

Rural-Origin Students' Perceptions of University Support Services for Psychosocial Adjustment

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Abstract

Most South African higher education institutions (HEIs) are located in urban centres, requiring rural-origin students to migrate—often disrupting established social networks and posing complex psychosocial adjustment challenges. This study explored the effectiveness of HEIs support services in aiding such students' transitions. Using a sequential-explanatory mixed methods design, quantitative data were collected from 280 students via an online questionnaire, followed by in-depth interviews with eight self-identified rural-origin students. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis revealed that rural-origin students encounter distinct barriers, including cultural dissonance, technological challenges, difficulties with social connection and navigation, and academic stress. Institutional support services were frequently viewed as misaligned with students' lived realities, prompting reliance on self-organised peer networks for emotional and academic support. These findings call for more inclusive, context-sensitive support frameworks within South African HEIs. While this study prioritises student perspectives, future research should incorporate institutional viewpoints and larger samples to inform scalable policy interventions that enhance rural students' adjustment, well-being, and academic success.

Key words: university support services, psychosocial adjustment, rural-to-urban student migration, digital literacy, self-organised support, social awareness

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Résumé

La plupart des établissements d'enseignement supérieur sud-africains sont situés dans des centres urbains, ce qui oblige les étudiants issus de milieux ruraux à déménager, ce qui perturbe souvent leurs r

Cette étude a examiné l'efficacité des services d'accompagnement proposés par les établissements d'enseignement supérieur pour faciliter la transition de ces étudiants. À l'aide d'une méthodologie mixte séquentielle et explicative, des données quantitatives ont été recueillies auprès de 280 étudiants via un questionnaire en ligne, suivies d'entretiens approfondis avec huit étudiants s'identifiant comme étant d'origine rurale. Les statistiques descriptives et l'analyse thématique ont révélé que les étudiants d'origine rurale se heurtent à des obstacles distincts, notamment la dissonance culturelle, les défis technologiques, les difficultés de connexion sociale et d'orientation, ainsi que le stress académique. Les services de soutien institutionnels étaient souvent perçus comme inadaptés aux réalités vécues par les étudiants, ce qui les incitait à s'appuyer sur des réseaux de pairs auto-organisés pour obtenir un soutien émotionnel et académique. Ces résultats appellent à la mise en place de cadres de soutien plus inclusifs et adaptés au contexte au sein des établissements d'enseignement supérieur sud-africains. Bien que cette étude donne la priorité au point de vue des étudiants, les recherches futures devraient intégrer les perspectives institutionnelles et des échantillons plus larges afin d'éclairer des interventions politiques à grande échelle visant à améliorer l'adaptation, le bien-être et la réussite académique des étudiants ruraux.

Mots-clés : services de soutien universitaire, adaptation psychosociale, migration des étudiants des zones rurales vers les zones urbaines, culture numérique, soutien auto-organisé, conscience sociale

Introduction and Background

Prior research has revealed that student support services are vital for creating conducive learning environments, enriching student experiences, and fostering academic success (Asaah Junior & Agyiri, 2020; Ciobanu, 2013). With growth in student numbers in higher education institutions (HEIs), drawn from diverse backgrounds, including those from poor and rural areas, well-functioning support services are crucial (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). These services encompass activities by various stakeholders to make learning productive (Kaur, 2016), mechanisms to improve academic endeavours (Shabani & Maboe, 2021), and forms of assistance that remove barriers and promote success (Potter, 1998). Essentially, student support services manage campus stressors, allowing students to focus on their studies.

Student support services are vital, yet rural-origin students face unique academic, psychosocial, and cultural challenges transitioning from high school to HEIs. This is because they often face difficulties accessing effective student support services despite the available equity and inclusion policies (Tadena et al., 2025). While some institutions are situated in rural or peri-urban areas, the majority of universities perceived to offer better academic and professional prospects are located in major urban centers, compelling rural students to leave behind familiar family and community support systems (Alemu, 2018; Kift et al., 2010). Scholars such as Tadena et al. (2025) and Kebu et al. (2023) have underscored that this relocation, though potentially transformative, is accompanied by adjustment difficulties that may hinder students' academic persistence and well-being. In urban university environments, rural-origin students must adapt to institutional structures and unfamiliar social and material realities, such as exposure to consumer culture, digital connectivity, and different social norms. These contrasts can provoke feelings of inadequacy and cultural alienation, complicating efforts to form supportive peer relationships and a coherent student identity.

