

# QUEER-TRANS-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES: DISRUPTING CISHETERONORMATIVITY ON UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES IN THE WESTERN CAPE PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

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## ABSTRACT

The Western Cape province is home to four universities – all of which host queer-trans-straight alliances committed to promoting education and advocacy to tackle the marginalisation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, and asexual (LGBTIQ+) students. These alliances include Stellenbosch University's QueerUS Society, the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Rainbow Society, the University of Western Cape's (UWC) LoudEnuf Society, and Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) Queer Unicorns. This article offers a comprehensive analysis of the research literature, reports, and media documenting the efforts of these four queer-trans-straight alliances in the Western Cape to highlight their pivotal role in promoting institutional policy reforms and raising social awareness and change initiatives. Using Livermon's concept of queer labour, this article spotlights the efforts undertaken by queer-trans-straight alliances and argues that they play a pivotal role in destabilising the representation of cisheteronormative cultures and ideologies promoting visibility and inclusion for LGBTIQ+ communities in higher education. The article concludes by exploring how queer labour facilitates queer-trans-straight alliances, social awareness, and change processes in higher education.

**Keywords:** cisheteronormativity, queer-trans-straight alliances, queer, trans, allies, higher education, South Africa

## Introduction

On 24 July 2023, representatives from Rainbow UCT, QueerUS, LoudEnuf, and Queer Unicorns, teamed up with other pro-queer students, staff, and civil society representatives to protest the presence of Kenyan lawyer and political activist Patrick Lumumba at UCT. Lumumba, who is popularly hailed for making eloquent pronouncements against bad governance on the African continent, was at the university to present a keynote speech at the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) political party's 10th-anniversary celebrations that were held in UCT's Sara Baartman Hall. Earlier in 2023, Lumumba sparked outrage from the LGBTIQ+<sup>1</sup> community when he articulated his support for Uganda's controversial anti-homosexuality bill. Speaking to Sophie Mokoena, foreign editor for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC, 2023), Lumumba argued that the LGBTIQ+ movement on the African continent was a result of Western liberal influence, which undermines the fact that choice must be limited according to uniquely African morals (SABC, 2023).

Patrick Lumumba's unfortunate pronouncements resonate with antipathic claims that to be queer is unAfrican. Such claims are used to reject queer inclusion and ensure the further entrenchment of heteropatriarchy and cissexist values (Mwikya, 2014; Kuloba, 2016). Due to their association with cultural and religious values, anti-queer sentiments are often upheld by popular African political leaders. They mainly promote an anti-queer stance to reject Western countries' emphasis on ensuring the full enjoyment of all human rights through queer inclusion. For example, the European Union (EU) has increasingly emphasised LGBTIQ+ rights being recognised and codified in text as a condition for aid, but the prospects of African governments championing this agenda remain minimal (Akokpari and Bimha, 2020).

South Africa is the only country in Africa where the rights of LGBTIQ+ people are recognised constitutionally. As a result, those who reside in the republic can create queer spaces and engage in education and advocacy to tackle homophobia and transphobia. That notwithstanding, South Africa, much like the rest of the continent, continues to battle discrimination, harassment, and other forms of violence against counter-normative people (Reid, 2022).

A month before the EFF's 10th-anniversary celebrations at UCT, queer, trans and straight

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this manuscript, we use the acronym LGBTIQ+ as an umbrella to include Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, Queer, and related marginalised identities that might be excluded who are exposed to systemic marginalisation because of their gender and sexual identities and expression. We also use acronym LGBTIQ+ when we refer to the cited literature even when authors have not always used the precise formulation in their own writing.

alliances at the institution asked the university's executive to withdraw permission granted to the party, as hosting Lumumba on the campus would signal tacit acceptance of homophobic sentiments (Ncwane, 2023). However, the request was disregarded, leading pro-queer agents to protest against Lumumba's presence on campus on the day of the event. While the EFF party had previously shown solidarity with Uganda's LGBTIQ+ community by marching to the Ugandan High Commission in Pretoria to protest Uganda's anti-LGBTIQ+ bill on 4 April 2023, it did not rescind its decision to host Lumumba as keynote speaker due to his political influence. Unsurprisingly, the UCT EFF Students' Command claimed that "the instigators of the protest had opportunistically disguised it as a pro-LGBTIQ+ protest" (Felix and Charles, 2023). The party claimed that some of the people involved in the planning of the protest sought to "undermine and frustrate the programmes of the EFF" (Calitz, 2023).

