

ACCESS AND INCLUSION EXPERIENCES OF LGBTQIA+ STUDENTS AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

B. Matsoso

School of Education

Deakin University

Melbourne, Australia

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0581-2692>

L. Nendauni

Department of Accounting Sciences

Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Cape Town, South Africa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8320-4556>

ABSTRACT

This article investigated the experiences of access and inclusion for LGBTQIA+ students at a university in South Africa. From the perspectives of gender identity and social justice, it is evident that the LGBTQIA+ community frequently encounters discrimination and marginalisation. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, utilising semi-structured interviews to collect data from 10 LGBTQIA+ students at a selected South African university. The data was recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically. The findings reveal that LGBTQIA+ students face substantial challenges, including non-inclusive policies, peer bullying, insufficient faculty awareness, and limited integration and support. Despite constitutional protections, these students continue to experience stigma and barriers within higher education. The study recommends the establishment of a specialised office dedicated to sexual orientation support and the integration of gender and sexual diversity into university curricula to ensure equitable access and opportunities for all students.

Keywords: LGBTQIA+, Students, Higher education, Access, Inclusion, Sexual orientation, Social justice, and Human rights.

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, numerous universities have made significant progress in transforming the composition of their student bodies and implementing policies aimed at fostering inclusivity. Public universities are legally required to comply with national legislative frameworks such as the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996), the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997), the White Paper 6 for Higher Education Transformation (1997), the Policy Framework to Address Gender-Based Violence in Post-School Education and Training

System (2020), and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (No. 4 of 2000). These frameworks were established to promote fair representation and equal access for all students, regardless of their sexual orientation, while addressing historical discriminatory practices.

Despite these legal frameworks, much of the focus on access and inclusion within South African higher education has been centred on race, with less attention paid to the challenges faced by students of different sexual orientations, particularly those from the LGBTQIA+ community (Matsoso 2022). Although the Constitution prohibits discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation and mandates the promotion of social justice (Republic of South Africa 1996), human rights violations against LGBTQIA+ students persist in higher education settings (Van Vollenhoven and Els 2013; Matsoso 2022). The persistence of these violations raises concerns about the effectiveness of policy implementation in addressing the needs of LGBTQIA+ students.

Muller (2014) highlights that students who identify as LGBTQIA+ continue to face barriers in accessing specialised services, such as health care and information about student support services, even though policies ostensibly guarantee equal treatment. The gap between policy and practice is often perpetuated by discriminatory attitudes within university communities, which can hinder the effective realisation of human rights and social justice. Although legislative protection exists, the practical application of these policies within university settings appears inconsistent and insufficient. Therefore, there is a need for a critical examination of how these frameworks are operationalised to ensure that institutions move beyond mere compliance towards fostering a genuinely inclusive campus environment.

Prior to 1994, racial exclusion was a hallmark of South African higher education, with significant barriers preventing Black, Indian, and Coloured students from accessing university education (Badat and Sayed 2014; Cloete 2009). Although progress has been made in addressing racial inequalities since 1994, universities have been slower to address issues of social justice, such as discrimination based on sexual orientation (Reddy 2006; Adonis and Silinda 2021). Representation of students from diverse backgrounds, including race, religion, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, has improved, yet LGBTQIA+ students remain marginalised in many areas of university life (Michaelson 2008). The failure to integrate inclusive practices for this community remains a significant concern, as it undermines the broader goals of social justice.

Globally, efforts to integrate LGBTQIA+ students into higher education have yielded mixed results. In countries such as the United States of America and Australia, research has shown that while universities have enrolled students of diverse sexual orientations due to

government pressure, there is often little genuine commitment to promoting inclusion (Shiz 2011; Bhopal and Rhanie 2014). Similarly, studies in South Africa have indicated that discriminatory practices affecting LGBTQIA+ students continue to occur despite the existence of protective legal frameworks (Muller 2014; Matsoso 2022). As such, policies alone are not enough; active institutional commitment is required to transform these policies into meaningful practice.

