

Research Paper

Barriers Rural Maldivian High School Students Face in Transitioning to Higher Education

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Abstract: Student enrolment in higher education has long been inconsistent for those residing in urban areas and for those who are settled in rural areas. This study aims to explore the barriers Maldivian rural high school students face in transitioning to higher education through the lenses of the students, parents and instructors. The research adopted a qualitative case study approach, involving individual interviews of five rural high school students, and a focus group discussion of four parents of rural high school students along with three higher education instructors, who were selected via purposive sampling. Perspectives of the participants were gained with regard to transition from high school to higher education and the common barriers encountered during the transition process. The collected data was analysed via thematic analysis, which led to the emergence of five challenges from two main themes, which are prioritisation of work over education and academic inadequacies in rural regions. The findings of this study are consistent with a number of other studies, whilst bringing some novel ideas to the forefront in the context of the Maldives.

Keywords: Rural students, barriers, higher education, high school, transition

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Introduction

Rural areas in the Maldives exhibit a distinct culture of limited educational resources, socioeconomic differences, and regional isolation when it comes to students' enrolment in higher education. Less than half of the students enrolling in secondary education proceed to higher secondary education, of which only a small number of students matriculate to higher education institutes (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2019). Nonetheless, the increasing demand for higher education qualifications, for the purpose of professional and promotional advancements have made it an essential necessity among high school graduates in the Maldives to attend colleges and universities. However, not all students have equal access to knowledge, assistance and resources to navigate the transition from school to university. This is particularly true in relation to the rural population scattered across the country, except for the capital Male (MOE, 2019). The main factor for this disparity is the limited number of resources available in the rural areas along with the smaller number of students enrolling in the courses, which prevents education providers from directing their maximal focus to rural regions. Eventually, the idea of higher education becomes an isolated phenomenon brimming with hardships and privilege (Wilkins, 2020).

According to Guzmán et al. (2021), several low- and middle-income countries are experiencing a national crisis due to the decrease in the rate of enrolment of rural high school students in higher education programs. This is primarily because most of the developmental focus is placed on the urban capital of the country, which results in the rural populations suffering greatly in every aspect of privilege (Wu et al., 2017). This crisis is exacerbated by the fact that 90% of the rapidly growing high-salary jobs demand a college diploma at the very least, if not additional higher education credentials. Schools in rural regions are entrusted with educating the vast majority of a country's future workforce, but at the same time, lack the resources required to provide a combative education, contrary to their urban counterparts (Jošić et al., 2022). Most of the researchers believe that the strain on rural areas with regard to students' transition to higher education stems mainly from the economical divergence and cultural variances among the people in a particular area (Gristy, 2019; Mgqwashu et al., 2020). Nevertheless, it is very likely that the constraints would vary depending on the country or a specific region of the country.

According to research, attaining higher education provides numerous benefits, including social and financial privileges for those who attend and complete their course of study (Chankseliani et al., 2020). Literature further suggests that receiving higher education elevates an individual's financial status in the long run, regardless of their initial socioeconomic situation (Alves & Korhonen, 2016). However, although higher education offers a range of benefits to all the students in a particular program, not everyone has the opportunity to pursue higher education. In 2019, the gross enrolment proportion of tertiary education was only 34% (MOE, 2019). The

number of students who go forward with higher education is disproportionate for urban areas and rural regions (Amankulova, 2018).

As reported by Amankulova (2018), a major reason for this disparity is due to the difference in availability of support and guidance to students residing in both areas. High school graduates in rural regions struggle in accessing higher education due to limitations in social capital, number of higher education institutes available and various financial strains. All these factors collectively make their journey more challenging (Mgqwashu et al., 2020). Further, Mbhiza and Nkambule (2023) asserted that parents of rural high school students feel helpless, despite wanting to guide their children, as they themselves do not possess first-hand knowledge regarding higher education.

The problem is that the barriers these rural high school students face are not thoroughly understood, which results in those barriers persisting over time (Amankulova, 2018). Most of the research on higher education among rural students is carried out by researchers from higher education backgrounds, and their take on the topic generally follows university students' perspectives (Kryst et al., 2018). Only a few studies (Goldman, 2019; Macaro et al., 2018; Yaşar & Turgut, 2020) have approached the topic from rural high school students' perspectives, of which none has been carried out in the context of Maldives, which leaves a significant knowledge gap in research. Due to the wide variations in the economic and social makeup of rural areas between nations, country-specific research is required to identify the barriers encountered by rural students in their respective countries (Mgqwashu et al., 2020).

