



Navigating Academic Acclimatization: Lived Experiences of Rural Students in Private Higher Education Institutions in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

The transition from rural secondary schools to higher education poses significant academic, social, and technological challenges for students in Zambia. This study examined the lived experiences of rural-origin students as they navigate academic acclimatization within Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs), focusing on their adaptation to pedagogical expectations, social environments, and digital learning demands. Guided by a qualitative phenomenological design and framed through Chickering and Reisser's Seven Vectors of Student Development and Perry's Cognitive-Structural Theory, data were collected from sixteen participants via semi-structured interviews, observations, and document reviews. Findings indicate that the students faced multifaceted challenges, including academic underpreparedness, cultural dislocation, difficulties with social integration, and digital exclusion. Despite these hindrances, the students demonstrated resilience, motivation, and self-agency, gradually developing autonomy, intellectual competence, and identity transformation. Based on these findings, the authors propose a framework of integrating developmental support mechanisms with institutional interventions that enhance academic and social adjustment. Interventions such as bridging programs, culturally responsive mentorship, digital literacy training, and inclusive peer support structures prioritize students' well-being.

Keywords: rural students; private higher education; academic transition; academic experiences; Zambia

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The transition from secondary education to higher education represents a critical academic turning point for many students. For students from rural backgrounds, this transition is often accompanied by pronounced academic adjustment challenges that shape their learning trajectories and overall university experience. In Zambia, rural schooling contexts are frequently characterized by limited instructional resources, inadequate exposure to advanced academic practices, and restricted access to digital learning technologies, factors that collectively contribute to uneven academic preparedness among rural learners (Masaiti, 2018; Mboyonga, 2025). When these students enter higher education, particularly Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs), they are required to adapt rapidly to pedagogical approaches that emphasize independent learning, critical thinking, and technology-mediated instruction modes of learning that often contrast sharply with their prior schooling experiences.

Private Higher Education Institutions have brought about expanded access to tertiary education in Zambia following the liberalization of the sector under the 1996 Educating Our Future policy. While PHEIs have played a vital role in absorbing excess demand unmet by public universities, evidence suggests that access alone does not guarantee equitable academic participation or success (Masaiti et al., 2018). Rural students enrolled in PHEIs frequently encounter difficulties adjusting to academic workloads, assessment systems, and digital learning environments, challenges that are compounded by inconsistent availability of structured academic support services such as academic mentoring, bridging programmes, and digital literacy training (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Masaiti et al., 2020).

Rurality can be understood as both a demographic and cultural construct, encompassing not only sparsely populated geographical areas but also the lived experiences of individuals originating from such contexts. This

dual perspective highlights how social and environmental factors shape students' identities and patterns of educational engagement, as emphasized by Masaiti et al. (2020). Agumba et al. (2023) describe rurality as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by geography, social identity, and economic conditions that influence how learners interact with educational systems. Within the higher education context, this complexity translates into unique academic and social challenges for students from rural backgrounds as they adjust to university life.

Existing literature on rural students' participation in higher education largely emphasizes structural barriers, including financial constraints and geographic isolation. However, fewer studies have examined the lived academic experiences of rural students once they are enrolled, particularly within the private higher education sector. Where such studies exist, findings remain mixed. Some scholars argue that rural students are academically disadvantaged due to limited exposure to rigorous curricula before university (Herzog & Pittman, 1996), while others suggest that, given adequate support, rural students can perform comparably to their urban counterparts (Byun et al., 2012). These contradictions point to the need for context-specific, qualitative inquiry that captures how rural students themselves experience academic acclimatization in higher education.

Academic acclimatization involves more than mastering course content; it encompasses students' ability to manage increased academic autonomy, adapt to unfamiliar pedagogical expectations, and develop confidence in navigating institutional learning systems. For rural students, this process is often exacerbated by limited prior experience with independent study practices, academic writing conventions, and digital learning platforms (UNESCO, 2022; Chanda & Musonda, 2023). Tinto (1993) cautions that difficulties in meeting the intellectual demands of higher education can undermine student engagement and persistence, particularly during the first year of study when academic identities are still forming.

Despite these challenges, rural students demonstrate a particular sense that has advanced them educationally. This is because they view higher education as a sure pathway to personal development and community transformation (Muyunda, 2021). Their experiences highlight both the strengths rural students bring to higher education and the structural gaps that hinder their academic integration. Inconsistent academic support across PHEIs further exacerbates these disparities, with some institutions offering effective learning support mechanisms while others provide minimal intervention, leaving students to navigate academic demands largely on their own.

Framing academic acclimatization through Chickering's Seven Vectors of Student Development, particularly the vectors of Developing Competence and Managing Autonomy, provides a useful lens for understanding rural students' adjustment as a developmental process rather than a deficit condition. From this perspective, academic success is shaped by how institutions support students' intellectual growth, foster independent learning skills, and create environments that enable students to adapt confidently to university-level academic expectations.