This discussion thus far highlights that for policies to be truly effective, universities should not only implement inclusive frameworks but also actively monitor and assess their application across all levels, from student services to curriculum design. Evidence from LGBTQIA+ students indicates that, despite inclusivity policies, implementation is often hindered by institutional inertia and societal biases (Matsoso 2022). As such, this article examines the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at a South African university, focusing on access and inclusion, while critically evaluating the effectiveness of current policies in addressing their needs. It aims to contribute to the discourse on enhancing support for marginalised communities and fostering a culture of inclusion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To frame this article and inform the analysis, understanding the relationship between social justice theory and the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ students in higher education is essential. The main premise is that social justice and human rights cannot be realised in educational settings where LGBTQIA+ students are excluded and mistreated due to their sexual orientation, and where they are not accommodated in the curriculum or included within instructional methodologies (Theoharis 2007).

According to Gewirtz (1998), social justice requires dismantling the structures that perpetuate marginalisation and discrimination, a necessary process that ultimately engenders mutual respect, acceptance, acknowledgement, and concern, all of which are crucial for creating an inclusive and just educational environment (Theoharis 2007). Similarly, Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) view social justice as the promotion of equity, equality, and fairness as innate human rights, encompassing social, economic, educational, and personal aspects. To achieve this, institutional structures should be modified to ensure they do not perpetuate inequality and discrimination.

In the context of this article, social justice is taken to be the process whereby past imbalances of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, and other historically discriminatory and marginalising practices are addressed. According to Jugănar (2018), the application of practices that bring about social justice is crucial to promoting inclusive

practices. Through recognising and addressing the effects of past discrimination and inequality, social justice can help create a fair and equitable environment for all individuals. Sapon-Shevin (2003) equates social justice to a model that helps identify the mutual obligations that bind individuals to society. By promoting inclusiveness, social justice seeks to create equitable opportunities and fair treatment for everyone. This requires a collective effort to address and overcome systemic inequalities and discrimination. Ultimately, the goal of social justice is to create a society that is just and inclusive for all individuals, regardless of their background or identity. This focus concentrates on the removal of any type of marginalisation and bias in higher education, calling for inclusive measures to accommodate LGBTQIA+ students and those with disabilities.

Experts such as Herek (2002), Brown and Capozza (2000), Nadal (2017), and Hines and Sanger (2010) have extensively explored social identity, offering valuable insights into LGBTQIA+ communities. While their focus is primarily on LGBTQIA+ identity, this article differs by examining the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at a South African university concerning access and inclusion in higher education. It evaluates both institutional policies on equality and the challenges faced by these students. Social justice, crucial to this study, supports the equal treatment and accessibility of all groups, with the LGBTQIA+ community protected under South Africa's Bill of Rights (SADC 2015). This discussion is further detailed in the literature review section below.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The LGBTQIA+ community encompasses a diverse range of identities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual, and others who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender. The term "cisgender" refers to individuals whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth (Green 2006; Serano 2008). Increasingly, research has emerged from South Africa, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, and the broader African continent to better understand the complexities and challenges faced by the LGBTQIA+ community (Graaff 2021).

Despite these advancements, the visibility and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ identities remain contentious in many African contexts. Belcher (2016) notes that discussions surrounding LGBTQIA+ issues are often absent or heavily restricted in numerous African nations, with some outright prohibiting these identities. However, South Africa stands out as a beacon of progress in the region, having enacted constitutional measures to protect LGBTQIA+ rights, including being one of the first African countries to legalise same-sex

marriage (Van Zyl 2011). Yet over 25 years post-democracy, LGBTQIA+ individuals in South Africa continue to encounter significant discrimination and are frequent targets of hate crimes (Geldenhuis 2021).

The SADC region has seen efforts towards inclusivity, with several higher education institutions in South Africa and Lesotho launching initiatives aimed at fostering supportive environments for LGBTQIA+ students (SADC 2015). Bazarsky et al. (2020) accentuate the burgeoning visibility of the LGBTQIA+ community within these educational settings, highlighting how institutional policies and support structures are evolving. Similarly, Dunkerly, Poplin, and Taylor (2022) reveal that various university services such as health facilities, counselling and psychological services, and student support are increasingly striving to understand and better serve LGBTQIA+ students.

