

Do we have the right to call ourselves an inclusive university? Untold stories of queer students at a rural university in Eastern Cape Province, South Africa

Sexualities

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Abstract

Ruraqueer students constantly experience higher levels of victimization, and negative university experiences than their urban and suburban peers. Further, rural students have limited access to university resources while, queer events and workshops related to queer community, as well as university-based ongoing activities to support positive sexuality and gender identity development are scanty. This has been worsened by extant research written from an ‘outsider’ perspective lacking breadth and depth of experiences of queer students especially in rural universities from an African perspective. Anchored on a qualitative approach using purposive sampling, in depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in this study with eight under and postgraduate students who identified as queer. Emerging themes show how rurality intersects with actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics of queer students in university spaces. Findings challenge the homogenization of university residencies; non-inclusive LGBTQ curricular; university environment that remains homophobic and how traditional, cultural and societal norms contribute to queer students sense of belonging. Implications suggest inclusive teaching and learning and ongoing awareness programmes that acknowledge diversity and enhance visibility of students with intersecting marginalized identities.

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Introduction

The quotidian experiences of violence, inequality and abuse of queer students in rural universities due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics, underlines how central it is to be vocal about their overleaped issues. There is a dearth of literature in rural universities related to the exclusionary practices of queer students through their lived experiences. The voices of the queer students remain inaudible due to teaching and learning spaces that normalize intolerance and a breeding ground to bullying and marginalization levelled against queer students (Francis and McEwen, 2023). Today, the invisibility queer students in rural universities and their concerns remains untapped; hence, it becomes imperative to take the initiative to acknowledge their presence, take cognisance of their predicament and work towards their unique needs by capturing their lived experiences (Blumenfeld et al., 2016). This study is designed to address this gap by telling stories of queer students as a way of unpacking and interrupting normalized oppression levelled against them and creating 'spaces of belonging' (Freire, 2005; Kraus, 2006, p. 108) within cis-heteronormative spaces such as universities. This is the first time that a study that focuses on students belonging to a Queer group has been done in the university under study as such queer is conceptualized using definition by Russell et al. (2010).

These scholars advance that queer is an umbrella term that individuals may use to describe sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression that does not conform to dominant societal norms. Most individuals today embrace the label in a neutral or positive manner particularly the youth to avoid limiting themselves to the gender binaries of male and female (Russell et al., 2010). The language used to describe sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics varies greatly globally and there are some terms that are used within the international context and are of Western origin. For instance, the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) represent concepts of personal identity that are not universal (Bronski, 2011). Therefore, for purposes of this research the minority groups in this study who identify as LGBTQ will be referred to as queer in this study. Further, I integrate the intersectionality theory by Crenshaw (1991) as a vehicle for examining the complexity and multidimensionality of being a queer student and the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to critically examine the lived experiences of queer students using their voices in a rural university.

Queer students and campus climate

Given the many roles and advantages of education, any teaching and learning environment is expected to be protective, stable, inclusive and pleasant to all students. Regrettably, research shows that a majority of queer students experience high rates of peer victimization as compared to their cisgender peers (Day et al., 2016; Brown and Diale,