Despite growing interest in student diversity in higher education, few studies (e.g., Tadena et al., 2025; Walker & Mathebula, 2019) have systematically examined how institutional student support services engage with the unique psychosocial needs of rural-to-urban migrant students. Crucially, this migration is not always a matter of free choice; it is largely shaped by financial constraints, limited programme availability, language policy issues, and deep-rooted structural inequalities (Ramontja, 2022; Selod & Shilpi, 2021; Alemu, 2018). It has been argued that rural-origin students, many of whom are also first-generation students, face a unique constellation of barriers, including limited digital literacy, cultural dissonance, language challenges, and unfamiliarity with available student support services (Gabielli & Impicciatore, 2022; Lo, 2022). These issues are further intensified for vulnerable groups such as women, increasing their risk of academic failure and dropout (Walker & Mathebula, 2019).

This study addresses this concern by exploring the lived experiences of rural-origin students and the adequacy of HEI support services intended to facilitate their adjustment and success. It uses case data from South Africa to investigate the extent to which rural-origin students access and benefit from university student support services in coping with psychosocial adjustment challenges. In line with this main objective, this study answers the following four questions: (1) To what extent do South African HEIs provide professional support for rural-origin students to cope with psychosocial adjustment challenges? (2) How are the rural-origin students assisted in coping with

psychosocial adjustment challenges? (3) To what extent are student services objectives effectively achieved in assisting rural-origin students to cope with psychosocial adjustment challenges? (4) What are the most pressing psychosocial adjustment challenges faced by rural-origin students?

By centering the lived experiences of these students, the study provides insights into how HEIs can better support an undeserved and often overlooked population. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the intersection of migration, psychosocial adjustment, and student support services, a nexus that has received limited empirical attention in South African higher education literature. The findings contribute to institutional policy and practice by highlighting gaps in current support mechanisms and proposing contextually grounded recommendations for inclusive student development. Since concepts of migration, psychosocial adjustment, and student support services are contextual, it is prudent to explore the South African context.

Before turning into the South African context, as well as the study's methodology, findings, and conclusions, it is important to clarify how certain key terms are used throughout this paper. The definitions provided here are not intended as exhaustive academic treatments but rather as working descriptions that frame the discussion to follow. Six terms, in particular, have been highlighted; not to suggest they are more important than others, but to offer readers a conceptual anchor for understanding the core issues explored in this study.

Rural-to-urban migration has been defined by Selod and Shilpi (2021) as the movement of individuals from under-resourced rural areas to opportunity-rich urban centres, as a well-established pathway to economic and educational advancement.

Rural-origin student is defined as one who attended and matriculated from a rural school, or from a school located in an area not governed by a local board or municipality (Qiu et al., 2011; Thakur, 2015).

HEI refers to “any institution that provides higher education on a full-time, part-time or distance basis and which is established, deemed to be established or declared as a public HEI, or registered or conditionally registered as a private HEI under the Higher Education Act, 101 of 1997” (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2021: 66).

Student support services are institutional mechanisms that HEIs establish to enhance student welfare and promote academic success (Johnson et al., 2022; Asaah Junior & Agyirii, 2020; Kaur, 2016).

Psychosocial support has been defined by several sources (e.g., Johnson et al., 2022; Othman et al., 2014; Tadena et al., 2025; U.S. Department of Education, 2021) to encompass all activities designed to address the interconnected psychological and social needs of individuals. This involves attending to psychological dimensions such as emotional well-being, cognitive processes, and feelings; and social dimensions such as family dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and cultural integration and belonging.

Perception, in the context of student support services, refers to the cognitive and experiential process by which students understand, engage with, and interpret the purpose and impact of these services (Chan & Hu, 2023; Mansouri, 2020; Schunk & Meece, 1992). This is fundamentally shaped by their individual lived experiences.

Student Support Services and Rural-Urban Disparities in South African HIEs

South Africa's higher education system comprises 26 public and over 21 private universities, predominantly located in urban areas (Kamerpower, 2022; Tjønneland, 2017; Uni24, n.d.). According to Macupe (2019) and Lane (2021), only eight public universities are in rural settings, which are often underdeveloped and lack critical infrastructure. Furthermore, Ntombela and Ntombela (2022) and Lefoka and Tlali (2021) have indicated that universities located in rural areas are also pressured to adopt urbanised academic cultures and norms, which further alienates rural-origin students. This disparity contributes to a structural divide, disadvantaging rural-origin students in accessing and succeeding in higher education (Nkomo & Schoole, 2007; Ratledge et al., 2020).

Mabizela and Matsiliza (2020) and Mlambo (2018) have underscored that such disparities emanate from the fact that rural regions in South Africa frequently lack basic services such as housing, sanitation, and electricity. Arguably, such limited development catalyses rural-to-urban migration pushing higher level students and skilled individuals to urban centers in search of more resourced training institutions and better employment opportunities, respectively. As such, Walker and Mathebula (2019) keenly noted that urban HEIs become the preferred viable option for rural-origin students seeking quality education and improved life chances.