However, this progressive narrative is not universally applicable across the continent. For instance, Rouget (2021) contrasts the South African experience with that of Senegal and Ghana, where LGBTQIA+ individuals face severe human rights violations. Senegal, despite its secular constitution that ostensibly promotes equality (Diagne 2017), has witnessed fundamentalist groups actively campaigning against LGBTQIA+ rights, driven by a desire to uphold conservative interpretations of morality (Bop 2008). Such movements not only contravene the constitutional promises of equality but also foster an environment of hostility and fear for LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Similarly, Ghana's constitutional provisions for gender equality and individual freedoms stand in stark contrast to the realities faced by LGBTQIA+ citizens. The Criminal Code Act (646) of 2003 criminalises same-sex relations, imposing harsh penalties that directly undermine the protections purportedly guaranteed by the constitution (Atuguba 2019). This dissonance highlights a troubling trend where legal frameworks fail to protect the rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals, despite broader commitments to human rights on the international stage.

In the South African context, the constitutional and legislative framework provides robust recognition and protection for LGBTQIA+ rights. Section 9(3) of the Constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation, while Section 10 affirms the inherent dignity of all individuals (Graaff 2021). Adonis and Silinda (2021) emphasise the role of higher education institutions in conducting research that influences policy and practice. However, despite these supportive legal structures, many South African universities struggle to effectively implement policies and create infrastructures that genuinely protect LGBTQIA+ students (Mbwana 2020).

This gap underlines the urgent need for research aimed at raising awareness and offering recommendations to enhance the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals within the higher education landscape. Therefore, the present study is crucial for addressing ongoing challenges and ensuring that the rights and identities of LGBTQIA+ students are respected and supported within academic environments.

RESEARCH METHODS

A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to achieve the goal of the present study. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative phenomenology seeks to elucidate the meaning of individuals' lived experiences concerning a specific phenomenon. This method proved particularly valuable in allowing the researchers to gain insight into the lived experiences and perspectives of LGBTQIA+ students, who were asked to share their thoughts on the phenomenon and reflect on its relevance to their own experiences (Turner 2010).

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The 10 participants, selected through purposive sampling, were asked open-ended questions designed to elicit their shared experiences and views on accessibility and inclusion in higher education. All participants identified as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Of these, six were self-identified females with a lesbian sexual orientation, while three were males identifying as gay, and one participant identified as queer. The female participants who identified as lesbians were aged between 19 and 24, while the male participants who identified as gay were aged between 21 and 23. The participant identifying as queer was 24 years old.

The researchers followed Saldana's (2013) coding procedures, wherein the recorded interviews were transcribed based on analytical notes taken during the interviews. Similar codes were grouped and analysed to identify categories, patterns, and recurring themes. The semi-structured interviews were subsequently transcribed and subjected to thematic content analysis.

In line with the research objectives, data collection tools were developed, and the data gathered was organised according to the research questions posed to each participant. The next step involved reading and understanding each transcribed response, followed by categorising and organising the data into separate columns for coding and interpretation. The compiled data was then presented in a single table to facilitate further analysis, allowing for the reorganisation of information into a series of codes and categories. Each coded segment consisted of direct quotes from the participants, enabling the researchers to interpret the

underlying meaning of the data. At this stage, the researchers had identified several key themes and referred to the relevant literature to either support or challenge the findings.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Firstly, the LGBTQIA+ participants were not selected randomly; rather, a purposive sampling method was employed. Consequently, it is possible that only students with an interest in the topic chose to participate in the research. Moreover, the study involved a small, purposive sample of 10 LGBTQIA+ students from a single South African university. While this sampling method allowed for a deep and nuanced exploration of individual experiences, it limits the generalisability of the findings to other institutions or regions. The experiences and challenges identified in this study may not reflect those of LGBTQIA+ students at other universities or in the broader South African higher education context. Future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample across multiple institutions to develop a more comprehensive understanding of LGBTQIA+ experiences in higher education nationwide.