The verbal accounts of authoritative members of Maldivian universities and colleges highlight that rural high school students in Maldives indeed face challenges in pursuing higher education, the details of which are not fully known due to the lack of research on the topic in relation to Maldives. For the most part, academic failure among young adults is often traced back to the challenges that they encounter during the initial phases of their transition between school and higher education. Additionally, these challenges can deprive students from feeling a sense of solidarity which can greatly interfere with their motivation in relation to studies, as well as their engagement with the academic environment (Hsu, 2019). This research not only makes it possible to identify the barriers, but it also draws attention to and helps bridge the disparity gap between rural and urban regions, ultimately expanding access to higher education across the country.

Hence, this study aims to identify the barriers encountered by rural Maldivian high school students in transitioning to higher education, and is driven by the following research question: What are the barriers encountered by rural Maldivian high school students in transitioning to higher education?

Literature Review

Higher Education in Maldives

Upon completion of high school education, students transit from the pedagogical system of school into higher education which is governed by andragogy (Chacko, 2018). In simple terms, higher education encompasses all post-secondary education that is received after high school. The Maldives' education sector has grown rapidly in the last decade, with an exponential increase in students and higher education institutions. There are currently nine private colleges and three public institutes comprising two universities in the Maldives, all of which have their subdivisions in various locations of the Maldives. However, depending on the region, the number of courses and programs offered to students vary along with the quality of education, in regions other than the capital, which has long been an issue of concern for most education providers (Wilkins, 2020). Most common reasons for this disparity are limited number of resources available in the rural areas along with the smaller number of students enrolling in the courses, which prevents education providers from directing their maximal focus to rural regions. Eventually, the idea of higher education becomes an isolated phenomenon brimming with hardships and privilege (Wilkins, 2020).

Transition from High School to Higher Education

Transition is a phenomenon which includes the inevitable process of adjustment that comes to a person over time (Shi & Brown, 2021). Thompson et al. (2021) supported this definition of transition by referring to the movement of high school students to higher education as a significant transition of life. This phase of transition is fraught with a number of challenges and strains for students as they attempt to fulfil the expectations of their new academic and social atmosphere. Students must learn to deal with a variety of new obstacles and move forward to integrate into academic expectations, build new social networks, become autonomous and independent, as well as become accountable for their personal and career choices (Thompson et al., 2021). The transition of students from high school to higher education is viewed in related literature as a multifaceted and intricate process (Korhonen et al., 2019). Nonetheless, when investigating the process of transition, most researchers focused on a single theme in relation to the transition of students from high school to higher education. Likewise, many researchers addressed the subject of transition after students arrive at higher education institutes, which leaves the pre-transition experience noticeably unexplored (Worsley et al., 2021).

Historically, the graduation rates of rural high school students were significantly low compared to their urban peers (Roberts & Grant, 2021). Nonetheless, over the years, the trend in graduation rates have reversed, exhibiting a higher graduation rate

among rural high students. Even though more rural students are graduating from high school, their matriculation into higher education still remains considerably low, as opposed to their urban equivalents (Johnson et al., 2021). According to Cain and Smith (2020), in 2015, in spite of high school graduation rates exceeding 15% more in rural areas, only 29% of high school students from rural areas enrolled in a higher education program compared to 48% from urban areas.

Barriers in Transitioning from High School to Higher Education

Although the reasons for rural high school students' enrolment in higher education institutes vary based on geographic region, some of the factors could be witnessed in the rural population of Maldives as well. Many of these factors are concerned with the intersection of various subjects beyond rurality, which directly impacts the future of the rural population (Goldman, 2019). This section of the literature review underlines the process of transition from high school to higher education, as well as the major barriers affecting rural high school students, including cultural and community constraints, high drop-out rates and lack of guidance along with financial limitations.