The anti-Lumumba protest is not the only example of campus-based queer-trans-straight alliance activism. In 2015, some members of the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement, which originated at UCT, sought to tackle the lack of transformation at the institution by calling for a decolonial intersectional approach to the institution's academic culture. Whilst most supporters of the movement proposed key reforms such as decolonising curricula and removing colonial symbols such as Cecil John Rhodes' statue, some activists proposed a more intersectional approach to social change. The latter argued that the university had to simultaneously confront racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and cisgenderism (Matandela, 2017). In this regard, a group of black, queer, trans womxn resisted erasure from the narratives of the #RMF movement through a photographic exhibition and public pronouncements, evidencing institutional marginalisation. Concurrently, #PatriarchyMustFall also emerged, challenging the gendered oppressions in institutional and societal contexts. The cleavages which emerged within the movement undermined solidarity. As Matandela (2017) noted, black queer womxn and nonbinary activists' experiences of intersectionality in the movement differed from the sentiments espoused by those who simply fixated their activism on race and class-based struggles.

The intersection of Blackness and non-normativity is an important point to emphasise in terms of intersectional marginalisation (Milani, 2014, 83). Kunene (2018), for example, reflected on how being a black, queer, non-binary activist shaped her experiences as a queer woman at Stellenbosch University. Kunene's activism started with facilitating *Open Stellenbosch* talks following the release of the 2015 Luister documentary, which featured black students recounting their experiences of racism on campus. Luister (meaning "listen" in Afrikaans) encouraged further efforts to fulfil requests made by the *Open Stellenbosch* student movement to revoke a university language policy which clearly favoured mostly white

Afrikaans speakers. Reflecting on her experiences of *Fees Must Fall* activism at Stellenbosch University in 2016, Kunene (2018) noted that the voices of black activists, in particular women and queer students who did not speak fluent English or Afrikaans, were perceived as immeasurably counter-normative due to their proximity from dominant whiteness and heteropatriarchy.

The 2022 Commission of Inquiry into allegations of racism at Stellenbosch University concluded that Black students and staff still feel unwelcome and excluded at the university, which continues to undermine transformation. (Khampepe, 2022, 11) Whilst the extent and forms of racism differ from one institution to another, it is important to note that the racial privileges associated with whiteness at Stellenbosch University are prevalent across the country. How racism is experienced conjointly with heterosexism can be seen in the following account by Blue, a white middle-class gay American student based at UCT in 2014 who noted that he had not experienced discrimination to the extent that his black gay peers had because white queer students were afforded different privileges based on their race (Rolfe and Peters, 2014, 28). Matandela (2017) and Kunene's (2018) accounts of their experiences at UCT and Stellenbosch University, respectively, also tell us that counter-normative students face intersectional oppression.

Queer-trans-straight alliances in universities play a crucial role in promoting education, advocacy, and safe spaces. This article explores – how queer-trans-straight alliances engage with agendas of transformative inclusion on university campuses in the Western Cape Province. Queer-trans-straight alliances in higher education have become increasingly prevalent, yet there is scant research on their constitution, agency, and transformative impact. Given that gender and sexuality counter-normative students also face challenges relating to race, class, and religion, among other factors (Francis, 2021b), it is important to examine how intersectionality has been conceptualised by the identified pro-queer initiatives. Since there is insufficient research on queer and trans activism on university campuses, the article aims to establish a research agenda in the area of gender, sexuality, and activism and to shed light on the following queer-trans-straight alliances – Stellenbosch University's QueerUS Society, the University of Cape Town (UCT) Rainbow Society, the University of Western Cape (UWC) LoudEnuf Society, and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) Queer Unicorns.

## QUEER LABOUR

The article draws insights from Livermon's (2012) conceptualisation of the cultural labour of visibility. Livermon (2012) posits that queer people who deliberately engage in social acts which destabilise the assumption or expectation of compulsory heterosexuality carry out the

cultural labour of visibility. The labour of queer visibility is a strategy aimed at bringing non-conformity into the public arena (Livermon, 2012).