This study adhered to established ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and measures were implemented to ensure confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process. Furthermore, ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Despite the sensitivity of the topics of access and inclusion against LGBTQIA+ students, there were 10 participants willing to share their experiences dealing with these issues. The analysis of their responses to questions posed during the interviews yielded four primary themes: university policies on inclusion, insufficient awareness on the part of other stakeholders within the university structures and education campaigns about the LGBTQIA+ community, bullying and rejection of the LGBTQIA+ community, and a lack of integration and socialisation. These themes are discussed in further detail in the following sub-sections.

Theme 1: University policies

According to the participants' responses, there was a degree of uncertainty that prevailed while completing the application form for admission to the university, since the institution solely accommodates male and female students, and not intersex groups. Hence, seven participants voiced comparable opinions on the university's policy, as expressed in the following comment:

“There is a big confusion that the institution does in the application forms, they ask for gender rather than sex and provide only two options which is male and female, which are the only options available thus making it impossible for LGBTQIA+ students to indicate their sexual orientation status in the application form” (Participant 3).

Pattman (2018) mentions this absence of inter-sexuality on application forms, highlighting this as an example of university spaces continuing to disregard the LGBTQIA+ community. Arguably, this could be a result of a decision made by the university administration to exclude gender non-conforming groups in the application form, undermining efforts to promote an accessible and inclusive campus environment for all. Similarly, in Casson’s (2014) doctoral thesis, the implications of asking LGBTQIA+ applicants to reveal their sexual orientation during the admission process were investigated. This finding reveals that although diversity in terms of race, sex, and ethnicity was present on the application form, sexual orientation was not. This finding aligns with social justice theory, which emphasises the need to dismantle systemic structures that perpetuate marginalisation and discrimination, as outlined by Gewirtz (1998) and Theoharis (2007).

Participant 3 indicated that university application forms do not accommodate sexual minority groups, including LGBTQIA+ students, as they only provide checkboxes for sex assigned at birth and lack options for sexual orientation. However, some institutions are making efforts to include LGBTQIA+ students by adding relevant identification options to their application forms. For example, three out of 26 South African universities request that new applicants provide their sexual identification (female, male or trans) on their application forms (Matsoso 2022). This makes these universities leaders in the accommodation and inclusion of gender non-conforming groups on campus.

Another difficulty faced by participants residing on campus was access to toilet facilities. As one participant stated:

“We need the toilets for LGBTQIA+ like we have toilets for males and females. The university does not allow us to use opposite toilets. The campus residence rules do not allow us to share a room with a male student if you are a gay or share with a female student if you are a lesbian” (Participant 1).

Similarly, another participant shared:

“Our campus residences are divided into male and female dormitories and within them, toilet facilities are designed based on a status of the residence being for male or female students. This becomes problematic when gay students, especially drag queens who wear female clothes, are not allowed to use female toilets” (Participant 6).

Students who identify as LGBTQIA+ would feel more comfortable utilising neutral toilet facilities. Yet, they are obliged to use facilities designated as either male or female. Taulke-Johnson (2010) reports similar challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ students, demonstrating the potentially hostile and homophobic intolerance present in university accommodations. Examples of this intolerance include anti-gay attitudes displayed on room doors, prompting gay students to alter their behaviour to conceal their identities within their living spaces. Taulke-Johnson's perceptions provide evidence of the harmful characteristics of social identity, where in-group members adopt biased, prejudicial, and discriminatory attitudes against out-group members.

Similarly, Beemyn (2005), Krum (2013), and Singh (2013) indicate that, within the context of higher education in the UK and the US, the absence of gender-neutral facilities and shared bedrooms for trans or gender non-conforming students has become problematic. Such findings are also applicable in the South African context where, as pointed out by participants, a lack of gender-neutral facilities not only erodes their sense of personal dignity due to discomfort using facilities not designed for their specific needs but also makes them feel unsafe. However, it is important to note that participants in this study do not seek exclusive bathroom access for LGBTQIA+ students; rather, the availability of gender-neutral facilities would significantly enhance campus inclusivity.