In Zambia, these contextual differences strongly shape the academic experiences of students from rural backgrounds enrolled in Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs). Many enter university with limited exposure to essential academic resources such as libraries, laboratories, and digital learning tools (Masaiti, 2018; Mboyonga, 2025). Consequently, they often struggle to adapt to university-level pedagogies that emphasize independent study, academic writing, and research-oriented learning.

Against this backdrop, the present study explores the lived experiences of rural students navigating academic acclimatization in Zambia's Private Higher Education Institutions. By centering students' voices, the study seeks to illuminate how rural learners experience academic transition, negotiate learning demands, and access institutional support within PHEIs. In doing so, it contributes to the growing discourse on equity, inclusion, and student development in Zambia's expanding higher education sector.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing enrolment of students from rural backgrounds in Zambia's higher education system, there is limited empirical understanding of how these students navigate and adapt to the academic demands within Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs). This is because rural students often enter university with significant academic disadvantages stemming from prior schooling experiences characterized by inadequate



instructional resources, teacher-centered pedagogies, and minimal exposure to digital learning technologies (Masaiti et al., 2020; Guiffrida, 2008; Agumba et al., 2023). These factors result in disparities in critical academic competencies, including independent learning, academic writing, digital literacy, and critical thinking skills essential for successful engagement in higher education.

Moreover, few studies have investigated how these challenges manifest within Zambia's PHEI sector, where institutional support structures, pedagogical approaches, and learning environments differ from those in public universities. The lack of Zambia-focused empirical research limits the design of responsive academic support systems, targeted learning interventions, and evidence-based pedagogical strategies tailored to rural students' needs.

Consequently, rural students risk underperformance, disengagement, and lower progression rates, which can perpetuate existing rural-urban educational inequalities and undermine the contribution of private higher education to national human capital development. There is therefore a critical need to examine how rural-background students experience, negotiate, and adapt to the academic environment in PHEIs, to inform effective institutional support mechanisms and promote equitable learning outcomes.

Purpose of the study

This study explored the lived experiences of rural students in Zambia's Private Higher Education Institutions by focusing on how they navigate academic acclimatization and adapt to institutional learning environments.

Research Objectives

1. To establish the lived experiences of rural students' academic acclimatization in 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 grounded in Student Development Theory, drawing specifically on Chickering and Reisser's (1993) Psychosocial Student Development Theory and Perry's (1970) Cognitive-Structural Theory to provide a holistic understanding of rural students' academic and social experiences in Zambia's Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs).

Chickering and Reisser's psychosocial framework explains how students develop competence, manage emotions, build autonomy and interpersonal relationships, and form identity, purpose, and integrity. Empirical studies have demonstrated that these developmental vectors are closely linked to students' academic persistence, engagement, and sense of belonging, particularly among students from underrepresented or transitional backgrounds (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Evans et al., 2010). For rural students, who often encounter academic adjustment challenges, cultural discontinuity, and identity negotiation when transitioning into urban and socially diverse higher education environments, the theory provides a useful lens for understanding how emotional resilience, self-efficacy, and belonging evolve in response to institutional climates and support systems (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Perry's cognitive-structural model complements this psychosocial perspective by focusing on students' intellectual and ethical development. The model explains how learners progress from dualistic thinking toward relativistic and reflective meaning-making as they encounter complex academic tasks and diverse viewpoints (Perry, 1970). Research in higher education has shown that students entering university from less academically resourced backgrounds may initially rely on absolutist ways of knowing, but structured academic support and exposure to diverse pedagogical practices promote higher-order thinking and epistemological growth (King & Kitchener, 2004; Baxter Magolda, 2001). For rural students in PHEIs, such cognitive shifts are often triggered

by unfamiliar instructional approaches and peer interactions, which, although initially disorienting, can foster critical thinking and intellectual development over time.

Together, these theories form a multidimensional framework that captures both the internal (cognitive and emotional) and external (social and institutional) dimensions of student development. When integrated, Chickering and Reisser's and Perry's theories have been shown to offer a comprehensive explanatory lens for understanding students' academic transition, social adaptation, and identity formation within higher education contexts (Evans et al., 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In this study, the combined framework provides a robust foundation for analyzing how rural students navigate academic acclimatization and developmental challenges within Zambia's private higher education institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The reviewed literature represented the foundational theoretical literature as well as relevant research on rural students' experiences, academic acclimatization, and support systems in Higher Education Institutions.

Academic Underpreparedness and Educational Inequalities

The literature consistently shows that rural students' academic acclimatization in Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) is constrained by pre-existing inequalities in rural secondary education, limited access to learning resources, and inadequate exposure to higher-order academic practices. Studies in Zambia indicate that rural learners often enter higher education with weaker foundations in academic writing, research skills, critical thinking, and digital literacy, placing them at a disadvantage compared to their urban counterparts (Mulenga & Luangala, 2020; Masaiti et al., 2020; Mwiinga & Mwansa, 2019).