Culture and Community Constraints

Comprehension of the barriers that rural high school students encounter in their transition to higher education must be done in the context of culture in rural communities (Cain & Class, 2023). Rural regions often lack the presence of diverse higher education institutes, which necessitates high school students from those regions to travel to areas which present them with that option. Goldman (2019) found that high school students from rural areas preferred to stay near their families and support networks and dismissed the idea of travelling for the purpose of higher education. She also outlined that although students antagonised the idea of moving away from their support networks, they did understand that it would be an unavoidable step, if they were to attain a good higher education qualification. It is the thought of leaving behind their accustomed ways of life which proves to be overly stressful for rural high school students to cope with.

Rural lifestyle and culture are more conservative in comparison to urban communities, which results in rural students experiencing cultural shock when they enrol in higher education institutes in urban areas (Verulava et al., 2019). Therefore, rural students enrolling in colleges and universities are often burdened with the compulsion of making the mental and environmental shift in a short span of time. Additionally, students from rural areas often face isolation in their new environment by their urban peers due to differences in lifestyle and cultural norms, which further discourages rural students from travelling to pursue higher education (Webb, 2019).

In addition to this, Sowle et al. (2022) found that rural high school students who aspire to pursue higher education do not receive the required support from their community. This happens because community members fear that students who move away for higher education would not return after completing their studies due to limited job opportunities for them back in their rural community. This idea is supported in Haley's study (2018), which demonstrated that rural high school students who travel away from home for higher education display a 7% higher chance of not returning back in comparison to their urban counterparts.

Drop-out Rates and Lack of Guidance

Another notable factor which hinders rural high school students' transition into higher education is the high drop-out rates at the school level and lack of guidance (Guzmán et al., 2021). Weybright et al. (2017) identified in their study that 48% of the class strength shrinks in rural high schools by the end of the final year. Schmitt-Wilson et al. (2018) believed that rural communities should make high school completion a high priority, as it directly influences students' future endeavours regarding higher education, as well as affect the potential growth of the rural communities.

In addition to this, rural high school students in general have extremely restricted access to information in relation to higher education, due to limited career academics and career counselling during their time in school (Rosvall, 2020). This limited access results in rural students being relatively unaware of the possible options that are available in terms of higher education. High school students in rural areas often depend on their parents and school counsellors for academic guidance and career planning. Seward and Gaesser (2018) in their research found that rural students who were the first to pursue higher education in their families were vulnerable when it came to succeeding in institutions of higher education. Students with parents who have previously received higher education are more likely to have greater educational aspirations in comparison to those students with low-literate parents (Toukoushian et al., 2021).

Research done in rural England focusing on parent and sibling educational level found that students with parents and siblings who attended college were twice as likely to matriculate into higher education themselves (Henderson et al., 2019). Low literacy rate is higher by multiple folds in rural areas than in urban regions, which results in parents in rural areas lacking knowledge regarding the importance of their child receiving higher education. This in turn leads to parents of rural students not being able to guide and support them in their journey to higher education (Ghanney, 2018). Additionally, parenting in rural areas is more community oriented, which means that various other adults apart from a child's direct guardians influence their overall development (Jannat & Letchamanan, 2022). Thus, with so few adults with

proper higher education in rural areas, students are left with limited guidance and support with regard to enrolment in higher education (Cheung, 2021).

Financial Restrictions

Financial instability is a common observation in rural regions, and it makes a substantial contribution to the geographical and psychological isolation students experience in the process of selecting their choice of higher education institute (Worsley et al., 2021). The scarcity of financial resources has been pointed out by Stoddard and Toma (2021) as an element which could affect students' preparation, as well as their continuation of the chosen higher education program. Moreover, high school students are often subjected to several situations which require them to pay for additional expenses, apart from what is to be paid for their undertaken program. For instance, fees for higher education preparatory courses, cost of accommodation and transport, as well as entrance examination fees are some of the expenses which place a considerable financial strain on high school students from rural regions (Yaşar & Turgut, 2020).