Against this background characterised by rural-urban disparities, South African HEIs, which are largely urbanised, attract many students. For example, more than 1.2 million students are enrolled in South African HEIs (see Agumba et al., 2023; Statista, 2023; Czerniewicz & Brown, 2014), yet disaggregated data on rural-origin student numbers are lacking. However, some sources have shown that rural-origin students are often economically disadvantaged and face additional structural barriers to access, retention, and academic success (Masolo et al., 2018; Ramontja, 2022). These students' struggles are not simply due to poverty but also to systemic neglect (Chidakwa, 2025), remoteness from critical infrastructure and services (Lasselle & Smith, 2025; Mann & Hordern, 2019), social capital and cultural dissonance within predominantly urban academic environments (Siqoko & Vandeyar, 2024). This is not to say that rural-origin students are necessarily poor, but rather most of them are disadvantaged by limited development in rural areas.

Unlike urban-origin poor students who may still benefit from proximity to infrastructure and public services, Lombo and Subban (2024) and Agumba et al. (2023) have argued that rural-origin students face disadvantages stemming from severely under-resourced schools, poor internet connectivity, limited transportation, and weak career guidance systems. Arguably, even when admitted to HEIs, rural-origin students confront academic challenges, linguistic barriers, and social alienation in environments that are culturally and structurally unfamiliar.

This mismatch leads to lower enrollment and success rates among rural-origin students compared to their urban peers (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2014; Wells et al., 2023). Chidhakwa (2025) and Siqoko and Vandeyar (2024) have asserted that national education strategies often treat disadvantaged students as a homogenous group, overlooking the unique needs of rural-origin students. As such, Walker and Mathebula (2019) suggested the need for tailored policies that identify rural-origin students as a distinct category to bridge these persistent gaps. Further clarifying this need, Ramontja (2022) and Ratledge et al. (2020) underlined that intentional academic integration is key to increase the rural-origin students' likelihood of succeeding in HEIs.

In line with the need for intentional integration strategies, student support services, such as academic advising, counselling, mentoring, and financial aid, are increasingly seen as essential for easing students' transitions from high school to HEIs (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Ciobanu, 2013). Several sources (e.g., Chidhakwa, 2025; Toyon, 2024; Council on Higher Education, 2020; Walker & Mathebula, 2019) have revealed that most HEIs do not design

these services specifically for rural-origin students, and their effectiveness in addressing this group's unique needs remains under-researched.

Effective student support services can mitigate these transitional adjustment challenges. According to Ali et al. (2021) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2018), student services should aim to provide inclusive environments, foster social integration, and enhance academic performance. Johnson et al. (2022) has noted that when implemented effectively, such services contribute to increased student retention, academic achievement, and a greater sense of belonging. However, the effectiveness of student support hinges on institutional commitment, adequate staffing, digital infrastructure, and financial resources. As such, HEIs must prioritise the intentional design of student support services that respond to the lived experiences of rural-origin students (Sakız & Jencius, 2024; Shabani & Maboe, 2021).

The psychological and cultural transition from rural to urbanised HEI life is profound. Intentionally designed psychosocial support has inherent potential to reduce loneliness among rural-origin students, increase their self-confidence, and competitiveness, especially in first year of study (Tadena et al., 2025; Meehan & Howells, 2018; Othman et al., 2014). This creates a sense of belonging, reduces stress of relocation, and reduces vulnerability to mental health issues and academic failure (Kroshus et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022; Wallin et al., 2019). Furthermore, Othman et al. (2014) underlined that well-structured, inclusive student support services not only help students adjust but also enhance institutional reputations and attract future enrollments. Ensuring these services meet the specific needs of rural-origin students is vital for equitable education and national development.

Core findings from literature are that South Africa's higher education landscape is urban-centric, with HEIs located in rural areas pressured to adopt urban norms, marginalising rural-origin students. These students often face compounded barriers, such as infrastructural deficits, limited digital access, and cultural alienation, which affect their access, retention, and academic success. Despite these challenges, student support services are rarely tailored to address the unique needs of rural-origin students, and disaggregated data on this demographic remains scarce. Existing services focus broadly on disadvantaged students without recognising rural-specific vulnerabilities. While literature affirms that well-designed student support can foster academic integration and mental wellbeing, its targeted impact on rural-origin students is under-researched. This gap signals a pressing need for context-sensitive, inclusive support strategies that directly address rural students' lived realities. To better understand this gap and propose

contextual strategies, this study uses students' lived experiences on the intersection of psychosocial support, student support services, and rural-urban disparities. The next section answers questions on what, where, when, why, who, and how data used to close this gap were gathered and analysed in this study.