The education and advocacy initiatives conducted by queer-trans-straight alliances destabilise the privileging of cisheteronormative cultures and ideologies within the university context and beyond. Through their emphasis on transformative inclusion and challenging the marginalising effect of cisheteronormative policies and practices, queer-trans-straight alliances' cultural labour of visibility ensures visibility, recognition, and transformative inclusion. The labour of visibility is inspired by wanting to be considered socially viable (Livermon (2012, 299). As Mkhize and Mthembu (2023, 377) noted, such labour is characterised by tackling hetero- and binary-defined norms by presenting counterarguments and proposing non-binary approaches. The multiple approaches adopted by Queer-Trans-Straight Alliances to ensure mobilisation, education, and inclusion at the four Western Cape universities represent this form of labour. As will be discussed in greater detail in the sections that follow, their strategies include deliberate activism against homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and the imposition of cisnormative standards in learning and residential spaces.

The cultural labour of visibility in South Africa is based on queer autonomy in usable cisheteronormative spaces (Livermon, 2014, 509). South African universities count as usable spaces due to their commitment to embracing diversity in line with the country's constitutional promises of LGBTIQ+ equality. These higher education institutions provide usable space by supporting students in forming societies and organisations dedicated to a range of human rights causes, including LGBTIQ+ inclusion. For instance, transformation units at the four institutions have expressed a commitment to working with the Societies. However, Chitsamatanga (2023, 5), writing about a South African university in a rural context, reminds us that such structures are established and mostly available in urban universities. While the four urban-based universities referred to in this article represent the cultural labour of queer visibility in South Africa's higher education sector, they do not represent the overall experiences of queer-trans-straight alliances in the country.

While Livermon's (2012, 2014) writings focus on queer visibility in residential areas rather than in educational contexts, their insights about communal solidarity hold relevance for the present study. Livermon's (2023, 2) emphasis on solidarity between queer communities and communal authorities holds promise for the advocacy work of pro-queer societies that calls for cooperation with a wide range of on-campus groups, community-based organisations, academics, and student leadership bodies. This emphasis exemplifies the importance of communal solidarities and collective advocacy for social change.

## METHOD

This study gathered and synthesised information about queer-trans-straight alliances from academic theses, peer-reviewed journals, book chapters, reports, media articles, and social media posts. Qualitative document analysis was adopted and applied to enable an understanding of policies, events, and procedures and for historical and contextual insight. The first author read and analysed available documents published online on websites and social media accounts belonging to the four university-based societies. This was followed by exploring findings from the research literature on queer-trans-straight alliances in higher education institutions.

For the analysis, we followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, which offered a guide for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis, a flexible method for “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data”, was used (Braun and Clark, 2006, 79). During thematic analysis, we familiarised ourselves with the data, generated codes, reviewed and collated themes, and repeated these steps until themes that responded to the research questions emerged (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 35).

The first author familiarised themselves with the data by reading selected documents and making notes on points relevant to the study. A second step entailed identifying relevant codes from the selected documents and distributing them into code groups. Two codes were initially established – (1) education and advocacy initiatives, which included educational talks, commemorative events, social activities, and social media activism and (2) queer-trans-straight alliance engagements with multiple stakeholders, including partnerships with other student societies, residence committees, transformation units, and civil society organisations. The analysis included scanning for examples of cisheteronormativity and how LGBTIQ+ activism was responded to in the four institutions. Included in this process was a review of the literature on queer activism, queer-cis alliances, and transformation in the higher education sector. The study revealed that queer-trans-straight alliances have played a pivotal role in promoting visibility and inclusion for LGBTIQ+ communities in higher education. In what follows, we surmise the work of queer-trans-straight alliances in the four institutions (presented alphabetically), followed by an analysis and discussion.