Digital Inequalities and Academic Engagement

Empirical evidence indicates that academic challenges faced by rural students are aggravated by digital inequalities. Limited access to ICT infrastructure, unreliable connectivity, and insufficient institutional e-learning support restrict rural students' engagement with blended and online learning environments. These constraints result in delayed submissions, reduced interaction with lecturers, and heightened academic anxiety (Kandari, 2020; Timmis, 2020; Lim et al., 2011). Similar patterns across African contexts reinforce the persistence of rural-urban academic disparities (Adom & Mensah, 2022).

Institutional Support Structures and Academic Adjustment

Institutional support structures are repeatedly identified as critical mediators of rural students' academic adjustment. While targeted interventions such as orientation programs, academic bridging, mentoring, and tutoring enhance student adaptation and persistence, evidence from Zambian PHEIs suggests that such supports are inconsistently implemented and largely fragmented (Mulenga, 2019; Mwewa & Siachiwena, 2019). Consequently, many rural students rely on informal peer networks and personal resilience as primary coping mechanisms (Lephalala & Makoe, 2012; Banda & Chabalala, 2020).

Social and Psychosocial Adjustment

The literature highlights significant social and psychosocial adjustment challenges among rural students in PHEIs. These students frequently experience cultural dislocation, language barriers, reduced confidence, and limited social integration within urban-based institutional environments, which negatively affect academic engagement (Mwiinga & Kalimaposo, 2018; Letseka & Maile, 2008). However, contrasting evidence shows that some rural students adapt successfully when supported by strong peer relationships and inclusive institutional environments (Tembo, 2018; Munyua, 2020).

Above and beyond, the literature demonstrates that rural students' experiences in PHEIs are shaped by interconnected academic, digital, institutional, and psychosocial constraints. Despite growing rural enrolment, research specific to Zambia's private higher education sector remains limited. This underscores the need for

empirical studies that document rural students' lived academic experiences and inform context-responsive support frameworks grounded in established student development theory.

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

Major findings are presented below.

Social Adjustment Challenges Faced by Rural Students in Urban Private Universities

One dominant theme is the struggle for social adjustment as rural student's transition into urban university environments. Participants highlighted the dramatic shift in social diversity from their rural hometowns to the university setting. *Enelesi* reflected:

My hometown is not as populated as the university community, so when I first arrived, I found it overwhelming to see so many people in one place. It took time for me to adjust to the noise, the busy schedules, and the fast-paced way of life compared to the quiet and familiar environment I was used to back home.

This comment reveals a sense of culture shock and the difficulty of adapting to a more densely populated, dynamic, and socially diverse environment.

Milika offered a deeper reflection on the personal and emotional struggle involved in making friends in a socially unfamiliar space:

Making friends here was difficult in the early days! ...in that the people I found here in terms of 'dress code!' and ... 'English accent!' ...were way advanced. So, it was a bit difficult to make friends, but at last I managed...

Milika's account underscores the feeling of social inferiority or cultural lag, particularly in relation to fashion and spoken English, two significant identifiers of social identity in urban settings. The use of the term "way advanced" implies a perceived gap in social capital, which became a barrier to early social integration.

The participant's account highlights the initial social adjustment challenges experienced when entering the university environment. Differences in appearance, language, and social behavior created a sense of inadequacy and hesitation, making it difficult to connect with peers. However, the student's eventual ability to form friendships demonstrates resilience and gradual adaptation to the new social and cultural context. This process reflects growing confidence and integration, which are important for both social belonging and effective participation in academic life.

In addition, the study also discovered that academic demands posed another hurdle to building social connections. *Vikumbutso* remarked:

Forming new friends in university has been tough because I get busy with school programs. Therefore, I am usually with students I am sharing courses with.

This illustrates how academic workload and scheduling conflicts can restrict the scope for social interaction, leading to functional, course-based relationships rather than broader friendships across the student body.

Together, these narratives portray a compelling picture of the multi-dimensional nature of social adjustment challenges ranging from environmental dissonance and cultural unfamiliarity to time constraints imposed by academic rigor. These findings align with the broader aim of this study. They show how social integration is a key part of the learning experience, influencing not just comfort and belonging, but also academic engagement and emotional well-being.

Academic Unpreparedness and Transition Challenges from Rural High Schools to Private Universities

Another prevalent theme is the academic unpreparedness and transitional challenges faced by students coming from rural high school backgrounds. Participants reported lack of adequacy in being to equipped to meet the academic demands of private universities. The lack of preparedness manifested in both teaching and learning experiences, as well as in students' self-regulation of study practices. *Vikumbutso narrated:*

The mode of learning here... is totally different from the way we used to learn in high school! The way they teach here! ...is different from how we were taught in high school. In high school, they would give us room to understand the concept... but here! ...lecturers cruise without caring if the students have understood or not.

This experience underscores a pedagogical shift that left the student disoriented, reflecting the drastic change from teacher-centered support in rural high schools to independent learning approaches at the university level. The participant's reflection reveals a struggle to adapt to the teaching and learning methods used at university.