2017; Beemyn and Rankin, 2011). Substantial evidence suggests that universities remain a perilous environment for queer students who face intimidation, maltreatment, exploitation, human rights violations and exclusion of gender and sexually diverse voices particularly in university policies and curricula (Fields and Wotipka, 2022; Kurian, 2020; Agueli et al., 2022; Arcidiacono and Carbone, 2021 Badgett and Crehan, 2017). Though the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in South Africa established guidelines on how to deal with homophobic bullying in educational institutions, nevertheless, pockets of harassment, victimization and bullying persist (Abrahams, 2022). Extant literature written within the South African context further validates that residences, classroom environment, social spaces and access to health and facilities such as bathrooms remain hostile and unsafe due to deeply entrenched heteronormative culture found in universities (Sumbane and Makua 2023; Brown et al., 2020; Vincent and Munyuki, 2017). These have detrimental effects on the social, emotional and academic wellbeing of students with diverse sexual identities to the point where some abscond or relinquish academic activities to avoid humiliation due to campus climate that is embedded on notions of 'Who is outside and who is inside'? 'who belongs among us and who does not' and 'those who dominate and those who are dominated have all to lose if the current disorders continue' (Fanon-Mendes France, n.d.: p. 8; Soudien, 2014, p. 912; Mavhadu-Mudzusi and Sandy, 2017; Brown et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, this is the kind of mentality that has to date promoted exclusionary practices such that sense of belonging and creating safe spaces for rural students that represent a variety of identities means their needs and rights are not discussed, or even recognized especially in rural universities due to queerphobia (Kazyak, 2011). Even though South Africa has inclusive human rights that protect queer individuals, there is differential actualization of these rights especially, in rural settings. The problem is that resistance to change remains a major problem in rural universities due to the deeply entrenched cultural and traditional beliefs that view queerness as unAfrican (Reid, 2013). Thus, the ongoing struggle for social change and justice due to limited activities that support inclusion and diversity at university level subsist. With reference to Judith Butlers' work, she advances that some individuals in society continue to face increased defencelessness in what she terms 'precarity'. Precarity infers that an individual cannot exist independently of society. As such, sociality and interdependency makes some people particularly vulnerable to 'statelessness, homelessness, and destitution under unjust and unequal political conditions' (Butler, 2012, p. 148). Queer students are not an exception to this. In fact, the current challenges faced by queer students such as suicidal behaviour, bullying, harassment, substance misuse, homelessness and poor scholastic achievement, mental health, have become more pronounced (Chen, 2022; Daniels et al., 2019; Jones, 2019).

Further to this, umbrella terms commonly used of equal treatment, non-discrimination and protection of fundamental rights have to an extent done the opposite by breeding a denial to human rights of queer students (Vollenhoven and Els, 2013). For instance, the right of assembly; freedom of expression; right to education; right to health; life; security of person, human dignity and right to inclusive campus residence; and right to security of person have been noted as lacking in most universities (Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Sandy, 2017). Without doubt, the idea of human rights rests on the central premise that all humans

are equal and that their human dignity should always be upheld. But Sithole argues that the universal human rights as illustrated by the South African Constitution are human rights for some and not for all (Sithole, 2015). This is not surprising, borrowing from Westman (2022) who posits that it is not about queer students being granted such rights but, whether the same human rights mean anything in the face of the prevailing socio-cultural and symbolic positioning of members of sexual minority groups, particularly those from poorer and rural communities by paving way to discrimination (Kazyak, 2011).

More so, scholarly work points to lack of emerging voices of queer students due to the deeply entrenched cultural and traditional beliefs that view queerness as unAfrican (Matebeni, 2017; Mateveke, 2022). This is mostly pronounced in deep rural areas where a majority of Black students come from (Walker and Mathebula, 2020). To date, in South African rural areas, homosexuality remains a taboo subject especially in institutions of higher learning (Msibi, 2013). Individuals that identify as belonging to the queer community in the rural areas are not only judged, but viewed as demonic, sick, inhuman and often derided by members of the dominant society (Connell, 2009). These views resonate with the deeply entrenched and strong patriarchal and heteronormative values among Africans Reygan and Lynette (2014) and such views also exist amongst AmaXhosa culture in the Eastern Cape Province in which this study is situated. There is no doubt that cis-heteronormative environment still exists in this Province and its surrounding rural universities are not an exception where being queer is still viewed as against cultural norms and beliefs (Chamane, 2017). Students from the rural areas are socialized according to traditional heterosexual gendered roles which are often based on Christianity, traditional or cultured ideologies (Harro, 2000).

Ravhuhali et al., (2019) in their study also posit that social acceptance of queer students is generally lacking, especially outside urban areas in the eastern half of South Africa. The research setting of this study was also located in the rural Eastern Cape Province. Thus, rurality as a concept in this study reflects the broader history of the Eastern Cape Province in line with the colonial wars, migration, apartheid resettlements, Christianity, religion and cultural beliefs (Walker and Mathebula, 2020). As such, rural communities are typically described as less affluent, less educated and less racially and ethnically diverse than their suburban and urban counterparts (Barton, 2010; Baso, 2013). Accordingly, a rural community is a small group of people living in the same place, have the same norms, standards, cultural and traditional beliefs (Van der Vyver, Mathikge, and Phiri 2010). In this study, a majority of the students come from the surrounding rural communities and small towns whereby conservative and traditional recognition of heterosexuality as the only sexual identity is accepted leaving little or no room for other sexual identities. Moreover, a majority of the university community members observe Christian, cultural practices and traditional beliefs of the surrounding rural communities with strong beliefs that queerness is a taboo or a result of being bewitched (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2014, Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Sandy, 2017). This present rural context thus presents a significant challenge for students who identify as queer, as a result, the ways in which queer students form their identities and find community is less well understood and unresearched as concluded by Hulko and Hovanes (2018). As a result,

