

Challenges Faced by Students from Rural Schools in Sri Lanka who Enroll for Foreign Tertiary Education: A Teacher's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the multifaceted challenges encountered by students from rural schools in Sri Lanka when they enroll in foreign tertiary education institutions, with hopes of transferring to affiliated universities in countries like Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the UK, and the USA. Drawing on 24 years of experience in higher education at two foreign universities in Sri Lanka, and extensive teaching experience at the primary and secondary levels, this article provides an in-depth analysis of the socio-economic, cultural, and educational hurdles these students face. The article incorporates educational theories to offer insights and recommendations for educators, policymakers, and support systems to better assist these students in their academic and personal transitions.

Keywords: rural schools, foreign tertiary education, socio-economic challenges, cultural adaptation, educational preparedness, psychological challenges

INTRODUCTION

The pathway from village schools in the Sri Lankan context to that of overseas university education is a long and challenging one and there are many factors that may affect the students' academic achievement and overall well-being. This is a fact that I am aware of as a higher education teacher for over two decades as well as one who has taught in primary and secondary education. This article investigates all dimensions of these challenges holistically, framed by practice-based experience and empathetic insight.

The motivation to go abroad for studies among students in Sri Lanka is for higher quality education, better career opportunities, and exposure to diverse cultures. It thus results in students shifting from rural areas to Colombo, the capital of the country, to join foreign education providers who facilitate admission to universities abroad. They often arrive with unrealistic expectations concerning the cost of living in Colombo and overseas, along with the commitment needed to succeed in a foreign educational setup. Misled by perceptions of high lifestyles and underestimations of rigid demands for academic and personal adjustment, they face significant challenges. This difference highlights the importance of enhancing pre-departure guidance and counseling to better prepare students for the significant financial and academic responsibilities needed to succeed overseas.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Economic status is one of the most serious factors that limit rural students from achieving their education goals. A considerable number of students from the rural areas belong to low-income families that are unable to support their studies at home or overseas. The cost of tuition, accommodation, and living expenses in foreign countries is often prohibitively high (Weeraratne et al., 2022). For instance, in Australia, international undergraduate students can expect to pay between AUD 20,000 and AUD 45,000 per year for tuition alone, with living expenses adding approximately AUD 21,041 per year (Study Australia, n.d.). Still, relating to New Zealand, it has been found that the tuition fees are between NZD 22000 and NZD 32000 per year and the living expenses are approximately NZD 20000 (New Zealand Education, n.d.). In the United Kingdom, yearly tuition costs for foreign students can begin at British pounds 10,000 and go up to 38,000 depending on course and performing university, and London living costs will be near to British pounds 12000-15000 (UK Council for International Student Affairs, 2024). In Canada for example, overseas students may be looked at tuition fee

of CAD 20,000 – CAD 30,000 per year, which is coupled with living cost averaging CAD 15,000 (Edu Canada, 2024). In addition, the standard of living is also lower in the promotion than it is in Colombo. Thus, the initial step in their academic journey in Colombo can eat into their ‘kitty’ more than they estimated.

Moreover, because these learners do not have the same level of financial literacy or those whom they live with, such scholarship opportunities and supervision in their finances seem difficult. There is evidence that the students in the rural areas perform lower in terms of financial knowledge than their urban counterparts. The research done by Lusardi and Mitchell (2014) indicates that lower class and rural residents tend to have a great deficiency of financial education sources ethically to support themselves. Such a gap affects how an individual undertakes his or her research studies as famine or even loans and grants intending to pursue education cannot be applied for. It was found in the analysis that the achievement of financial literacy especially promotes financial behavior where among other skills can apply for scholarships and loans, budgeting for costs, and availing of the necessary information to acquire student loans (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014).

I recall a student named who was exceptionally bright but faced financial difficulties. His family relied heavily on agriculture, and their income was unstable. Despite his academic potential, the boy struggled to find the resources needed to study abroad. We worked together to apply for various scholarships and financial aid programs, but the stress of his financial situation was a constant burden. He eventually gave up his dream to study abroad and settled to do a professional qualification in a higher education institute closer to his home in the village.

The involvement in higher education is negatively affected by the failure to satisfy the basic financial needs, as indicated in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory (Maslow, 1943). Maslow's theory is that human needs are unique, but needs are arranged in a hierarchy. The physiological need is the first level of the hierarchy, followed by safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization as the last level or the Apex of the pyramid. For students, financial insecurity represents a failure to satisfy physiological needs and safety needs, both of which are the lower levels needs in Lower order need and therefore cannot be pursued; the need for higher goals such as academic achievement and self-actualization.