The shift from a more guided and supportive approach in high school to a fast-paced and less personalized style of instruction at university creates difficulties in comprehension and adjustment. This experience highlights the gap between prior learning experiences and higher education expectations, emphasizing the need for greater academic support and inclusive teaching strategies. It also reflects the student's perception of limited lecturer engagement, which can affect motivation, understanding, and overall academic performance.

Similarly, *Pelekelo's* experience reinforces the theme:

Before I arrived here, I thought that everything would be provided like the way it was in high school. However, here! ...it is a different story! Everything has to be researched by yourself! The methodology used by teachers in high school is very different! ...in that here, most of the things should be done by yourself!

This narrative reveals the expectation gap regarding academic autonomy. Students accustomed to receiving direct instruction and resources in high school were now required to independently research and manage their learning, a challenge for many.

The experience above reflects the challenge of adjusting to the self-directed nature of university learning. Coming from a background where teachers provided structured guidance and ready materials, the student experienced difficulty adapting to an environment that demands independent research and personal initiative. This shift reveals a gap in preparedness for autonomous learning and underscores the transition from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered approaches. It highlights the need for students, especially those from rural backgrounds, to develop self-regulation, critical thinking, and research skills essential for success in higher education.

Moreover, *Madalitso* admitted struggling with academic weight, stating:

Let me admit that I face academic challenges at this university compared to high school.

This comment captures the intensified academic demands of university life, particularly for those from resource-limited rural settings.

Despite the dominant narrative of struggle, the study also uncovered contrasting experiences, suggesting that not all rural students were unprepared. For instance, *Kuzwayo* expressed a degree of preparedness stemming from subject continuity and teacher influence in high school:

...for me, I can say that my high school teachers somehow prepared me for university life. ... I am doing business-related courses because of my background. I took business subjects in high school. ...as I enjoyed them from high school ...mostly because of my former high school teacher.

This experience suggests that while academic unpreparedness was widespread, certain individual experiences reflected better transitions due to subject alignment and teacher influence. The participant's account demonstrates a sense of academic continuity and preparedness stemming from their secondary education. Their exposure to business subjects in high school influenced their choice of study at university, showing a clear link between prior learning experiences and current academic interests. This continuity also highlights the positive impact of effective teaching at the secondary level, where a supportive teacher inspired the student's passion and confidence in the chosen field. The experience reflects how early academic foundations and teacher influence can shape motivation, course selection, and adaptation in higher education.

The theme of academic unpreparedness and transitional challenges among rural students entering private universities in Zambia captures a critical dimension of their learning experience. These findings not only relate directly to the study's title but also shed light on systemic disparities in educational preparation. Verbatim responses reinforce the urgency for targeted academic support and better alignment between rural high school curricula and university expectations.

Transformation of Identity and Social Capital Through Higher Education

Another theme shows that rural participants experienced a marked shift in how they were perceived within their home communities. Attaining university status conferred not just educational opportunity, but also social prestige and admiration. As a point of illustration, *Mukuka* strongly claimed:

...when I go back to my hometown! ...I am considered to be very important! ...Simply because I am at university!

This sentiment reflects a powerful transformation in personal and social identity, where the university student becomes a symbol of aspiration and success. Being the first in many families to attend university, these students were often regarded as role models, representatives of familial dreams, and embodiments of progress.

Further to this, participants reported a growing realization of their role and responsibility not only as students, but as ambassadors of their communities. Despite initial fears of transitioning into university life, a deeper sense of purpose began to emerge. *Enelesi* opportunely divulged:

...I see a sense of happiness in my family! ...my mother always introduces me to different people in the village that this is my daughter from the university!

Such expressions suggest that university experience transcends personal gain, instilling in students a sense of pride, dignity, and collective representation. Their academic journeys were not isolated achievements but communal triumphs that enhanced their family's social standing.

Moreover, the university environment fostered personal growth in terms of intercultural understanding and social cohesion. For many, university life introduced them to people from varying backgrounds, challenging and expanding their worldviews. As *Madalitso* noted:

...at this university, one tends to learn the value of diverse livelihood in society. Coursemates would teach you their way of life, ...where they come from.

This points to the students' increased cultural competence, a critical skill for thriving in a pluralistic society. It also illustrates how exposure to diverse perspectives can be a learning tool in itself, shaping the students into more socially aware and adaptable individuals.

These findings directly relate to the study title by revealing that learning experiences extend beyond academics for rural students in private higher education institutions. They include profound socio-cultural transformations, elevation in social capital, and development of a broader self-concept rooted in both individual achievement and community representation. The narratives emphasize that university education, for rural students, is not merely about acquiring knowledge; it is a life-altering journey that reshapes identities, nurtures intergroup relations, and solidifies their roles as agents of change within their communities.

Personal Growth and Autonomy through Transition into University Life

A central finding of this study is that being away from home created fertile ground for personal growth and autonomy, as students began navigating life independently academically, socially, and emotionally. This is a significant personal transformation for the students.

Madalitso, for example, reflected on how the university environment shaped his personal responsibility and freedom of expression:

My experience transitioning into this university has been good! ...in that it has taught me to be responsible in life. I have personal freedom to decide what I want compared to high school! ... Can dress in whatever way I want! ...without the approval of my parents!