Methodology

Both qualitative depth and quantitative breadth were necessary to explore the lived experiences of rural-origin students and assess the adequacy of HEIs' support services. To achieve this, a mixed-methods approach was adopted in a sequential explanatory design. This involved first administering a questionnaire survey to gather broad, quantifiable insights, followed by narrative inquiry to capture in-depth, personal accounts that enriched the understanding of survey findings.

Quantitative data were collected from multiple South African HEIs, representing a range of degree-conferring types, including both traditional public universities and private institutions. A combination of convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling methods was employed. As the researcher is affiliated with a private HEI in South Africa, initial access to participants was conveniently facilitated through existing professional networks. Four institutions were initially targeted, two public and two private, with one located in a peri-urban area and the remaining three in urban settings. The digital questionnaire was distributed via institutional email lists. Sampling was purposive in selecting diverse institutional contexts, and snowballing occurred as initial contacts referred the researcher to additional participants across other HEIs.

As previously noted, approximately 1.2 million students are enrolled in South African HEIs (see Agumba et al., 2023; Czerniewicz & Brown, 2014; Statista, 2023). Based on this population size, Saunders and Thornhill (2009: 219) recommended a sample of 384 respondents to achieve a 5% margin of error for populations between 1 and 10 million. While the study aimed to meet this target, only 280 students responded to the questionnaire survey, yielding a response rate of 73%. Drawing on findings from Wu et al.'s (2022) meta-analysis, which reported average online survey response rates typically ranging up to 44.1%, this study achieved a substantially higher response rate. This increased participation was primarily facilitated by sending targeted reminder emails to participating students, encouraging questionnaire completion.

Respondents completed a structured Google Forms questionnaire comprising closed-ended and Likert-scale questions. The instrument was

designed to capture students' perceptions of access to and the effectiveness of institutional support services, along with indicators of their psychosocial adjustment. To allow for comparative analysis, the questionnaire also included a self-identification item for students to indicate whether they came from a rural or urban background.

Of the 280 survey respondents, 51 students (18%) self-identified as having a rural background. All 51 were invited to participate in follow-up interviews to explore their lived experiences transitioning into higher education. Eight students (16% of those invited), two male and six female, volunteered for in-depth interviews. While Hennink and Kaiser (2022) suggested that saturation in qualitative studies is often achieved with 9 to 17 interviews, the present study did not meet this threshold. This was partly due to two factors; very few students expressed willingness to participate, and two participants who initially expressed willingness to participate later withdrew from the study. Despite these limitations, the eight interviews generated rich insights as the sample size was not far from the acceptable threshold. Given the geographical dispersion of participants, interviews were conducted and recorded in English via Google Meet. A semi-structured interview guide was used to prompt discussion around their personal experiences, challenges faced, and perceptions of how effectively institutional support services addressed their needs. While guided, the format allowed participants to share their stories openly within the thematic scope of the study.

To enhance the quality of both instruments (questionnaire and interview guide), a pilot study was conducted with a purposive sample of 10 students, comprising five of rural origin and five of urban origin. The pilot study aimed to assess the clarity, appropriateness, and robustness of the instruments. Based on participant feedback, minor revisions were made to improve the wording, sequencing, and overall relevance of the instruments in adherence to ethical consideration. For example, all participants gave informed consent via digital consent forms prior to participation. Their confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS IBM version 30, specifically using descriptive statistics to summarise demographic information and identify trends in students' access to and satisfaction with institutional support services. Likert-scale items were analysed using frequency distributions and visualised through component bar graphs. To assess the reliability of data gathered using the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha was calculated at 0.871, indicating strong internal consistency. Additional reliability tests were

done using split-half reliability ($r = 0.800$), Spearman-Brown coefficients for equal and unequal lengths (0.889 and 0.890 , respectively), and the Guttman split-half coefficient (0.885). These results collectively confirm the questionnaire's high internal consistency and reliability in measuring the intended constructs.

Qualitative data sourced through interviews were transcribed verbatim using Google Meet and analysed thematically. Thematic analysis was guided by six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013); organising data, immersion in the data, generating codes, generating categories, generating themes, and producing the report. A coding framework, presented in the findings section, shows the relationship between categories and themes related to psychosocial adjustment, access to student support services, and institutional responsiveness. Transcripts were independently reviewed to ensure accuracy and consistency. The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods enabled triangulation, thereby enhancing the study's credibility and depth of insight. The next section presents synthesised findings resulting from the methodology outlined in foregoing paragraphs.

Synthesised findings

This section unfolds by exploring the biographical profile of the participants so that findings can be contextually understood within the scope of these demographics. It also discusses the descriptive outcomes of data gathered using the questionnaire survey. After that, the rest of the chapter discusses the four themes resulting from the analysis of interview data.

Participants' demographic profile

Building on the work of Casteel and Bridier (2021) and Banerjee and Chaudhury (2010), this study recognises the critical role of demographic variables, such as age, gender, education, and income, in providing a comprehensive understanding and characterisation of research samples.