The participants clearly expressed that gender-neutral bathrooms would accommodate all students, fostering a welcoming environment on campus. As a result, the LGBTQIA+ community, which is often denigrated and segregated within the framework of social identity, seeks to have their voices heard and to gain recognition. They desire acceptance within an inclusive university that features user-friendly facilities addressing the needs of all students. Social justice, as articulated by Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002), advocates for the transformation of institutional structures to promote equality and fairness for all students, including those from sexual minority groups. The university's failure to provide gender-neutral bathrooms not only marginalises LGBTQIA+ students but also contravenes the principles of equity inherent in social justice. In brief, revising university policies will facilitate easier navigation of spaces for LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Theme 2: Lack of awareness and education about the LGBTQIA+ community

Participants pointed to the stigmatisation and victimisation that prevail in terms of recognising and being inclusive towards sexual minority groups. Regrettably, stereotypes related to the LGBTQIA+ community are characterised by ignorance and negative attitudes towards its members. Three participants shared the following:

“There is no education that is offered to students at this university regarding the LGBTQIA+ community, sexuality, gender, and sex, so that is the biggest challenge we have on this university campus” (Participant 6).

“I think university’s curriculum should include classes or lessons or something that educates lecturers and students about the LGBTQIA+ community because I think most people still don’t understand how the LGBTQIA+ community operate and came into existence” (Participant 2).

“I think the university should raise awareness by having campaigns on campus. Yeah, having LGBTQIA+ campaigns where they will be educating people about our rights” (Participant 9).

The opinions expressed above highlight social identity issues, where members of in-groups typically dictate the terminology used to describe non-conforming out-groups. Supporting this, studies by Metro (2015) and McKinney (2005) demonstrate how stereotypes and ignorance serve to marginalise others. They assert that curriculum invisibility is particularly acute for LGBTQIA+ students, who report that their experiences and the history of their community are absent from the curriculum. According to Formby (2015), the curricula used in higher education institutions are specific to each institution. A review of the literature indicates that university programmes remain heteronormative, upholding the belief that heterosexual relationships and traditional gender roles are the default or normal mode of sexual orientation and identity. In this context, the study participants noted that instruction on LGBTQIA+ rights in higher education is not included in the curriculum.

O’Flaherty (2015) argues that a lack of understanding regarding LGBTQIA+ rights and needs hampers effective responses to bullying and exclusion, resulting in in-groups developing prejudicial attitudes towards these out-groups. This ignorance arises from the absence of relevant content in the curriculum, which contradicts the principles of social justice and human rights central to this study’s theoretical framework. Gewirtz (1998) contends that dismantling structures of marginalisation is essential for fostering inclusivity, while Sapon-Shevin (2003) notes that without embedding LGBTQIA+ issues within the curriculum, social justice goals remain unfulfilled.

This study’s researchers advocate for inclusive curricula in university programmes that address the needs of all students, regardless of sexual orientation, to improve societal attitudes. Glazzard (2020) reinforces this, asserting that curriculum diversity should be integral to all courses to effectively address LGBTQIA+ equality issues. Suggested inclusive practices in disciplines such as management, humanities, and social sciences include integrating LGBTQIA+ themes into the curriculum to recognise and embrace diversity (Formby 2013; O’Flaherty 2015; Snapp 2015). Ultimately, developing more inclusive

curricula is vital for educating individuals about the LGBTQIA+ community and reducing stigma.

Theme 3: Bullying and rejection of the LGBTQIA+ community

According to Booth and Ainscow (2002), the creation and implementation of inclusive cultures and policies lead to more accepting and safe environments for all. Supporting diversity in this way significantly reduces discriminatory attitudes within educational institutions. Yet, as shown by Hernandez-Torrano (2020), despite the *Salamanca Statement* representing the commitment of 92 member countries to universal education by attaining the global aim of “Education for All”, the literature illustrates the continued bullying and rejection of LGBTQIA+ students by their peers. As noted by participants:

“I have witnessed and experienced bullying from mainly male figures who will just suppress you to make feel otherwise of yourself because you are male, they will make funny comments like, why are you trying to be a woman?” (Participant 5).