This account encapsulates a broader experience shared by rural students: the shift from a dependent adolescent life in their hometowns to a more autonomous and self-guided adulthood within the university context. This is a positive adjustment to university life, characterized by increased independence and personal responsibility. The newfound freedom to make individual choices, both academically and personally, signifies a transition toward self-reliance and maturity. The experience highlights the development of autonomy and identity as the student learns to make independent decisions without parental oversight, an important aspect of personal growth and adjustment in higher education.

The study further revealed that this autonomy came with increased responsibility and intellectual discipline, as emphasized by *Mukuka*, who spoke of academic demands and lifestyle adaptation:

...here one needs to focus on learning and avoid missing lessons! ...as it is different from high school, where they give you attention! ...I feel I have developed and adopted a new lifestyle, environment, and technology!

Mukuka's insights underscore a deeper layer of this transition, cognitive maturity, and the development of academic self-regulation. Participants reported becoming more self-aware of their learning needs, managing their time, and adapting to new technological and environmental contexts that were previously unfamiliar in their rural backgrounds.

The account above reflects an increased sense of academic responsibility and the need for self-discipline in the university environment. Unlike high school, where structured guidance was provided, the student recognizes the importance of attending lessons and actively engaging in learning. This experience also highlights personal growth, as the student has adapted to a new lifestyle, environment, and technology, demonstrating the development of skills and habits essential for success in higher education.

In view of this, the transition from high school to university was not merely a change in academic location; it was a holistic transformation encompassing lifestyle, responsibility, independence, and intellectual engagement. The findings confirm that rural students, despite initial challenges, undergo profound personal development and adapt to their new academic and social environments in meaningful ways.

Digital Disadvantage and Technological Exclusion among Rural Students

A recurring theme that emerged across participants was a marked lack of technological preparedness, revealing how systemic inequalities rooted in their rural schooling experiences continue to impact their academic journeys in higher education.

Funyayo's emotional reflection:

...I wish I had known about technology before enrollment to this university! ...because it has been my greatest challenge here at university! ...I literally had no experience of using technology before I came to this university!

Funyayo's words resonate with a deep sense of regret and frustration, underscoring how being thrown into a digitally demanding university environment without prior exposure created a formidable barrier to academic integration and confidence. The participant's reflection highlights the challenge of adapting to technology in the university setting. Coming from a background with little or no prior exposure to technological tools, the student experiences difficulty navigating digital learning requirements. This lack of prior experience has presented a significant barrier to academic engagement and success, emphasizing the importance of technological preparedness for effective participation in higher education.

These narratives powerfully relate to this study. The findings illuminate a key dimension of this experience: technological exclusion. This digital divide not only hampers academic performance but also exacerbates feelings of alienation, self-doubt, and helplessness in environments where digital competence is assumed.

Inconsistent Institutional Academic Support for Rural Students

The findings from this study reveal a deeply layered and inconsistent experience of institutional academic support among rural students. Participants felt a profound sense of academic neglect by university authorities. They voiced that academic assistance, particularly in the area of research and assignment guidance, was often lacking. *Pelekelo* lamented the academic loneliness and lack of guidance, stating:

...the methodology used here is different! ...here, most of the things are done by the students! Lecturers and tutors rarely come in to assist in the writing of assignments and other academic work.

This sentiment echoed a broader disconnection between students and the academic structures expected to guide them. Many rural students were left to navigate the complexities of higher education independently, which was a sharp contrast to what they had anticipated. The participant's reflection highlights the shift to a student-centered learning approach at the university. Unlike previous experiences, students are expected to take primary responsibility for assignments and academic work, with minimal direct support from lecturers and tutors. This emphasizes the need for independent learning, self-discipline, and initiative in navigating the university's academic requirements.

Yet, this reality was not universal. Some participants described a more positive academic experience. *Funyayo*, for instance, appreciated the institutional support provided and expressed satisfaction:

...lecturers provide us with necessary learning materials! ...I do not really face serious academic challenges at this university!

The participant's statement indicates that access to adequate learning materials from lecturers has facilitated a smooth academic experience. The availability of these resources has helped the student manage their studies effectively, resulting in minimal academic difficulties at the university. Such conflicting experiences highlight a clear disparity in the academic support system: while some rural students benefitted from institutional mechanisms, others felt largely unsupported and overwhelmed.

To further interrogate this disparity, the researcher interviewed senior administrative officers, namely, Deans of Students and Registrars. These interviews revealed that institutions had put in place various support strategies, especially aimed at vulnerable populations, including students from rural areas. These included tuition fee flexibility, scholarship opportunities, academic orientation sessions, the provision of communication skills training, and access to counselling services.