As outlined in the previous section, this study used a sequential-explanatory approach using the questionnaire survey followed by a narrative inquiry. Of the 280 participants who responded to the questionnaire, the majority were female, accounting for 74%, while 25% were male, and 1% did not disclose their gender. This may be partly attributed to South Africa's gender demographics, where females outnumber males (Statistics South Africa, 2011), alongside national education policies that promote gender equity and the empowerment of adolescent girls and young women (United Nations South Africa, 2022). In terms of racial identification, 66% identified as Black African, 27% as Coloured, 2% as Indian/Asian, and 5% as White. This is partly explained by racial distribution in the country constituted by native

South Africans outweighing other races (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Then, the age distribution revealed that 68% were between 18 and 21 years old, 23% were in the 22-25 age group, and 9% were above 25 years of age. This indicates that a substantial proportion of the sample were students entering HEIs directly from high school, making them well-positioned to share first-hand experiences of their initial transition into higher education.

Furthermore, 18% and 82% of the respondents were of the rural-origin and urban-origin, respectively. While rural-origin students constituted a smaller proportion of this specific sample, their significance is amplified when considered against the broader South African higher education landscape, which serves approximately 1.2 million students nationally (Matsolo et al., 2018; Statista, 2023; Tjønneland, 2017). Prior research by Tadena et al. (2025) and Walker and Mathebula (2019) has indicated that students with a rural background frequently navigate distinct academic and psychosocial challenges which influence their experience and engagement with institutional support services. As such, they offered valuable insights into the differentiated support needs within higher education.

Academically, the largest group of participants, 43%, were enrolled in their first year of undergraduate degree programmes. Second-year students comprised 21%, and third-year students accounted for 22%. This suggests that a significant portion of respondents were encountering higher education for the first time, placing them in a strong position to provide first-hand insights into their initial transition experiences. Finally, all the eight students who participated in the narrative inquiry had a rural background and they identified as Black Africans. This is partly attributable to the colonial legacy of spatial segregation, which relegated native South Africans to rural areas and townships based on racial classification (Group Areas Act, 1950).

Respondents' experience with support services

To gain deeper insight into students' perceptions of support services, respondents were asked to reflect on their experiences with the available offerings. This inquiry aimed to identify which services were most widely accessed and how students perceived their effectiveness. Understanding these perceptions served as a foundational step toward exploring the lived experiences of students in greater depth. The questionnaire specifically addressed students' satisfaction with institutional support services, their comfort in discussing personal or academic issues with staff, whether they felt emotionally supported, and whether staff showed genuine concern for their academic progress. Figure 1 shows distribution of responses as perceived by respondents.

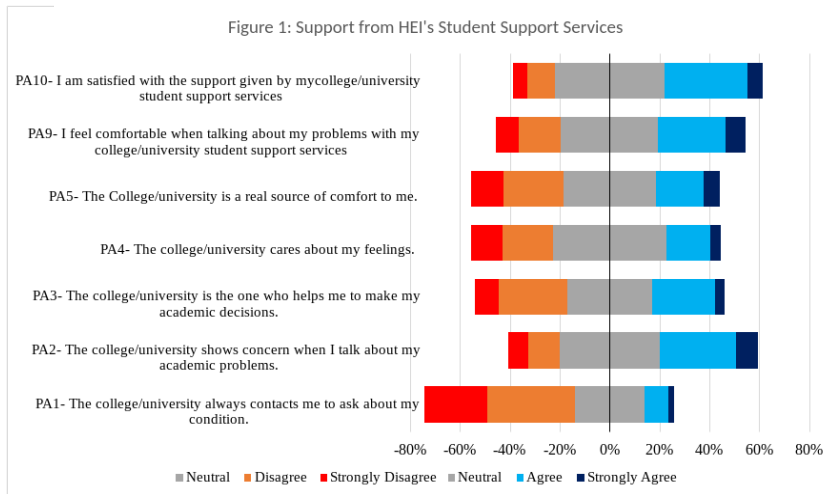


Figure 1 suggests that most of the respondents reported that HEIs do not contact them regarding their psychosocial condition. This is numerically supported by the fact that this construct, coded PA1, had the least mean of 2.28 and standard deviation of 1.017. Despite the concern that most respondents reported that they are not consulted regarding support services they need the most, they were generally satisfied with the support they are given. For example, the construct PA10 recorded the highest mean of 3.23 and standard deviation of 0.93. This highlights the importance of involving students in the design of support services, as respondents reported feeling excluded. It suggests that as much as existing support services are beneficial, they should not be implemented without meaningful consultation with the intended beneficiaries to ensure their relevance and effectiveness.