There has proven to be a significant effect of financial stress on the achievement of students and their general well-being. It was found out by Broton and Goldrick-Rab (2016) that students with a high degree of financial burden are faced with low academic achievement, poor mental health, and lack of interest in studies. In summary, the study suggests that lowness of income, together with the attendant feelings of avoidable stress, forms an obstructive wall that impedes learning, by taking away cognitive and emotional capacities that would have been directed to academic work (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Some students defend themselves and report that financial insecurity prevents them from concentrating on education and eventual self-realization.

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ADAPTATION

Cultural adaptation poses another major challenge. Students from rural areas often experience a significant cultural shock when they move abroad or even just a mere move to a more metropolitan city in Sri Lanka. The differences in language, social norms, and lifestyle can be overwhelming (Pabodha & Abeywickrama, 2021). While they may have learned English to a functional level, the academic and social nuances of using the language in a foreign context can be daunting. Students may additionally experience stereotyping or discrimination because of how they speak, their skin color or their ethnicity leading to further alienation in a new society.

One student, Tharushi, shared with me her experience of culture shock when she relocated to Australia for her undergraduate studies. The difficulty of dealing with the Australian accent and idioms made her quite helpless in relation to class discussions. Furthermore, her peers’ rather casual way of interacting was in stark contrast to their previous more formal interaction with her in Sri Lanka and thus complicated her ability to fit in socially.

Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory holds that social interaction is key to cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Based on Tharushi's difficulties, it is evident that there are certain sociocultural and societal structures that might foster delays in cognitive and non-cognitive development through affecting learning from

social experiences and processes.

EDUCATIONAL PREPAREDNESS

Another critical challenge is the disparity in educational preparedness. Rural schools in Sri Lanka often lack the resources and infrastructure of their urban counterparts. This includes access to qualified teachers, modern teaching methods, and educational materials (Sarma et al., 2018). As a result, students from rural backgrounds may find themselves at a disadvantage when competing academically in foreign tertiary institutions.

I remember working with a student named Ruwan who came from a remote village. His school had limited access to science labs and libraries, which hindered his exposure to practical learning. When he joined a foreign university, he found it challenging to keep up with his peers, who had benefited from better resources and advanced teaching methods. We arranged additional tutoring sessions to help bridge this gap, but it was evident that the disparity in educational preparedness posed a significant hurdle.

The theory of Constructivism, particularly as proposed by Piaget, underscores the importance of hands-on, experiential learning in developing cognitive skills (Piaget, 1970). Ruwan's lack of practical learning experiences highlights how inadequate educational infrastructure can limit cognitive development and academic readiness.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES

The impact on a person's mental and emotional well-being when they start in a new school setting is very significant. The need to do well in school, along with the difficulties of adjusting to a new culture and dealing with financial worries, can cause serious mental health problems (Lin, 2023). Many students feel huge pressure to show they are capable, both to their families back home and to their classmates at the new school.

For example, Samantha, a student from a small town, told me about her problems with anxiety and missing home. The lack of familiar support and the high hopes her family had for her academic success made her feel lonely and stressed. Although the university provides counseling services, she was hesitant to seek help due to the negative attitudes towards mental health in her culture.

Erikson's stages of psychosocial development indicate that young adults struggle with building close relationships while also establishing their own identity (Erikson, 1968). Samantha's experiences show the tension between her cultural background and her new surroundings, which affects her mental health.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To tackle these issues, a comprehensive strategy is needed. Schools, both in Sri Lanka and other countries, should offer support systems designed for rural students. This includes financial help, scholarships, and programs to teach students about managing money to ease their financial worries (Weeraratne et al., 2022).

Programs that introduce students to new cultures and mentoring can help them adjust to their new surroundings and make friends (Lin, 2023). Universities should also provide academic support, like tutoring and workshops, to help students catch up and understand new teaching methods (Sarma et al., 2018).

Additionally, it's important to raise awareness about mental health and offer counseling services that respect different cultures. Encouraging conversations about mental health and reducing the shame of asking for help is key to supporting these students in creating that conducive environment (Maharaj et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

Students in rural schools in Sri Lanka face many challenges when trying to join foreign colleges. These challenges include social, economic, and cultural barriers, as well as educational and mental difficulties. It's important for teachers, leaders, and support groups to work together to help these students do well in school

and in life. By understanding and addressing these problems, we can create a fairer and more supportive learning environment for all students.

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