“Acceptance also within the lecture room. Lecturers also need education in this area. For example, you’ll raise your hand when the lecturer has asked a question, but then they move on to the next person” (Participant 7).

These statements reveal experiences of bullying and discrimination, particularly from male figures who undermine others by making derogatory comments about their masculinity, suggesting they are trying to be women, and making other hurtful remarks to demean them. This behaviour creates a hostile and uncomfortable environment. Additionally, there is a noted need for greater acceptance and inclusivity within academic settings, as highlighted by incidents where lecturers overlook certain students, even when they actively participate.

Ellis (2009) concurs with the above statements, pointing to numerous studies that portray LGBTQIA+ students as victims who are obliged to contend with bullying, harassment, and discrimination in higher education. In the context of this study, participants explained that the frequent negative remarks regarding their sexuality from their peers have contributed to their low self-esteem and sense of being unsafe on campus. The safety issues caused by the non-affirmation of sexual orientation fall within the category of bullying and are hugely problematic, highlighting a serious lack of security in South African universities (Ncontsa 2013, as cited in Juan et al. 2018, p. 1). However, despite the study participants being part of the LGBTQIA+ community, it should be noted that the safety and protection of LGBTQIA+ community members, women, and differently-abled persons are safeguarded by the South African Constitution and Human Rights.

Participants in this study reported psychological setbacks resulting from “homophobic attacks”, which dehumanise victims within the higher education environment. This aligns with Formby (2015), Keenan (2015), and Licona et al. (2015), who argue that such abuse fosters isolation and depression among LGBTQIA+ students, emphasising the need to educate peers to alter negative behaviours. The lack of formal educational programmes addressing diverse campus groups exacerbates the issue, forcing LGBTQIA+ students to educate their peers despite universities’ responsibility to promote gender equality and inclusivity.

McGlashan’s (2017) research in New Zealand highlights institutions’ efforts to combat bullying and marginalisation of LGBT students and promote diversity through gender-neutral policies, such as inclusive sports and extracurricular activities. However, this recommendation does not fully promote inclusion, as it overlooks the LGBTQIA+ community.

In line with this study’s theoretical framework, addressing the bullying and rejection of LGBTQIA+ students requires a commitment to social justice. This entails recognising and dismantling the systemic inequalities that marginalise these students and implementing inclusive policies that promote their full participation in academic and social life. As Gewirtz (1998) and Theoharis (2007) suggest, social justice is not merely a theoretical concept but a practical process that must be embedded within institutional policies and cultures to create a truly inclusive and equitable educational environment.

Theme 4: Lack of integration and socialisation

The study participants reported experiencing socially unfair behaviour from non-LGBTQIA+ students on campus. Essentially, due to their sexual orientation, LGBTQIA+ students are neither valued nor recognised, leading to their exclusion from the heterosexual in-group. This results in a significant lack of social interactions between both groups. For example, two participants indicated the following:

“The real challenge is discrimination because we find ourselves sitting alone instead of being part of social groups involving straight people. We are being discriminated against on many things, whatever the other students do, we are unable to join them” (Participant 4).

“I think, once other students noticed that you are a gay or lesbian, they isolate you and they do not want to be associated with us. This is hurting because it is not like we are not humans or what.... So, sometimes people understand this community, but majority of them do not.” (Participant 8).