To explore students' perceptions of academic support from lecturers, respondents were asked to reflect on their personal experiences. The aim was to assess the extent and effectiveness of lecturers' contributions to student learning. This helped gauge the broader academic support landscape within HEIs. Specifically, the questionnaire included items on whether lecturers provided study guidance, offered help to improve academic skills, and were accessible when needed. Figure 2 visually summarises the students' responses to these aspects.

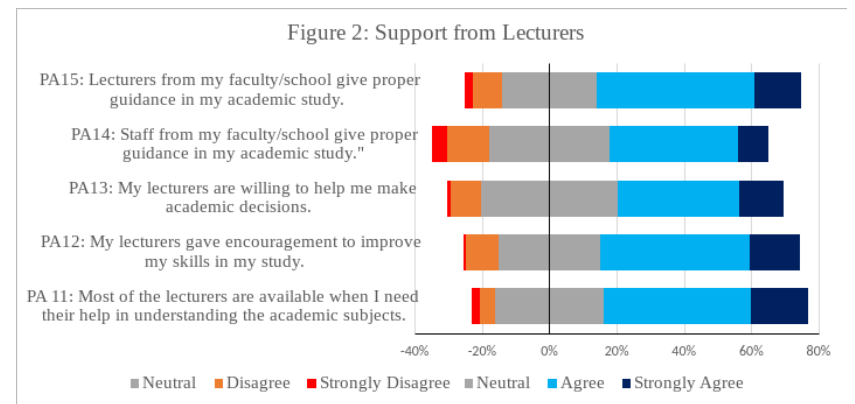
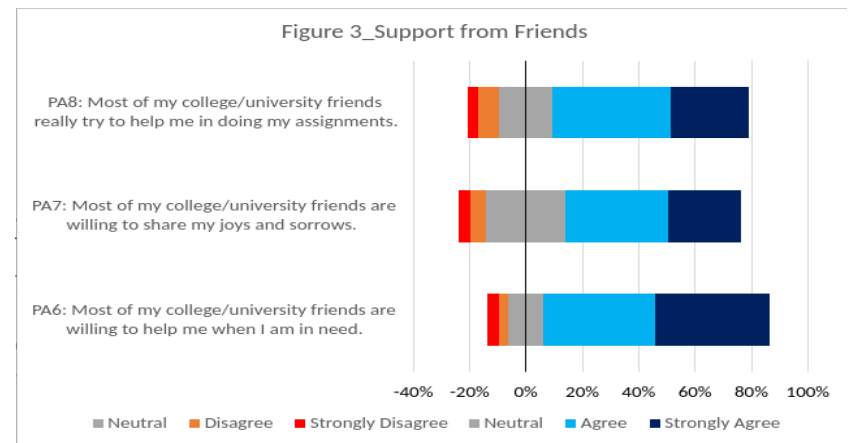


Figure 2 indicates that students are generally satisfied with the academic support received from their lecturers. When compared with the responses in Figure 1, it is evident that students reported higher satisfaction with lecturer support than with institutional student support services. This may be partly attributed to the more frequent and direct interaction students have with lecturers, in contrast to the limited engagement they typically experience with broader institutional support service providers. The mean satisfaction scores for lecturer support ranged from 3.34 to 3.69, with standard deviations below 1 across all items, suggesting consistent positive perceptions. These results imply that academic staff in HEIs tend to adopt inclusive support strategies that benefit students across diverse backgrounds.



Regarding support from peers, a significant percentage of respondents indicated that the support they give each other has helped them adjust comfortably in their academic pursuits. Peer-to-peer support was rated

higher than the assistance offered by institutional student-support services. This is reflected in the data, with mean scores ranging from 3.74 to 4.10 and standard deviations between 1.005 and 1.037, indicating consistent responses clustered around the mean. Overall, the findings suggest that students rely more heavily on academic staff and peers than on institutional service providers. This underscores the need to enhance the visibility and effectiveness of formal student support services to match the impact of other support systems. To further investigate this trend, in-depth interviews with rural-origin students revealed four key themes, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes and sub-themes

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>
<i>Institutional gaps in support for rural-origin students</i>	<i>Lack of university services</i>
	<i>Ineffective university services</i>
	<i>Lack of targeted programmes</i>
	<i>Limited tailored programmes</i>
<i>Self-organised support & social awareness</i>	<i>Self-organised support</i>
	<i>Digital literacy</i>
	<i>Social awareness programmes</i>
<i>Student perceptions of the role and effectiveness of student support services</i>	<i>Support effectiveness</i>
	<i>Effectiveness of objectives</i>
<i>Psychosocial and academic challenges faced by rural-origin students</i>	<i>Challenges faced by students</i>
	<i>Improvement in wellbeing</i>
	<i>Impact on wellbeing and academics</i>

Theme 1: Institutional gaps in support for rural-origin students

To explore this theme, participants were asked to reflect on perceived shortcomings in institutional support services, especially in relation to rural-origin students. Their responses highlighted a general lack of targeted, professional support. Many described the services as ineffective, citing reasons such as unapproachable or impatient staff, insufficient resources, and the absence of support programs specifically tailored to their unique

needs and backgrounds. This was established as the following statements of participants in their own words indicate:

Interviewee 1: There is nothing except that we as students have organised ourselves into small groups where we met twice a week to discuss the challenges that we were facing and how to focus and manage school work and not feel overwhelmed.