An *administrator* detailed their multifaceted approach to student support:



Academically, ...we offer our students communication skills. ...you can tell the difference between one who went to a trust school or technical school from someone who attended a rural school in terms of language. So, we offer communication skills to all students.... We also have orientation for first-year students where students are enlightened on what is expected of them. We also offer scholarships to deserving students. ...for international students and those outside Lusaka (this includes rural students), we drive them around the corners of the city. Through the student union leadership, we make sure that some challenges faced by the students are taken care of.

This suggests that institutional frameworks do exist, but the inconsistency in students' experiences may be due to poor implementation, lack of awareness among students, or unequal access to these services. The statement highlights the university's efforts to support students' academic and social adjustment. It shows that the institution provides communication skills training to address differences in language proficiency among students from various educational backgrounds. Additionally, orientation programs help first-year students understand university expectations, while scholarships and logistical support for students from rural areas or outside the city assist in easing financial and mobility challenges. Student leadership involvement ensures that student concerns are addressed, contributing to a supportive learning environment.

Further, institutions emphasized the personalization of support and the critical role of faculty in recognizing student diversity. Another *officer* confirmed:

...we have well-qualified lecturers who are well-versed in their subject areas! ...we have the Dean of Students Affairs, where free counselling services are offered to students. ...some students are allowed to sit for exams despite not completing payments of the tuition fees... but, this is treated on a case-by-case basis!

Such sentiments indicate that, at least on paper, the institutions are conscious of the special needs of rural students. The statement emphasizes the university's provision of academic and pastoral support to students. Qualified lecturers ensure that students receive expert instruction, while the Dean of Student Affairs offers free counseling services to support students' well-being. Flexible policies regarding tuition payments, handled on a case-by-case basis, demonstrate the institution's efforts to accommodate students facing financial challenges, thereby facilitating continued access to learning and academic participation. However, the discrepancy between student testimonies and administrative claims points to a gap between policy and practice.

The findings of this study unveil a significant inconsistency in the academic support experienced by rural students in private higher education institutions in Zambia. While institutional mechanisms for support are in place, their uneven implementation or lack of student engagement with these services results in a perception and often a reality of academic neglect. The study underscores the need for more effective communication, monitoring, and targeted interventions to ensure that rural students are not only aware of but also able to benefit from the academic resources available to them. Equitable academic outcomes hinge on universities moving beyond policy statements to ensure that every student, regardless of background, receives consistent and meaningful academic support.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

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

Social Adjustment and Cultural Integration

Consistent with international literature, this study confirms that rural students experience culture shock, perceived social inferiority, and difficulties integrating into urban university environments (Corbett, 2007; Byun et al., 2012; Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2010). However, unlike studies that emphasize prolonged marginalization, the findings reveal a dynamic adjustment process in which initial social dislocation gradually gives way to adaptation and selective integration. This suggests stronger social resilience among rural students in Zambia's private universities than is often portrayed in existing literature.

Student Agency and Social Navigation

In contrast to studies from Australia, Canada, and South Africa that depict rural students as passive recipients of exclusion (Looker & Naylor, 2009; Letseka & Breier, 2008), this study highlights students' agency in navigating social spaces. Participants actively formed course-based relationships and adjusted to academic pressures, indicating that social integration is shaped not only by cultural differences but also by institutional academic structures, an aspect underexplored in prior research.

Academic Preparedness and Transition

Existing African and global studies consistently frame rural students as academically underprepared due to systemic inequalities in secondary education (Akyeampong, 2017; Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019; Ministry of General Education, 2020). While this study affirms these challenges, it contrasts with deficit-dominated narratives by revealing variation in student experiences. Some participants reported smoother transitions due to subject continuity and positive teacher influence, a nuance often absent in comparative studies.

Lived Academic Experiences in Zambian PHEIs

Unlike much of the Zambian literature, which focuses primarily on access, retention, and structural barriers (Kapambwe et al., 2020; Chishimba, 2017), this study foregrounds lived academic experiences. It demonstrates that pedagogical shifts, lecturer–student engagement, and learning autonomy are central to academic acclimatization in private higher education institutions, extending beyond access-oriented analyses.

Identity Transformation and Social Capital

While prior studies emphasize higher education as a source of symbolic status and mobility (Morley et al., 2010; Tikly, 2020; Chiwela, 2018), this study shows that identity transformation occurs alongside ongoing academic and social struggle. Social prestige, communal pride, and responsibility emerge concurrently with adaptation challenges, indicating that identity development is a continuous process rather than a post-success outcome.

Autonomy and Developmental Transformation

Student development literature often treats autonomy and self-regulation as normative milestones (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Tinto, 2012). This study contrasts with that assumption by showing that for rural Zambian students, autonomy is transformational. Participants encountered independence as a radical shift intensified by rural upbringing, limited technological exposure, and urban relocation.

Digital Inequality and Technological Exclusion

Global literature on digital inequality typically emphasizes differences in access quality or usage intensity (Selwyn, 2020). In contrast, this study documents near-total technological exclusion before university entry. Participants entered private universities with little or no digital experience, positioning technological exclusion as a central lived barrier to academic acclimatization rather than a peripheral issue, thereby extending African scholarship (Boateng & Effah, 2021; Mtebe & Raisamo, 2014).