## FINDINGS

### **Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT)**

CPUT was formed following a merger of the Cape Technikon and Peninsula Technikon on 1 January 2005 (CPUT, 2023). CPUT's Queer Unicorns Society was officially launched on 23 February 2022. It identifies as a representative of LGBTIQ+ members of the CPUT community (CPUT, 2022b). Based on the researcher's review of posts on the Society's Facebook and

Instagram accounts, the organisation seeks to create a safe, intersectional, and inclusive space for all. Their advocacy work includes commemorating Women's Month, Pride Month, Transgender Day of Visibility, Pansexual Visibility Day, and National Human Rights Day. Participating in institutional gender-based violence forums, hosting consultative seminars, promoting disability inclusion and environmental sustainability, and ending period poverty are ways they engage. The Society collaborates with a diverse set of on-campus stakeholders such as the Division of Student Affairs; the Centre for Diversity, Inclusivity, and Social Change; the Green Campus Initiative, Debating Society, and student political parties such as the Economic Freedom Fighters Students Command (EFFSC), South African Students Congress (SASCO), and the Pan-Africanist Student Movement of Azania. In addition, the Queer Unicorns have hosted and worked with representatives from Gender DynamiX, Triangle Project, QueerUS, Rainbow UCT, and UWC's Gender Equity Unit. The researchers could not establish whether and how the Society interacts with academic departments.

Though young in its formation, the Society has conducted robust and deliberate efforts to promote awareness and tackle challenges imposed by patriarchy and queerphobia. Although there are no deliberate efforts to ensure queer inclusion through curriculum reform, the Transformation, Diversity and Social Cohesion Unit has committed to collaborating with student activists and the university's management to find solutions to challenges faced by the LGBTIQ+ community (CPUT, 2022a, 2). So far, they have taken the issue of misgendering in university processes to the attention of the registrar; and they are seeking to provide support for staff and students who have undergone sex change (CPUT, 2022a, 2).

In 2021, CPUT conducted an Institutional Diversity and Inclusivity Survey in response to the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion. The survey found that 48 per cent of sexual minority students reported experiencing bias, harassment, and discrimination based on sexual orientation (CPUT, 2022a, 2). 29 per cent of trans-identifying students reported experiencing bias, harassment, and discrimination in the form of cyberbullying, name-calling, as well as misgendering in admission, enrolment, recruitment, and residence placement processes (CPUT, 2022a, 2). In general, marginalised students reported persistent forms of subtle discrimination and feeling undersupported by the institution (CPUT, 2022a, 2). The formation of a pro-queer student society following this report was timely. Furthermore, the Queer Unicorn's strategy of partnering with a diverse set of stakeholders on and off campus is a step in the right direction towards transformative inclusion. Future research on the Society should enquire about its conceptualisation and constitution.

## **Stellenbosch university**

QueerUS (formerly known as Lesbigan) is a student society with a mission to facilitate and enable safe spaces for queer persons at Stellenbosch University (SU). The Society's activities are geared towards promoting education and advocacy for queer liberation and opposing any form of discrimination against queerness and other forms of marginalisation, including race (Stellenbosch University [SU], 2022). QueerUS has also played a pivotal role in speaking against cissexist rituals practised in university residences. It recently came to light that QueerUS had been calling for the condemnation of dehumanising rituals practised at Wilgenhof men's residence since as far back as 2020 (Govender, 2023). While the allegations gained nationwide attention at the beginning of 2024, QueerUS brought up the issues in previous years' meetings with the Student Representative Council (Govender, 2023). Students who have reflected on their experiences of the Society describe it as an organisation which provides a familial environment and safe comfort zone to non-conforming individuals through supportive dialogue, events, and workshops (Graziano, 2005, 305). Some noted that being part of the Society gave them a stronger self-image and awareness, which hetero-conservative families, student residences, and learning spaces did not offer (Graziano, 2005). Participants in a study by Lesch, Brits, and Naidoo (2017, 140) appreciated the social events held by the Society but also cautioned that some interactions felt superficial due to people attending to seek partners or to engage in gossip.

It is important to note that QueerUS is not the only officially recognised pro-queer group at Stellenbosch University. In 2020 the SRC added a portfolio for Womxn and Queer Empowerment (WAQE) to offer support and create awareness of the marginalisation of women and queer people at the university (Manare, 2020). It seeks to “actively diminish institutional patriarchy, end rape culture, queerphobia, and gender-based violence” through transformative engagement with students, student leaders, staff, and the broader community (Vink, 2022). WAQE's engagement strategies include consulting QueerUS and facilitating multistakeholder interactions aimed at ensuring that “all womxn and queer bodies feel safe, protected, heard, and included” (Vink, 2022). In 2021, members of the QueerUS branch at Tygerberg Medical campus formed the SPECTRUM! Society. It seeks to challenge the erasure of queer bodies, guided by issues taking place within the Tygerberg campus (SPECTRUM! 2021). Although they operate as a separate entity, they collaborate with QueerUS, WAQE and the university's Equality Unit, which provides health care support.