Interviewee 4: Not very effective...providers are not patient.

The sentiments expressed by interviewees 1 and 4 indicated lack of such services; if they exist, there is limited awareness among students regarding specifically tailored programmes for rural-origin students. These sentiments are supported by Walker and Mathebula's (2019) conclusion that there is a widespread absence of specialised programmes or resources designed to cater to the needs of rural-origin students across HEIs. The participants indicated that tailored support could include structured orientation for rural students, digital literacy workshops, peer mentoring by senior rural-origin students, or access to specialised counselling services that address cultural and psychosocial adjustment. This suggests that eligibility could be based on indicators of rural-origin. Valid concerns about feasibility, especially due to limited resources and institutional capacity, may be a limiting factor. However, adding rural-origin student support to existing services could be a practical and inclusive starting point.

Theme 2: Self-organised support and social awareness

As alluded to earlier in theme 1, rural-origin students use 'invented' channels (self-organised peer groups) to share coping strategies, discuss academic challenges, and manage responsibilities collectively. In their own words, Interviewee 1 confirmed that "our own initiative of the social gathering helped us to gather and socialise educating each other on the city life". This suggests that social awareness programmes, initiated and organised by students themselves, have proven beneficial in fostering open dialogues to address challenges and facilitate adjustment to the complexities of urban life. This grassroots initiative has helped fill a critical gap in psychosocial support and demonstrates a high level of student agency and resilience. Such an initiative has been identified by several sources (e.g., Kift et al., 2010; Selod & Shilpi, 2021; Sheng et al., 2025; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007) as key to navigating adversity in higher education environments.

In addition to peer-led support groups, participants suggested adding a digital literacy module to the university curriculum. This would help students from under-resourced schools gain the skills needed to use academic

platforms, complete assignments, and take part in online learning with more confidence.

Theme 3: Student perceptions of the role and effectiveness of student support services

Participants identified what they perceived to be the main objective of student support services. These included helping them cope with psychosocial adjustment challenges, supporting rural-origin students in adapting to city life, and enabling greater focus on academic responsibilities. These perceptions were based on their personal experiences and expectations rather than formal institutional definitions. The findings suggest that while students are aware of some core functions of student support services, their understanding is largely shaped by their immediate needs and challenges. For example, Interviewee 6 noted that existing services are “*not very effective... providers are not patient*”. These sentiments are in sync with sources (e.g., Johnson et al 2022, Ali, et al 2021, U.S. Department of Education 2021, OECD, 2018) that emphasise the importance of providing comprehensive and flexible support to help students overcome the challenges associated with rural-to-urban migration.

Theme 4: Psychosocial and academic challenges faced by rural-origin students

The challenges reported by participants included financial constraints, limited access to resources, and difficulties in adjusting to urban environments. These challenges were perceived to trigger psychosocial issues such as feelings of isolation, cultural disconnection, anxiety around social interaction, homesickness, and academic stress. As one participant, Interviewee 5, said:

They do affect as the way one ends up stressed they kind of prevent you from having a social life being afraid to socialise and it will end up affecting academic performance, making the grades to fall.

These findings highlight the complex, intersecting pressures that rural-origin students face, which often impact their emotional well-being and ability to succeed. Participants also noted significant hurdles such as racial discrimination, cultural disconnect, inadequate equipment, and difficulties in forming connections and navigating technology and diverse social settings.

While some counselling services are available to reduce the impact of the identified hurdles, they are not tailored to address the specific needs of rural-origin students. Some respondents noted that accessible counselling

services help improve their well-being; however, there are lingering questions regarding their overall effectiveness as Interviewee 7 lamented: “*cultural gap, feeling estranged and lonely all contribute to mental and social challenges*”

Discussion and conclusion

This study explored how rural-origin students in South Africa experience and navigate higher education, focusing on the adequacy of institutional student support services in aiding their psychosocial adjustment and academic success. Using a sequential-explanatory mixed methods approach, the research found that existing support services often fail to meet the specific needs of these students. Instead, rural-origin students rely heavily on self-organised peer groups, referred to as ‘*invented*’ channels in the study, to support one another, share coping strategies, and manage academic and personal challenges together. This highlights a critical gap in institutional responsiveness to diverse student backgrounds.