Castleman and Meyer (2019) noted in their study that, even with the possibility of being eligible to some of the most prestigious courses and programs in higher education institutes, high school students from rural areas with lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to make less aspiring educational choices in terms of the program they choose to study. Hence, financial limitations foster a feeling of vulnerability among rural high school students in relation to their higher educational goals (Stoddard & Toma, 2021). Aside from the obvious expenses related to higher education, financial limitations indirectly impact on the opportunities made available to students residing in rural areas. Educators that reside in rural regions do not receive the same income as their urban counterparts (Sichilima & Chipindi, 2020). This has resulted in more and more educators and professionals relocating to urban areas in search of better pay and better opportunities for themselves, correspondingly depriving rural students of proficient mentors (Ramasamy & Lee, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

The contextual theory put forward by Lent et al. (2000) could be applied in exploring the issue of barriers rural high school students in Maldives encounter in transitioning to higher education. The social cognitive career theory proposed by Lent et al. (2000) analyses the process through which an individual develops career and academic interests, makes choices in relation to those interests and eventually attains success in the chosen area of interest. The fundamental theory which paves students' academic pathway is Bandura's social cognitive theory. As the fundamental "building blocks" of the theory, there are three intricately related variables: self-efficacy beliefs,

outcome or result expectancies, and goals (Lent et al., 2000). The three variables play key roles in the social cognitive career theory's models of educational and vocational interest development, choice making, and performance achievement. The types and areas of activities to which adolescents and children are exposed to depend partly on the environment and culture in which they are raised (Rasdi & Ahrari, 2020). For instance, in the Maldivian community, rural high school students are often only exposed to limited job opportunities and career options, which causes them to make repressed decisions when it comes to enrolling in higher educational programs.

The social cognitive career theory also underlines that decision goals can occasionally be impacted more strongly and directly by self-efficacy ideas, result expectancies, or contextual factors than they are by interests (Lent et al., 2000). Nevertheless, many individuals are still unable to pursue their passions due to certain constraints or lack of support from people who they consider important. In these situations, people may put their interests on hold and make decisions based on more pragmatic factors such as the types of opportunities that they have access to, beliefs about their own abilities, and the outcome of the choice they make.

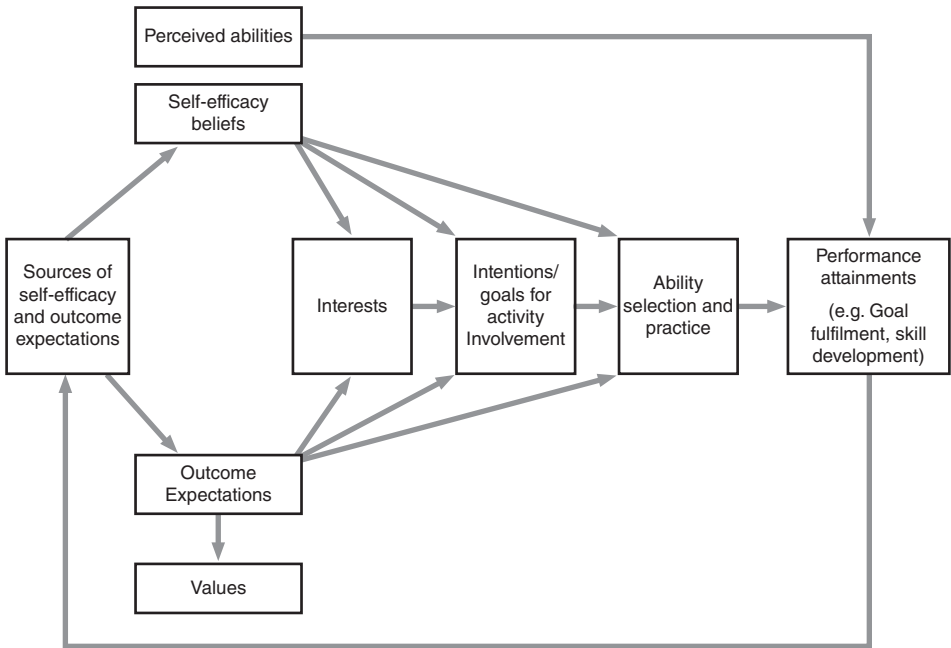


Figure 1. Social cognitive career theory adapted from Lent et al. (2000)

Methodology

Research Design

A case study approach which follows a qualitative methodology was applied for the purpose of this study, as Takahashi and Araujo (2020) outlined this is an effective method of gaining in-depth knowledge about a particular experience described by participants. According to Aspers and Corte (2019), a qualitative methodology should be employed in studies which seek to understand the views and perceptions of the participants involved, as it would generate new ideas which would require further synthesis. This qualitative case study enabled the examination of rural high school students' perception on the barriers they were encountering in matriculating into higher education.

