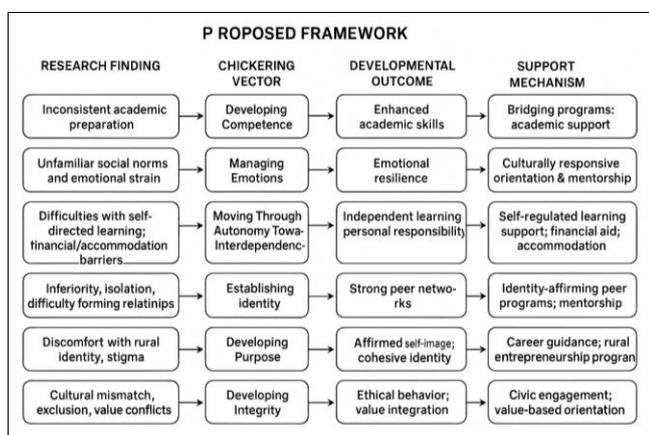
Finally, cultural value mismatches affecting belonging align with broader African literature on rural student marginalization (Jansen, 2019; UNESCO, 2021), while other studies demonstrate that value-based engagement facilitates adjustment (Kuh *et al*., 2010; Le Grange, 2016). Vector Seven emphasizes integrity, ethical reflection, and civic engagement as foundations for inclusive participation.

Above and beyond, the framework demonstrates that rural students' challenges are not fixed deficits but contextually mediated developmental processes that can be addressed through aligned institutional supports grounded in Chickering's Seven Vectors.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study highlights the complex and multifaceted challenges rural students face when transitioning to urban private universities in Zambia. Persistent educational inequities, including limited technological exposure, inadequate infrastructure, and under-resourced teaching in rural schools, create significant academic and social adjustment difficulties. Rural students experience "learning transition shock" as they navigate self-directed learning, unfamiliar assessment methods, and culturally distinct urban environments. Social isolation from high school peers and emotional stress further compound these challenges.

Despite these obstacles, rural students demonstrate resilience, gradually developing autonomy, decision-making skills, and personal growth. The findings underscore that the transition to university is not merely academic but also psychological, social, and cultural. Applying Chickering's Seven Vectors reveals both the utility and limitations of the model in a resource-constrained context, emphasizing that institutional support is critical for rural students' holistic development. Consequently, the study advocates for targeted interventions that align academic, social, and technological support with students' developmental needs, transforming challenges into opportunities for growth.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. Private universities, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, should implement mandatory bridging programs before or during the first semester. These programs should focus on academic writing, critical thinking, ICT literacy, and university orientation to reduce "learning transition shock" and equip rural students with foundational competencies needed for autonomous learning.
2. Private universities should establish culturally responsive mentorship programs pairing rural students with faculty, senior students, or alumni who understand the rural-urban transition. Complement these with student-led rural associations and peer networks to provide guidance, social integration, and emotional support, mitigating isolation and cultural dissonance.
3. Private universities should strengthen counseling centers and student support services to provide interventions addressing academic stress, psychosocial challenges, and cultural adjustment.
4. Universities should provide accessible digital infrastructure, including computers, reliable internet, and targeted ICT training.

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