In addition to collaborating with WAQE and SPECTRUM, QueerUS participates in events organised by UCT's Rainbow Society, CPUT's Queer Unicorns, and UWC's LoudEnuf Society. QueerUS also collaborates with civil society organisations such as Gender Dynamix



and the Triangle Project. The former is the first African-based organisation which solely focuses on the Rights of Transgender people. The latter is an LGBTIQ+ human rights organisation working throughout the Western Cape Province. Following Stellenbosch University's first Pride Month march in June 2023, representatives from WAQE and QueerUS invited interested students to participate in a workshop conducted by the University of Pretoria's Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) Unit. The event was part of the SOGIESC Unit's nationwide outreach project, which is aimed at equipping queer-cis alliances with knowledge regarding the role of the national equality courts in the implementation of the recently passed Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill [B9B-2018].

### **University of Cape Town (UCT)**

Like QueerUS, UCT's Rainbow Society facilitates a wide range of education and advocacy activities with the aim of challenging cisnormative biases and prejudices. Their initiatives include, but are not limited to, book readings, seminars, pride marches, picnics, games nights, parties, art showcases, and mental health awareness initiatives. Internally, the Society works closely with the Office for Inclusivity and Change (OIC) and the Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS). In terms of external partners, they have worked with pro-queer societies from Stellenbosch University, UWC, CPUT, and the University of Pretoria (UP). They also consult and collaborate with Gender DynamiX, the Triangle Project, and the Desmond Tutu Health Foundation to ensure a holistic approach to queer challenges.

In a study on LGB students' experiences with Rainbow UCT, participants described the Society as a safe space which provides hope within an extremely heterosexist campus environment (Rolfe and Peters, 2014). They noted that while Rainbow promotes queer visibility and queer-cis alliances, some students evade the queer spotlight by passing as cisnormative as they navigate university spaces such as lecture theatres, laboratories, and residences (Rolfe and Peters (2014). Some even went to the extent of forging heterosexual relationships (Rolfe and Peters, 2014, 19). Participants who identified as bisexual spoke of how they were stigmatised by lesbian and gay members of the Rainbow Society who called them "sluts" and "dirty" (Rolfe and Peters, 2014, 21). Biphobia persists. During an event hosted by Rainbow UCT to commemorate Africa Pride Month in October 2023, biphobia was highlighted as a challenge which is often sidelined due to the focus on tackling homophobia and transphobia. A bisexual panellist shared his experiences of homophobia by cis students, and biphobia from within the queer community.

Biphobia is not a challenge exclusive to UCT. Kunene's reflections on being a black,

queer, non-binary activist at Stellenbosch University included a reference to how identifying as a queer woman did not imply inclusion and acceptance into pro-queer spaces. She explained that “bisexuality is a sexual preference that is not necessarily taken seriously by other “queer bodies” (Kunene, 2018, 7). Since she presented as cis, her bisexual identity was not taken seriously. Similarly, as shown by Beukes and Francis (2020, 19), while LGBTQI+ societies and events promote visibility and solidarity, they may sometimes engage in exclusionary practices towards trans and gender-diverse individuals. Intra-categorical exclusion and marginalisation diminish the solidarity amongst gender and sexually diverse people (Francis 201b).