Population and Study Sample

This research study was conducted on one of the islands of the southern region of Maldives. The target population of the study consisted of students who have enrolled in the high school of the selected rural island. In addition, educators teaching in tertiary education were also selected for the study. This study utilised purposive sampling of five students, four parents, as well as three higher education instructors. This type of sampling is useful in times when the available resources are limited, or in cases where the identification of best suited samples are required to answer the research question (Ames et al., 2019). In the instance of this study, very few students were enrolled in the high school as a whole, and even fewer of those students intended to pursue higher education.

All the students who participated in this study were local students between the ages of 17 and 20, in their final year of high school, and who planned to matriculate into higher education at the time of the interview. Since this study aimed to explore the barriers Maldivian rural high school students encounter in transitioning to higher education, expatriate students were not considered for the study, as the overall educational intent and experience would differ between expatriate and local students. Additionally, the study only involved final-year high school students, as they would likely be the first to make the shift from school to higher education. Likewise, parents of final-year high school students were selected based on their child's interest in pursuing higher education. Also, higher education instructors with at least two years of experience were selected for the study to obtain the most suitable and relevant data for this study.

Before data collection, all participants signed an informed consent letter sent via email, outlining the purpose and procedure of the study, which also detailed the voluntary nature of participation along with the right to decline answering particular questions or complete withdrawal from the study at any point. To further protect the

well-being of the participants, data collection was carried out employing the utmost confidentiality and anonymity. In addition, pseudonyms in place of real names were used throughout the report. Further, the recordings and the transcribed data were kept in password-protected folders, and destroyed once the research was completed.

Data Collection Methods

Interviews and focus group discussion were used to collect data for this study. Focus groups assist in acquiring information from a group setting. As Luke and Goodrich (2019) described, focus groups allow participants to add to the discussion, in conjunction with other members in the group, which helps them explain themselves by dwelling over the ideas presented. Moreover, focus groups enable perceptions of multiple individuals to be gathered simultaneously, which provide the researcher nuanced insights about a topic from a number of viewpoints. There were two focus groups in this study; focus group A consisted of four parents and focus group B included three higher education instructors. A semi-structured question guide was designed for each focus group to make sure that all the participants were committed to the task, and that the meetings were organised and orderly.

Moreover, individual interviews with five higher secondary students were conducted in this study. Interviews enable participants to provide subjective information without being influenced by others in their responses. According to Philipps and Mrowczynski (2019), although in-person interviews are generally time-consuming, it allows the researcher to gain effective information from the participants, while being able to observe nonverbal cues, which could enhance the researcher's extrapolation of the information. The interview strategy used in this study was semi-structured, with the aim to allow a degree of flexibility in questioning. Questions in the guide mainly pertained to students' experiences and views in relation to the topic of enrolment in higher education institutes. All the questions were open-ended and synthesised in a way which proceeded to follow-up questions, enabling the collection of more information.

In order to promote reliability and soundness in this research, participants were presented with the option of refusing to take part in the study. This would ensure the honesty of the information as the data collection process involved only those participants who were willing to provide information. Moreover, data triangulation was carried out by collecting information from three different sources, parents, students and higher educators and by employing interviews and focus group discussions. The findings from both interviews and focus group discussions were then compared to verify the validity of the collected information as the utilisation of multiple sources of data or methods can thoroughly comprehend a phenomena (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021; Campbell et al., 2020).

Data Analysis

After completing data collection, all the audio recordings were transcribed. Following this, the transcribed data was thoroughly read to concentrate data into codes and to identify the initial themes. As per Elliott (2018), this first review of data known as open coding allowed the examination of all the compiled data, and line-by-line highlight areas of the text that might potentially become a common theme. Hence, the initial line-by-line coding approach was utilised and it enabled better comprehension of the thought process of the participants involved in this study. Next, the data was reviewed a second time to assess the initial codes and to construct linkages between the open coded data, which Theron (2015) referred to as axial coding. In the third review, categories and themes were identified from the linked data and the core variables were established. Eventually, a table was tabulated, and columns were designated for each participant. Thereafter, quotes and phrases which synonymised with the identified categories and themes were listed separately to derive conclusions. On the same note, the differences in the information provided by students, parents and higher education instructors with regard to questions that were recurrent in all three populations were also analysed.

Findings

The analysis of the data identified five challenges faced by students in pursuing their tertiary education. The five challenges are categorised into two main themes: prioritisation of work over education in rural regions and academic inadequacy in rural regions. The following section presents the findings.