DePalma and Francis (2014) suggested in their report on how religious, cultural and traditional discourses still support the notion that homosexuality can be cured or prevented, thus promoting discourse of intolerance. Moreover, given the role of religion, patriarchy and cultural norms, in rural universities, research shows that mention of inclusive queer research and scholarship breeds level of discomfort amongst faculty (Reygan and Steyn, 2017).

To make matters worse, rural universities lack visible queer communities and gathering places that are readily available in most urban universities in the form of programmes, standalone units/centres. Further to this, it has been noted that participation in queer events and workshops related to queer community, newsletters with queer perspectives, as well as university-based ongoing activities to support positive sexuality and gender identity development are scanty (Wienke and Hill, 2013). Even informal support networks are hindered by the concern of discovery or being outed in campus and surrounding villages and small towns where everyone knows everybody (Denny et al., 2016). This lack of visible support networks leads to a feeling of isolation among rural queer individuals (Perales and Campbell, 2020). Further, despite research pin pointing to a number of strategies for university-based support, namely, (1) inclusive anti-harassment policies, (2) faculty support, (3) supportive extracurricular options including clubs, (4) access to information and support related to sexual orientation and gender identity and (5) LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum have been implemented, little changes have been made (Konishi et al., 2013). Geldenhuys, (2021) also suggests the promises made on paper to protect queer community from discrimination remain unfulfilled and queer students continue to face humiliation in university spaces. Humiliation 'marks one as that which does not belong, as that which must be expelled in order for the community to feel better' (Guenther, 2012, p. 61). Therefore, in this research, I explore the dynamics that queer students experiences in a rural university in South Africa and how transphobic and homophobic in rural universities has generally silenced the voices of queer students' talking about their lived experiences. The consequences of this is that South African scholarship in universities particularly in rural settings has failed to address the urgent problems of sexual minorities thus providing an alibi for the oppression of queer students and the socially toxic effects of this elision (Mateveke, 2022; Gaitho, 2022; Mulaudzi, 2018). Hames buttresses this and states that universities 'remain some of the most conservative and untransformed spaces, even when several academic studies and publications have concentrated on demystifying sexuality and sexual orientation in South Africa' (Hames, 2012, p. 66). Ncube (2013, p. 66) refers to this as a 'scandalous silence' as it forms part of the undeniable existence of queer students. Ncube's sentiments highlight how the characteristics of rural areas tend to promote silence of the experiences of rural queer students. Rural areas are more hostile toward queer individuals than urban areas (Wienke and Hill, 2013). Hence, the lived experiences of queer students in rural universities continue to remain on the periphery (Chen, 2022; Ravhuhali et al., 2019; Kazyak, 2011). Therefore, as a way of making provision for an analysis of queer students' experiences, it remains imperative to hear about their everyday experiences in rural universities.