According to Cosgrove (2021), non-tech audiences are typically individuals who may be aware of technology but do not actively incorporate it into their daily lives, often only using it for basic communication with family or friends. The experiences of these Zambian students reflect this very demographic; their exposure to and engagement with technology were either extremely limited or absent during their high school years.

Overall, while this study corroborates existing literature on the challenges faced by rural students in higher education, it contrasts with prior work by foregrounding adaptation, agency, and transformation within Zambia's private higher education context. It shifts the discourse from a deficit-based framing toward a more nuanced understanding of rural students as active participants in their academic and social development, offering context-specific insights for policy and practice.

Inconsistent Institutional Academic Support for Rural Students

Contrary to other studies conducted in South Africa (Kasi et al., 2021; Mabila et al., 2016; Letseka, 2014), this study found that rural students in Zambia experienced a far more abrupt and challenging transition when moving from highly structured rural high schools to the independent learning culture of urban private universities. Whereas South African research often reports that institutions provide orientation programmes, academic support centers, and structured first-year interventions that help students gradually develop self-management and time-discipline skills, the rural Zambian students in this study encountered limited guidance and minimal academic scaffolding.

Participants described the shift as frightening, tough, and strange, reflecting a profound struggle to adapt to expectations of personal responsibility and autonomous learning. South African literature suggests that with adequate support, rural-origin students progressively build competencies in planning, self-regulation, and managing coursework (Mudhovozi, 2012; Strydom & Mentz, 2010). In contrast, participants in this study expressed feeling unsupported, isolated, and overwhelmed by the sudden demand to organize their own schedules, meet deadlines independently, and navigate assessments without the close supervision they were accustomed to in rural high schools.

The verbatim by Enelesi, “here we do everything on our own,” highlights a level of academic self-reliance that students were unprepared for. This stands in opposition to studies from South Africa that document how institutional support systems ease the transition by providing mentoring, tutoring, and structured academic development programmes (Council on Higher Education, 2013; Theron & Theron, 2014). As a result, the Zambian rural students’ struggles with self-management and time discipline appear more pronounced, revealing gaps in institutional support that may hinder their adjustment and academic performance.

Therefore, these findings demonstrate that while literature from South Africa emphasizes the role of institutional interventions in supporting rural students’ adjustment, the rural Zambian students in this study faced a much more demanding and unsupported transition, intensifying the challenges of personal responsibility and autonomous learning. The findings of this study reveal a complex and uneven pattern of institutional academic support experienced by rural students enrolled in private higher education institutions in Zambia. While institutional frameworks designed to aid vulnerable students, such as scholarship schemes, orientation programmes, communication skills training, and academic counselling, are reportedly in place, student testimonies indicate considerable variability in their awareness of, access to, and benefit from these support mechanisms. This inconsistency signals a concerning gap between policy and practice, particularly affecting students from rural backgrounds who often arrive at university with lower levels of academic preparedness.

Within Zambia, the majority of academic literature on rural students in higher education has focused on public institutions, where challenges related to overcrowding, underfunding, and logistical limitations are well-documented (Mulenga, 2020; Masaiti, 2020 & Mkandawire, 2020). However, less attention has been paid to private institutions, which are often assumed to offer superior learning environments. This study disrupts that assumption by demonstrating that private higher education institutions also grapple with significant disparities in the delivery of academic support, especially for rural students. While administrative officials in this study described various mechanisms aimed at addressing student needs, including flexible tuition payments, guided city tours for non-local students, and access to counselling services, the accounts provided by students themselves reveal that many remain unaware of these resources or perceive them as inaccessible.

The study shows that while multiple forms of support exist on paper, the extent to which rural students’ access or benefit from them is highly inconsistent. This disparity not only impedes equitable academic outcomes but also undermines the very purpose of such support systems. The findings highlight the importance of not just providing support structures but ensuring their effective communication, accessibility, and adaptation to the lived realities of rural students.

Moreover, the findings bring to light the under-researched experiences of rural students in Zambia’s private higher education landscape, a sector that has seen rapid growth but limited academic scrutiny. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the rural student experience within private institutions, contrasting with the

dominant focus on public universities. By including both student perspectives and administrative insights, the research offers a more nuanced understanding of how institutional support mechanisms function or fail to function in practice.

In conclusion, these findings call for a more systematic approach to the implementation and evaluation of academic support in private higher education institutions. This includes increasing awareness among students, particularly those from rural areas, about available resources; enhancing faculty and administrative accountability in the delivery of support services; and institutionalizing regular feedback mechanisms to assess the efficacy and inclusivity of such programmes. Without bridging the policy-practice gap, institutional support will continue to be a promise unrealized for many rural students, thereby perpetuating educational inequities within the higher education system.

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.