Prioritisation of Work over Education in Rural Regions

A few challenges in transitioning to higher education were mentioned by all the participants, many of which were similar to those emphasised in the literature review, while some were unique to this study. This theme illustrates the participants' narration of the barriers they encountered because of their rural background. Lack of academic drive in the community, along with poor financial conditions and the necessity to travel for education, influence rural regions to prioritise labour over higher education.

Absence of a College-Going Culture

All of the students in this study vocalised that they felt supported by different individuals, with regard to their decision to pursue higher education. Nonetheless, they indicated that the rural community as a whole, favoured the idea of businesses and immediate employment over higher education. Student A described the attitude his community members had towards higher education:

Most people think higher education is pointless, especially for boys. They think we are capable enough to start a business or get a job once we are done with our secondary or higher secondary education. We will get enough money from the business or the job.

Apart from a few individuals in the rural community who encouraged students to pursue higher education, most members of the community urged students to find employment immediately after high school. Student A stated that, “everyone is pushing me to get a job once I’m done with school, except some teachers.” In the focus group discussion conducted with higher education instructors, instructor A shared her experience:

Most of the students that I have taught were previously working. Mostly in resorts or retail shops. They decided to enrol in college once they started to feel that their level of education was not going to help them progress in the job they are employed in. I believe those students get influenced by people around them into working right after high school.

Financial Shortcomings

Another challenge identified in this research was financial limitations as a barrier to enrolment in higher education in a comparable, but less explicit way. Student E stated the following regarding higher education:

I guess many people don’t have the money for it, unless they get a scholarship or a student loan from the government, they’ll not want to pursue higher education. Besides, only a few students who score the top marks are eligible for scholarships. Plus, most of us are clueless about the whole process of applying and getting the scholarship.

She further mentioned the availability of scholarships as an important factor in resolving the issue of finances, which was a recurrent answer among almost all of the participants. On the same note, student C, regarding her plans of attending higher education, stated that her first attempt would be to apply for a scholarship before considering studying at a government university. Student C further added that most of the scholarship-related briefing sessions are held in the capital city, which she believed might limit her chances of getting one.

The decision of considering a government university over a private college was again repetitive among the students who participated in this study. According to the students, the tuition fees at private colleges are more expensive in comparison to government-funded universities and colleges.

In the focus group discussion with parents, when asked about the barriers their child would likely face in transitioning to higher education, the first response of all the parents were “money”. All the parents agreed that higher education would provide children with better opportunities in life. However, they were of the viewpoint that they can assist their children with finances only to a certain extent, and anything beyond their set boundaries cannot be sustained by them, due to other commitments. This was apparent in the statement made by student B:

It would be really hard for my parents to spend on my college expenses while looking after my siblings. I mean they would somehow find a way to send me to college, but I'll have to work part-time to continue studying.

Travelling as a Deterrent

Maldives is a geographically dispersed country, and its capital Male', situated in the north central region of the country, is equipped with all the major higher education institutes. Students who participated in this study were all from the southern region of Maldives, where the number of institutes providing higher education are scarce. This meant that travelling for higher education arose by default for rural students. Nonetheless, narratives in relation to travelling for higher education varied between different students who participated in this study, as not all students displayed interest in travelling elsewhere for higher education. Student C and Student E mentioned their interest in pursuing higher education abroad but stated that they felt apprehensive about the high cost of international travel. Similarly, Student B voiced her disappointment regarding the issue:

The course that I want to study is offered only in Male' and is taught in block mode. This means that I have to travel back-and-forth from home multiple times, and every single time I have to purchase tickets at high cost. My family is not wealthy enough to accommodate me in Male'.

Additionally, travelling away for higher education also posed as a barrier emotionally for those students who plan to travel away from their homes. Student C shared her thoughts on the emotional aspect of travel:

If I happen to attend the course abroad, I would be thrilled. Still, it would be really hard for me knowing that I can't go back home whenever I want. I know I can stay in touch with my family through video calls, but I'll miss physically being around my mom and dad so much. I'll truly be homesick.

Academic Inadequacy in Rural Regions

Students who participated in this study expressed a sense of being underprepared for higher education in terms of academics in a variety of ways. This theme highlights the academic barriers rural high school students in Maldives encounter, in relation to the poor quality of education provided in rural schools and the lack of diversified programs and resources in rural higher education institutes.