Theoretical framework

The intersectionality theory by [Crenshaw \(1991\)](#) whereby, she frames the lived realities of many oppressed individuals, and their unique experiences anchored this study. [Crenshaw \(1991\)](#) cited by [Fotopoulou \(2012\)](#) defines intersectionality as a concept to describe how different identities such as ethnicity, sex, class, race and other individual differences intersect with each other to explain differences. This theory aligns with study under research as it entails centering the voices of queer students in rural universities who are exposed to inequities and experiences of oppression, stigma, and discrimination through race, gender and other social identities due to existing power relations, traditional, religious and cultural beliefs that remain deeply entrenched ([Jones and Abes, 2013](#)). This theory does not only place the lived experiences and struggles as the starting point of the marginalized groups ([Weber and Parra-Medina, 2003](#)), it also informs strategies to eliminate inequalities across multiple dimensions of social inequality by 'fostering a radical social justice agenda' ([Bilge, 2013](#), p. 407). In this research I employ the intersectionality theory because of its six core ideas with are "inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity and social justice" ([Collins and Bilges, 2016](#), p. 25). These core ideas cement the importance of social change, particularly for queer students in the Eastern Cape Province which to date remains very conservative to issues of homosexuality and displays open discrimination against queer population. Therefore, the foregoing tenets act as a guideline on change of attitude in universities so that they are more inclusive, diverse as well as recognizing the voices of queer students as the marginalized population ([Richards, 2015](#)). Further to this, using the intersectionality theory in diverse contexts such as universities allows me to highlight why it is important to challenge oppressive practices such as lack of social justice and human rights that are still levelled against queer students in rural universities. Lastly, I further engage with the intersectionality theory because it aligns with the methodology espoused for this paper which is grounded on constructivist epistemology and Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis (IPA). A constructivist epistemology aligns with the current study because queer students' experiences are appropriately located within a socio-political, cultural, traditional, Christian and historical context of gender, marginalization, vulnerability and discrimination and exclusion. On the other hand, the IPA focuses on exploring the varying depths of meaning of an individuals' unique experience through collected data and interpretation of the emerging themes. In other words, Crenshaw's theory enhances an understanding of how queer-phobic discrimination is still prevalent in universities and how queer students are more disparagingly marginalized than their counterparts.

Research methodology

An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach via a bounded case study anchored this study as supported by [Soeker et al., \(2015\)](#), p. 177) that using the IPA 'the researcher [is] able to gather information from the participants' perspectives and gain a better understanding of the lived experiences' ([Soeker et al., 2015](#), p. 177). Further, the approach was commensurate with the study because it allows for a small number of participants to be interviewed as it involves the use of thick description of the collected data and understanding

how meaning is created through embodied perception, as proposed by [Starks and Trinidad \(2007, p. 1373\)](#). Therefore, using the IPA allowed for the voices of queer students to be captured verbatim as they reflected on their individual and unique experiences. In addition, the IPA was aligned with this study because it advocates for the examination of topics which are complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden and the lived experiences of queer students is a prime exemplar of such a phenomenon ([Smith and Osborn, 2015](#)).

Study site

The study took place at a rural university in the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa which has approximately 19,600 students located across its three campuses. The students who took part in the study are located in the main campus. The geographic setting of this campus though largely rural is surrounded by semi-rural township communities, small towns and villages. Religious and traditional and cultural beliefs are practiced by a majority of the population. It is from these beliefs that queerness is deemed as unAfrican and a taboo ([Reid, 2013](#)). Since the university is a microcosm of the society, such beliefs and discriminatory practices have cascaded to teaching and learning spaces and the university in question is not an exception.

Participants

Demographic Information

This study involved members and allies of the queer students who are members of a group named Queer Ambassadors Group. It is through the Queer Ambassadors Group that the first Pride march was held, an initiative that showed that the queer students felt that part of promoting their existence, recognition, visibility and diversity in campus spaces had to come from their own initiative. For some of the queer students it was the first and the last pride march before exiting the university space, for others it was the beginning of embracing their sexuality openly. Thus, though there are many students' groups in the university under study, this is the first official group to be formed by queer students and comprises of students that identify with any sexual orientation or gender identity, including those who identified as heterosexual. Having a diversified group ensured that a full range of views could be accessed without adhering to rigid or binary conceptualizations of gender identity or sexual orientation and that the results of the study were not biased. The ages of the eight participants ranged from 21 to 34 years. A total of two students were postgraduates, and of the remaining six students, two were doing their final year and four were third-year students. In terms of gender identity and sexual orientation, all the participants preferred to self-disclose. Three identified as lesbian, 2 as a gay man, 1 as transgender, 1 as queer and questioning and as heterosexual. All the participants identified as Black and seven of the students came from the village setup, while, one student was a foreign national.