These findings highlight the pervasive discrimination faced by LGBTQIA+ students on campus, leading to their social isolation. Participant 4 describes the challenge of being excluded from social groups involving straight peers, resulting in a feeling of solitude and segregation. Participant 8 elaborates on the pain of this isolation, noting that once their sexual orientation becomes known, they are often shunned and avoided by other students. This lack of acceptance underscores a broader issue of misunderstanding and prejudice within the campus community, emphasising the urgent need for initiatives to foster inclusivity and acceptance for all students, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Higher education institutions do not have separate classrooms based on gender: all students, regardless of their race, religion, age, socioeconomic status, language, and sexual orientation, are assigned to the same classrooms. Cross (2004) argues that in South Africa, higher education institutions have begun to recognise and accommodate the social, educational, cultural, linguistic, religious, and racial diversity of the country. Nevertheless, according to Participant 4 and Participant 8, their freedom of expression and sense of belonging are still quite limited. Even first-year students, who, to be accepted by non-LGBTQIA+ students and avoid this in-group's homophobic barbs, have become fearful of "coming out" or "disclosing" their gender identities. According to Participant 10:

"I think most first year students are not comfortable to disclose their identity in terms of their sexual orientation status. They do not come out to be accepted by heterosexual students. So, most of them live a lie just to impress other students" (Participant 10).

Nevertheless, Formby (2015) states that recent research has defined the university experience as a positive one that enables students to explore their gender and sexual identities. Michaelson (2008) supports this claim, asserting that homophobia has become a principal point of discussion in school settings, where most of the socialisation takes place among students. This particularly applies to students who inform others of their sexual orientation, as homophobic attacks can have a negative impact on the mental health of LGBTQIA+ students (Mason 2001; Wilson and Cariola 2019). The non-integration and lack of socialisation between LGBTQIA+ and heterosexual students could be due to the opinion that individuals associate more comfortably with others who have similar political, cultural, or religious views on homophobia.

To summarise this section, the study findings reveal significant challenges related to access and inclusion faced by LGBTQIA+ students on campus. Analysis of the participants' responses identified four primary themes: university policies on inclusion, insufficient

awareness among university stakeholders, bullying and rejection of LGBTQIA+ students, and a lack of integration and socialisation.

University policies often fail to recognise non-binary genders, leaving LGBTQIA+ students feeling excluded. This finding aligns with previous studies that highlight the inadequacies of institutional policies in addressing the needs of diverse gender identities (Licona et al. 2016; Formby 2015; Ravhuhali et al. 2019). Participants noted a lack of educational initiatives and awareness campaigns regarding LGBTQIA+ issues, which contribute to stereotypes and ignorance. This observation is consistent with research by O’Flaherty (2015), which found that a lack of knowledge concerning LGBTQIA+ rights and needs leads to detrimental attitudes and behaviours within the university environment.

Bullying and discriminatory behaviours, particularly from male figures, create a hostile environment. This mirrors previous studies indicating that LGBTQIA+ individuals often experience heightened levels of bullying and harassment in educational settings (McKinney 2005; Glazzard 2020). Furthermore, LGBTQIA+ students frequently face social isolation due to their sexual orientation, resulting in limited interaction with heterosexual peers.

These findings accentuate the urgent need for more inclusive policies, education, and initiatives to foster acceptance and integration within the university community. Having discussed the findings, the following section provides recommendations.

SUGGESTIONS FROM THE STUDY

To effectively address the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ students and promote a more inclusive environment within higher education institutions, the following actionable recommendations are proposed:

Establishment of a specialised LGBTQIA+ support office

Universities should create a dedicated LGBTQIA+ Support Office within their student affairs department. This office should have a dual mandate: providing direct support to LGBTQIA+ students and spearheading the revision of non-inclusive policies. The office could start modestly, with one or two trained staff members, and expand gradually based on student needs and the office’s workload. These staff members should be knowledgeable about LGBTQIA+ issues, mental health, and the legal frameworks governing LGBTQIA+ rights in higher education.

Furthermore, this office should work in close collaboration with existing student services, such as counselling, academic advising, and health services, to provide a holistic support system. For example, counselling staff could be trained to address LGBTQIA+

mental health concerns, while academic advisors could assist with navigating any academic challenges related to students' identities. By embedding this support across multiple services, universities can ensure that LGBTQIA+ students have access to a comprehensive network of care.