Poor Quality of Education in Rural Schools

Specific to this study, all the students cited that the quality of education was not satisfactory in terms of teaching and preparing them for higher education. Some participants specified certain factors which minimised the quality of education, while others had a more general take on the subject. Student D stated the following when asked about the barriers they faced in school to successfully transition into higher education:

We don't have teachers that are specifically trained to teach higher secondary students at our school. Teachers who are trained to teach secondary students are sent to take classes for us. The examination boards in secondary and higher secondary level are different, which makes it really difficult to adjust to the change in the syllabus. So, sending us teachers who are new to the syllabus themselves isn't much of a help. If I mess up my higher secondary exams, I won't have the chance to enrol in a degree directly.

This statement by student D indicates that the quality of education provided at the school for rural students is compromised. Similarly, student C mentioned that she was concerned she might have to struggle in college due to how poorly her school was preparing students for higher education in terms of academics. Likewise, when asked about the number of students in the class, student A answered:

We started with 26 students and now there's just 15 of us. Some of them dropped out. Most of the students who dropped out were those that studied Art in their secondary. One of them was a close friend of mine and I tried to convince him to stay, but he said that his main interest was art and since it was not offered in higher secondary, he didn't want to continue his studies.

Inadequacies in Rural Higher Education Institutions

Students who participated in this study connected the challenges they faced in transitioning to higher education mainly with the scarcity of academic resources and

the lack of programs in those higher education institutes. Student B explained why she was considering travelling to the capital city for higher education:

Of course, we have colleges and a university campus on our island. But it does not offer the program I want to enrol in, nor is there any guarantee that it would be offered anytime soon. I don't want to end up like my sister who has been waiting for her desired course to start here on the island for the past 4 years. Now she has almost given up hope.

This statement by student B indicates that higher education institutes in rural areas indeed lack the reinforcement in relation to academic programs desired by students. Additionally, it is clear that the lack of support would eventually deter rural students from pursuing higher education. While discussing about the academic level of rural students who enrol in rural colleges, instructor C recounted one of his experiences:

I had this exceptionally bright student who was enrolled in the advanced certificate in teaching program. I checked her student profile, and it turned out she was a straight-A student in her high school. I knew she would have met the criteria for the bachelor's degree in teaching program. However, at the time, the bachelor's program was not launched at the campus on the island. So, unless she went to Male', there was no way she could have enrolled in a bachelor's program here. And her family weren't well off enough to send her away for education.

Discussion

In general, the findings of this study indicate that matriculating into higher education is rather challenging for rural students. This idea is supported by the data available from the Maldives Education Sector Analysis (ESA) report published in 2019, which stated that higher education is less accessible for students outside the capital Male' (MOE, 2019). The findings of this study regarding the absence of a college-going culture in the participants' community can be directly explained through the social cognitive career theory. Self-efficacy, which is one of the fundamental variables of the social cognitive career theory, aids a person to overcome erroneous beliefs and eliminate intuitive and irrational manipulations to extend their occupational prospects (Lent et al., 2000). For instance, Instructor A mentioned that students often get influenced by different members of the community and undertake employment right after high school. Nonetheless, she added that after a certain point, students realise the importance of higher education in making progress in their careers, which brings them back on the path of education. Hence, this realisation by students can

be credited to the self-efficacy variable of the social cognitive career theory which enables them to move beyond the common beliefs and manipulations of their rural community.

Other than this, the statement made by student A regarding the lack of a college-going culture, not only indicates that higher education is undervalued in rural communities, but also describes the disparity between genders when it came to higher education. The statistics available with regard to higher education showed that in 2019, the enrolment of female students in higher education outnumbered male students by 28% (MOE, 2019).

As per literature, rural students generally come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which greatly influences their decision to enrol in higher education (Castleman & Meyer, 2019). Multiple participants stated that affording higher education would be a struggle due to the financial conditions of their families. Some of the participants also raised their concern over the additional cost of travelling required for higher education apart from the college expenses, which was pointed out by Yaşar and Turgut (2020) as a financial barrier in their study as well. Furthermore, the distance some of the students had to travel from their homes to college was also perceived as a barrier to enrolment in higher education, due to the emotional aspect of being away from loved ones. This is consistent with the findings of the study conducted by Goldman (2019), who stated that rural students felt reluctant to move away from their support networks for higher education.