This key finding extends Walker and Mathebula’s (2019) study that assessed the challenges faced by rural-origin students in coping with the demands of transitioning into urbanised HEI. Their findings provide a broader understanding of the key role played by higher education communities, family members, and academic staff in fostering students’ aspirations. Walker and Mathebula’s study validated the agency, resilience, and resourcefulness of rural-origin students in designing coping mechanisms to manage their unique university life challenges. However, Walker and Mathebula’s (2019) study is suspect on three counts of comprehensiveness, methodological rigour, and spatial scope.

This study builds on the work of Walker and Mathebula by examining how student support services intersect with the psychosocial adjustment challenges faced by rural-origin students. Unlike their study, which relied solely on interviews with 30 students from three South African universities, this research employed methodological triangulation, combining a questionnaire survey with narrative inquiry. Although their qualitative sample was larger, this study’s survey involved 280 respondents, offering broader insight into the types of support services available to both urban- and rural-origin students. This provided a solid foundation for then focusing more specifically on rural-origin experiences. Additionally, Walker and Mathebula’s study did not include rural-based HEIs, which, despite their geographical location, often reflect urbanised academic cultures. This study addresses that gap by incorporating such institutions and drawing participants from at least four different HEIs using snowballing, helping to reduce spatial bias and improve the generalisability of the findings.

Extending Walker and Mathebula's (2019) study, a second key finding of this research is the pronounced absence of student support services specifically designed for rural-origin students. This emerged from an analysis of the intersection between available student services, the unique challenges faced by rural-origin students, and their psychosocial adjustment needs. The issue is likely exacerbated by the lack of reliable data on the number of rural-origin students within these HEIs (Statista, 2023; Czerniewicz & Brown, 2014). This finding is critical in explaining why many of these students resort to self-invented resilience strategies to navigate the transition from high school to urbanised academic environments.

Despite the contribution of this study in extending Walker and Mathebula's (2019) work, it has sampling limitations. The questionnaire survey did not reach the threshold of 384 initially targeted. However, this was compensated by a high response rate which surpasses the average of online surveys. Furthermore, only eight participants took part in the narrative inquiry, which falls below the minimum acceptable sample size to guarantee conclusive power. Despite efforts to ensure diverse representation from South African HEIs, the sample may not fully capture rural-origin students' experiences. Additionally, the nine-month data collection period from May 2023 to January 2024 may introduce temporal biases. The voluntary nature of participation and absence of incentives could affect response rates and introduce self-selection biases. Furthermore, the study's exclusive focus on student perspectives, to the exclusion of institutional viewpoints, potentially introduced bias into the research data and findings. And, student strikes in public universities during the research period may influence availability and response accuracy. These limitations underscore the need for further research with larger, diverse samples and consideration of external factors to enhance findings' robustness and generalisability.

Despite these limitations, this study provides student-driven views based on what they perceive could improve student support services. All the participants concurred that pre-enrollment exposure initiatives, such as orientation programmes before formal entry, would help them to familiarise with the university setting and urban dynamics. While they recognised the value of in-person visits, they acknowledged that time, travel, and cost could be prohibitive. As such, they suggested low-cost alternatives like virtual campus tours, digital orientation videos, and online peer mentoring as more accessible options.

The proposal to have virtual pre-enrollment orientation tools is not without its challenges. It may not be fully viable in many South African and other African rural contexts due to barriers such as limited internet access, low

digital literacy, high data costs, and unreliable electricity. Acknowledging these realities, alternative approaches could include printed pre-enrollment guides, community-based information sessions hosted at local schools or education centres, or radio segments explaining university systems and urban expectations. Over time, investment in low-data, mobile-accessible digital content, and partnerships with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) or local municipalities could expand reach. These suggestions highlight the need for context-sensitive strategies that progressively close the access gap without assuming full digital readiness.

Another proposal involves having tailored psychosocial support mechanisms such as culturally sensitive counselling and facilitated peer groups, to help students process emotional and adjustment-related challenges. This can be partly enabled by early identification of rural-origin students during the admissions or registration process, to allow for more targeted support interventions. For this arrangement to realise its intended purpose, most participants proposed clearer communication about available support services and training of student support staff to improve cultural sensitivity regarding the needs of rural-origin students.

Riding on existing informal structures such as peer-to-peer support systems, it has been suggested that new rural-origin students can be deliberately paired with experienced students who have successfully navigated similar transitions. These student-driven insights reflect a strong awareness of the gaps in current support systems and a desire for more inclusive, accessible, and responsive higher education environments. Future studies should investigate institutional perspectives and feasible interventions or mechanisms to optimally support rural-origin students' psychosocial well-being and academic success.

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