Introduction of gender-neutral bathrooms and accommodation

Universities should make gender-neutral bathrooms and accommodation options available on their campuses to foster inclusivity. To minimise costs and resource constraints, institutions could begin by converting a limited number of existing bathrooms and dormitories into gender-neutral spaces. This would require relatively few structural changes, such as updating signage, but would represent a significant step forward in creating inclusive campus environments.

Additionally, universities should revise their accommodation policies to reflect the diverse needs of LGBTQIA+ students. Offering gender-neutral living spaces can help alleviate the discomfort or safety concerns faced by students who may not feel comfortable in traditional, gender-segregated housing. Such changes would not only support LGBTQIA+ students but also promote awareness and acceptance among the broader student body.

Curriculum review to incorporate LGBTQIA+ perspectives

A comprehensive review of the university curriculum should be conducted, particularly in faculties such as humanities, education, and law, where discussions on gender, sexuality, and identity can be naturally integrated. This review should ensure that LGBTQIA+ issues are embedded into relevant modules and are not treated as peripheral topics.

To support this initiative, academic staff across all faculties should receive training on how to incorporate LGBTQIA+ perspectives into their teaching. This would not only enhance the relevance of course content but also normalise discussions around gender and sexuality in academic settings. For example, courses on law could address LGBTQIA+ legal rights, while education modules could explore inclusive teaching strategies. By integrating these perspectives into the broader curriculum, universities can foster a more inclusive learning environment where all students feel seen and respected.

Development of ongoing LGBTQIA+ awareness campaigns

Universities should implement continuous LGBTQIA+ awareness campaigns aimed at educating both students and staff about the challenges faced by this community and promoting a culture of inclusivity. These campaigns could include educational workshops,

seminars, and panel discussions led by both internal experts and external LGBTQIA+ advocates. Workshops should be interactive and designed to encourage participation and discussion, thereby making the content more engaging and impactful.

To ensure the relevance and effectiveness of these initiatives, universities should seek feedback from LGBTQIA+ students and incorporate their suggestions into the design of campaigns. Additionally, the success of these efforts should be measured through annual student surveys. These surveys would gather data on students' perceptions of inclusivity and allow universities to adjust their strategies based on the feedback received. Regular evaluation will ensure that the campaigns remain dynamic and responsive to the needs of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Strengthening and enforcing anti-bullying policies

Universities should strengthen their anti-bullying policies to explicitly address bullying and harassment based on gender identity and sexual orientation. This could involve revising the existing code of conduct to include specific provisions protecting LGBTQIA+ students from discrimination and ensuring that these policies are clearly communicated to the university community. Additionally, there should be clear procedures in place for reporting and addressing incidents of bullying or harassment, with prompt and fair investigations to ensure accountability.

Training for staff and students on recognising and preventing bullying, particularly against LGBTQIA+ individuals, should also be incorporated into orientation programmes and ongoing professional development. By creating a culture of zero tolerance for bullying, universities can foster a safer and more supportive environment for all students.

To sum up, the implementation of these recommendations would not only improve the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students but also align universities with best practices in fostering inclusivity and diversity.

CONCLUSION

This article stresses the urgent need for systemic change within higher education institutions to address the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ students. Despite legal protections and constitutional guarantees, these students in South African universities continue to experience marginalisation, discrimination, and exclusion, adversely affecting their academic and social experiences. Key issues identified include restrictive policies that inadequately address non-binary identities, a lack of awareness regarding LGBTQIA+ issues among faculty and

students, prevalent bullying, and insufficient social integration. These barriers contribute to an environment where LGBTQIA+ students feel unsupported, isolated, and undervalued.

To cultivate a genuinely inclusive academic environment, universities should implement comprehensive reforms. This includes revising policies to introduce gender-neutral options and facilities, enhancing curricula to incorporate LGBTQIA+ perspectives, and launching robust awareness campaigns. Such measures will not only benefit LGBTQIA+ students but also promote a more equitable and respectful campus culture for all. Addressing these challenges necessitates more than policy adjustments; it requires a fundamental shift in attitudes and institutional culture. By embracing diversity and fostering a supportive environment, universities can uphold the principles of social justice and human rights, paving the way for a more equitable and enriching educational experience for every student.

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