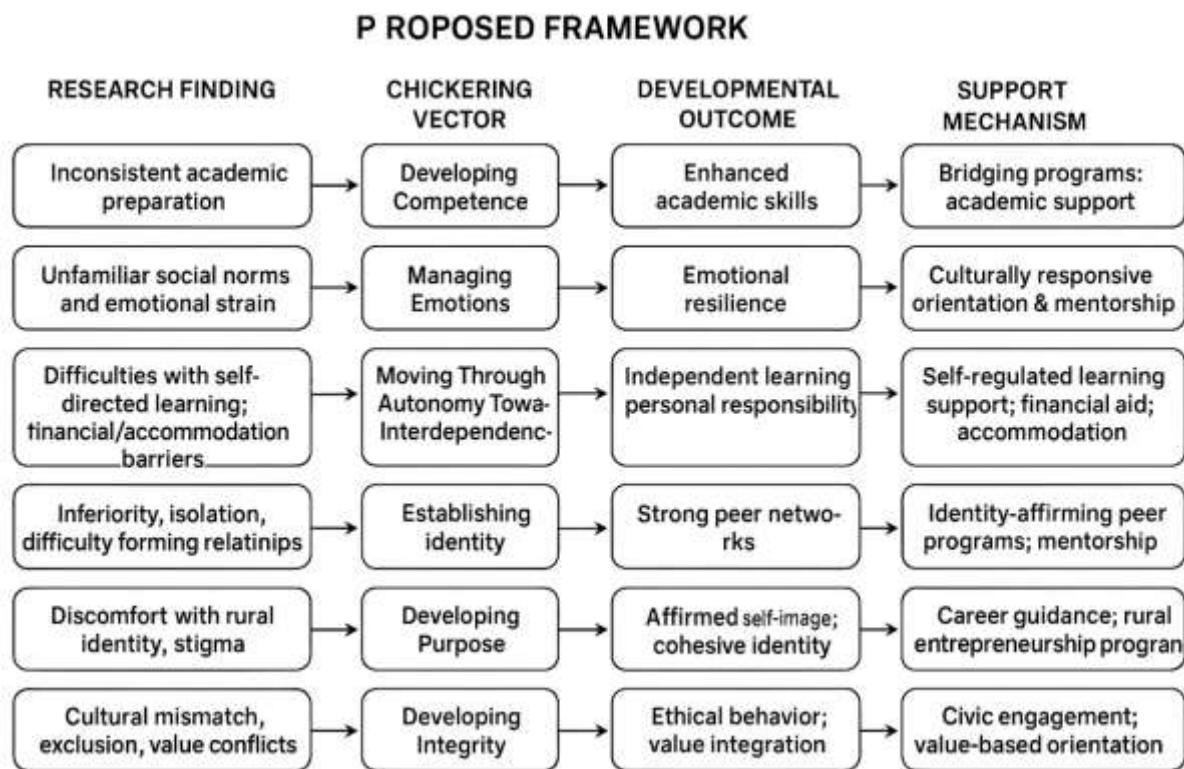


Figure 1: Framework for the support mechanism of rural students in private universities

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 (Kudzana & 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 has ascertained that rural students in Zambia's Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) face complex challenges in transitioning from rural secondary schools to urban university environments. Key barriers include academic underpreparedness, cultural dislocation, and digital exclusion. However, the study reveals that rural students are active agents who gradually adapt, navigate social spaces, and develop resilience, challenging deficit-based narratives prevalent in existing literature.

Study outcomes indicate that adjustment is both academic and developmental. Using Chickering's Seven Vectors and Perry's Cognitive-Structural Theory, students were found to have progressively developed autonomy, intellectual competence, emotional regulation, and identity while managing self-directed learning, urban social norms, and technological demands. Autonomy emerges as transformational, influenced by rural upbringing and limited prior exposure to digital tools.

Importantly, academic acclimatization is shaped not only by structural access but also by lived experiences, including peer relationships, lecturer engagement, and institutional culture. With targeted, context-responsive support such as mentoring, digital literacy training, and culturally inclusive programs, rural students can successfully adapt, thrive, and realize their full academic and personal potential in private higher education.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

- a) The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with private universities, should implement compulsory bridging programs designed to equip rural students with foundational competencies in academic writing, critical thinking, digital literacy, and university orientation. These programs would address the academic preparedness gaps identified in the study, ensuring that students from under-resourced rural schools are better able to navigate the demands of higher education.
- b) To address the social and cultural challenges identified in this study, including feelings of alienation, identity conflict, and limited peer support, universities should establish student-led rural associations and designated safe spaces. The Student Affairs Office should take primary responsibility for coordinating these initiatives, providing policy support, oversight, and resources to ensure sustainability.
- c) In response to the academic difficulties experienced by rural students, such as academic unpreparedness, stress, and the dual transition of adapting to new pedagogical and cultural norms, universities should implement culturally responsive mentorship programs. Responsibility for these programs should be shared among academic departments, the Student Affairs Office, and senior students or alumni.
- d) Future research should follow cohorts of rural students throughout their university experience to examine the long-term impacts on academic outcomes, psychosocial well-being, and post-graduation employment trajectories. Such studies would provide insights into how early academic and social challenges influence success over time.

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