### **University of the Western Cape (UWC)**

Unlike UCT and Stellenbosch, which are historically white universities, UWC is a historically black university (HBU). Since the early 1990s, the institution has made deliberate efforts to combat discrimination through the Gender Equity Unit, which promotes a social justice and transformation agenda to address challenges faced by students and staff concerning gender, sexual orientation, and expression (Matthyse, 2017). The unit’s functions include developing, monitoring, and reporting on action plans (Hames, 2007, 59). LoudEnuf (formerly Gayla) is UWC’s student-led pro-queer Society. It works closely with the Gender Equity unit. Unlike CPUT Queer Unicorns, Rainbow UCT and QueerUS, which have no sustained relations with teaching departments, LoudEnuf collaborates extensively with the Women's and Gender Studies Programme and the Department of Religion and Theology at UWC. Regarding external partners, the Gender Equity Unit and LoudEnuf have engaged in strategic partnerships with the Triangle project, Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church, and the One in Nine Campaign (a collective of South African organisations and individuals motivated by feminist principles).

UWC’s pro-queer agents organise events relating to Mental health awareness, gender equity in higher education, Women’s Day, the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT), UWC LGBTQI+ Awareness Month in October, and 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence. Their awareness and advocacy initiatives include facilitated film screenings, workshops, marches, fun runs, creative performances, and generosity drives. In September 2023, the Gender Equity Unit published a call for submissions for a book entitled “Power, prejudice, protest, resistance, and Celebration: A Reflection of 30 Years of Gender Equity at the University of the Western Cape (1993 to 2023)”. Further insights from future publications could serve as a blueprint for other institution-based pro-queer agents.

An autoethnographic study conducted by Matthyse (2017) based on their experiences as

a researcher and student leader of an LGBTIQ+ student organisation at UWC revealed that gender non-conforming people are significantly marginalised because university spaces are curated for conforming people. Matthyse (2017) noted that key challenges experienced by non-conforming students include verbal harassment, impunity towards homophobic and transphobic microaggressions, as well as institutional cisgenderism in terms of residence placements, student identification card labels, and toilet usage rules. Furthermore, cisgender-centric classroom environments undermine queer inclusion and affirmation, thereby invisibilising and silencing counter-normative people (Matthyse, 2017).

The coding of public spaces based on heterosexual and cisgender norms persists across all university campuses in South Africa (Beukes and Francis, 2020; Chitsamatanga, 2023). A simple shift to mixed-gender residencies and designated gender-neutral bathrooms is not sufficiently transformative. These may serve as tokenistic approaches in the short run, hence pro-queer societies' efforts to ensure further engagements with universities' transformation units. A relevant social justice approach should be accompanied by queer-education efforts targeted at educating students, staff, and workers about cissexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other concerns related to countering gender-binariied stereotypes (Ndelu, 2017; Brown, Maseko, and Sedibe, 2020). The Gender Equity Unit and LoudEnuf continue to lead conversations to ensure further transformation through queer-affirming strategies (Matthyse, 2017).

## DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest that advocacy and activism efforts undertaken by the queer-trans-straight alliances contribute to attitudinal changes in higher education and seek to include and empower LGBTIQ+ students. Because of their positive impact on the university climate and the well-being of LGBTIQ+ students, the study findings have implications for university leaders, especially those holding offices of inclusion and transformation.

Over the past three decades, South African universities have developed support systems in response to concerns raised by queer-trans-straight alliances (Buthelezi and Brown, 2023, 1). Within the context of our review, supportive units include the Stellenbosch Equality Unity, the UCT Office for Inclusivity and Change (OIC), UWC's Gender Equity Unit, and CPUT's Centre for Diversity, Inclusivity, and Social Change. Though not fully established and constituted, the intra-institution collaborations show evidence of the development of LGBTIQ+ inclusion and support strategies in response to homophobia, transphobia and gender-based violence. For example, the launch of Gender Dynamix's "Model Policy Framework for Inclusion of Trans and Gender-Diverse Students within Higher Education Institutions in South Africa" was

developed in consultation with a range of representatives from Universities, Civil Society Organisations and queer-trans-straight alliances. Such advocacy efforts promote responsive, supportive higher education institutions that promote the inclusion and well-being of LGBTQ students.