In terms of academic barriers, most of the students who participated in this study reported feeling unprepared to begin higher education. From the reviewed literature, the prominent cause of rural students feeling unprepared for college was due to the difference in the language of instruction between high school and higher education institutes (Macaro et al., 2018). However, this was not the case with the students who participated in this study, as they were fluent in the main languages of educational instruction in their country. It was rather the poor quality of education in rural schools and higher education institutes which discouraged students from pursuing higher education. According to Fomba et al. (2022), well-qualified teachers, parallel rates of enrolment and completion are some of the key indicators of good quality education. Nevertheless, information provided by several participants regarding untrained teachers and drop-out rates suggest that the quality of education in rural schools are compromised. The social cognitive career theory claims that interest development results in students being persistent in their education (Lent et al., 2000). Yet, poor quality of education in rural regions causes students to lose interest in their studies and drop out.

Likewise, the accounts of some participants hint that the academic quality in rural colleges and universities are also substandard, in terms of resources, opportunities and programs offered. This is demonstrated by the experience shared by instructor

C, with regard to a student enrolling in a course lower than her academic ability due to the lack of programs in that particular college. Similarly in literature, Castleman and Meyer (2019) also highlighted the issue of students settling for less in terms of higher educational programs, despite being eligible for far more elite courses. However, in their research, financial limitation was found to be the root cause for this low aspiration, rather than academic inadequacy.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research

This study explored the barriers encountered by rural Maldivian high school students in transitioning to higher education. The research findings highlight key barriers which cover geographical, financial, and educational factors. The education sector of the Maldives recognises the academic shortcomings present in the rural areas of the Maldives when it comes to higher education (MOE, 2019). However, unless schools and higher education institutes that serve the rural population implement immediate mitigation measures, the number of students matriculating into higher education would likely remain less in rural areas. This might eventually lead to a reduction in the educated workforce not only in rural areas, but the entire population of the Maldives.

In the same way, the exorbitant expense of higher education makes it difficult for rural students and their families to envision higher education as a possibility (Worsley et al., 2021). The findings of this study indicate that parents of rural students are hesitant to invest in their child's higher education due to multiple family commitments which require financial attention. Until parents envision the positive impact their investment will have on their child's future employment opportunities, expenses in relation to college education will always remain a demoralising barrier for rural high school students.

Additionally, it was found that rural students highly depend on scholarships and government assistance to pursue higher education. Nevertheless, the limited exposure to information with regard to scholarship application processes and the incapability to attend necessary scholarship forums due to geographical barriers greatly minimise the number of rural students who matriculate into higher education. This will again lead to an increase in the number of individuals without proper qualifications in rural communities and increase the number of citizens who are not eligible for high-paying jobs.

Although the analysis, findings, and recommendations of this study are applicable to multiple areas of high school and higher education, there are several limitations to this study. Despite having similar upbringings in rural areas, all the students who participated in this study have unique individual backgrounds. Since this particular demographic is small in proportion to the total number of rural

students in the country, it is not intended to reflect the opinions of all rural high school students in Maldives. Furthermore, this study is specific in looking at only one high school in the southern region of Maldives, which minimises the generalisability of the study. Although the findings may be applied to a certain extent to similar schools in the country, they may not be applicable to schools elsewhere in the world. Lastly, personal perspectives and interpretations may be a constraint when coding and categorising qualitative data. While data is received from the participants, the researcher's understanding is still necessary for the data analysis. Human interference is always a possibility in qualitative research since it is impossible to completely exclude personal influence (Ross & Zaidi, 2019).

Additional research should be done to identify potential strategies that could ease the transition of Maldivian rural high school students into higher education. Moreover, investigating partnerships between rural high schools and higher education institutes might also provide valuable insights into the actions being taken by both parties in facilitating rural students' enrolment into higher education. This could further help identify certain areas which require improvements and help determine whether the efforts align with the needs of rural high school students. Besides this, qualitative research could be carried out focusing on the urban population of high school students of the Maldives, which can then be utilised to compare and contrast the results of this study. This new area of focus could highlight issues which are common to both rural and urban students, and therefore, could initiate a re-evaluation of educational policies set forth by the stakeholders of the education sector.

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