Underreporting of gender-based violence incidents present an additional challenge. When the former Minister of Police, Bheki Cele, attributed a decrease in GBV reports to intensive GBV awareness campaigns, some activists cautioned that underreporting may have caused the decrease (Clifton, et al, 2021). As noted by the Council on Higher Education, reasons for underreporting are complex and related to heteropatriarchy, cultural heteronormativity and the prevalence of GBV in South Africa (Davids, 2019, 6). Furthermore, LGBTIQ+ people underreport hate crimes due to fears of further harassment (Matthyse, 2017, 117). Although there is an acknowledgement that LGBTIQ+ individuals may also experience GBV, the “Policy Framework to address Gender-Based Violence in the Post-School Education and Training System” is primarily premised on the definition of GBV concerning male-on-female violence (Davids, 2019: 2). The efforts of queer-trans-straight alliances to highlight different forms of GBV on different days of commemoration are therefore pertinent. The spotlighted days include National Human Rights Day, Women’s Day and Women’s Month, Transgender Day of Visibility, Pansexual Visibility Day, International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT), international Pride Month in June, and South Africa Pride Month in October.

The online presence of pro-queer societies, especially on Instagram and Facebook, promotes their visibility beyond physical campuses. It is through such channels that more people can gain awareness. These platforms also serve as outreach tools through advertising events, reflections on hosted events, and open virtual discussions. Hosting events online and in a hybrid way using Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Facebook, is a timely approach, ensuring a broader reach. When the pro-queer societies record such events and post them on social media pages for future access, they promote sustained engagement and opportunities for future reference in studies like the present. Levels of engagement vary depending on the organisations’ preferred means of communicating on social media. Changes in the constitution of Society committees also influence what is posted, by whom, and when. In this sense, the availability of event posters and social media recordings provide insights that a researcher might not otherwise gain from interviewing pro-queer agents.

Odendaal and Nel (2022, 14) emphasised the importance of queer-trans-straight alliances collaborating with academic departments by citing the example of the University of South Africa (UNISA) Sexual Orientation Forum’s collaboration with academics from the Health Studies, Sociology, and Psychology departments. University transformation units should find

ways of fostering sensitisation efforts beyond engaging with pro-queer societies and CSOs. Additionally, because universities primarily engage in research and teaching, transformation initiatives must be mainstreamed into lecture rooms, laboratories, and sporting and cultural spheres. During an open event hosted by UCT's Rainbow Society to celebrate South Africa Pride Month in October 2023, students from various departments noted that they did not feel supported by academic staff, including in courses which cover gender and sexuality topics. During a panel discussion on queer visibility and acceptance at Stellenbosch University's Tygerberg medical campus, participants expressed concern that queer inclusion is not included in health sciences curricula, even though once trained, health professionals will be responsible for caring for a diverse population, including LGBTIQ+ individuals.

Finally, belonging exposes “the differential power relations sometimes obscured in the language of universal citizenship” (Livermon, 2012, 299). Although South African universities strive to transform and achieve equality, the existence and activism of queer-trans-straight alliances on university campuses remind us that South African universities inadvertently produce and reproduce gender and sexual inequalities. Addressing these inequalities, their related marginalisation, and the effects of higher education institutions' cisheteronormative cultures, requires troubling and activism (Francis, 2021a).

The notion of troubling resonates with Livermon's assertion that gender and sexually counter-normative people have to undertake the labour of visibility to bring “dissident sexualities and gender non-conformity into the public arena” (Livermon, 2012, 300). Queer-trans-straight alliances, as agents, undertake the labour of troubling the dominant representation of cisheteronormativity. They encourage institutions to adopt more inclusive and supportive policies by establishing forums and agendas to improve the lives of LGBTIQ+ students and staff. In addressing their transformative agendas, higher education institutions should collaborate with queer-trans-straight alliances to ensure equality and inclusivity for all (Francis, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

In sum, we want to highlight three key findings. First, queer-trans-straight alliances' activism is mainly driven by education and advocacy initiatives such as talks, commemorative events, social activities, and social media activism. Second, their activism strategy is multistakeholder engagement, mainly characterised by partnerships with other student societies, residence committees, transformation units, and civil society organisations. Third, queer-trans-straight alliances generally have limited interactions with academic departments, undermining their potential to influence much-needed curriculum and learning space reforms.

In bringing our article to a close, our analysis has spotlighted how queer-trans-straight alliances have made significant strides in ensuring the representation of LGBTIQ+ students. Similar to previous studies, our article reflected that the work of queer-trans-straight alliances in South African universities has introduced and sustained efforts to counter marginalisation through raising awareness and education and initiating social change efforts and health-centred initiatives.

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