Sampling procedure

This paper is situated within a larger exploration of the ways in which rural universities can be supportive and inclusive of queer students while promoting diversity where practices of cis-heteronormativity are generally normalized. Using purposeful sampling procedures, I selected participants that were most likely to yield appropriate and useful information as proposed. A total of eight students belonging to a group called Queer Ambassadors formed the sample. To obtain the sample size the researcher contacted the leader of the Queer Ambassadors on campus to get a list of the queer students with their contact details. Using emails, a call was sent to the queer community on campus for those who were interested and were willing to participate and to go on retreats earmarked for queer students and allies. These retreats gave the queer students and allies the opportunity to spend a few days away from the campus environment where they could refocus, re-energize, thus share their experiences. Thus, it is during these retreats which were held between October 2021 and March 2022 that data were collected. The selected sampled size allowed me to reach a threshold of the recommended one to ten participants as proposed (Trinidad, 2007). For eligibility, the students had to be registered for the academic year 2022, identify as queer and be 18 years and above. Participants were requested to self-identify before commencement of the interviews. All the interviews were recorded upon consent from the participants and these were immediately transcribed verbatim and destroyed upon completion as proposed by Greensmith and King (2022). For purposes of trustworthiness and credibility, peer-debriefing through colleagues whose scholarship and/or lived experience gives them expertise on the issues of queer students was used. In this study, member checking was used by sharing the preliminary interview transcripts with the participants to determine if their narratives had been correctly captured or if they could offer any additional insights.

Instrumentation

Data were collected through face-to-face semi structured interviews with students as this provided me with the flexibility in data generation as well as providing a doorway in tapping on the lived experiences of the participants (Kelly, 2010). Each interview ranged between 30 and 45 min. All the participants were asked the same set of questions though the interview schedule also comprised of optional probing questions that allowed flexibility for the interviewer and participants to create a conversational flow as proposed by Kelly (2010). With the consent of the participants all interviews were recorded using an electronic device to prevent lost data and these were transcribed verbatim and coded as soon as each interview was over. Note taking was also used as backup during the interviews. All the transcripts were password protected and saved on one drive.

Data analysis

Data were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2012) through an intersectional lens by developing a list of significant narratives as a way of truly understanding the

phenomenon. An increased level of familiarization of the data from the interviews involved thorough listening and re-listening of the recorded interviews and articulate reading of transcribed data to identify the emerging patterns and common themes and a possible follow up interview(s) should there be emerging gaps during the familiarization of the collected data. To achieve this, the emerging themes were organized with intersectionality in mind so as to promote an understanding of queer students as shaped by their interactions with different social identities, systems and structures of power as proposed by Lueng (2021). For instance, I analysed data looking at how it interacted with the students' ethnicity, country of origin, identities, religious and cultural beliefs within a rural university environment. All the responses were typed and this assisted me to easily identify the similarities and the differences through the emerging findings. All the direct quotes that were similar were identified and these were labelled and coded into categories (Smith and Osborn, 2008). This I did by making a comparison between the typed transcripts from the recordings and the hand written notes to ensure accuracy. Thematic analysis was used to identify similar themes and these were summarized as final themes, coded and tabled in line with the participants experiences and the research approach adopted to this study.

Ethics

Permission to conduct this study was sought from the Ethics Committee and proof of approval to conduct research was issued as Ethics Clearance Number: REC-270,710-028-RA Level 01. Written and verbal consent were also obtained from participants prior to the interviews informing this paper. All the participants were reminded that interviews could stop at any given time should they so wish and that privacy and confidentiality would be adhered. Care was also taken to make sure that none of the participants would be in distress before and after the interview process. Arrangement were made with Student Counselling Unit (SCU) prior to and after the commencement of data collection in-case there were student participants who required counselling sessions. A follow up after the interviews showed that none of the students needed counselling sessions instead they alluded that voicing their lived experiences as queer students in rural university was an intrinsic reward in helping advance queer research and scholarship.

Research findings

Four primary themes emerged from the data: (a) *Do we have the right to call ourselves an inclusive university?* (b) *LGBTQ issues in university curricula - what does this mean for our classrooms and our students?* (c) *Toxic vibe in and out of the queer community;* (d) *Student residencies as a hot spot for discrimination.* Below, I explore how each theme connects to queer students' experiences and how this has in the process influenced both students' identities and their understanding and awareness of queerness in university spaces.

Do we have the right to call ourselves an inclusive university?

Participants shared their reasons why they thought the university remained non-inclusive. A majority of the emerging issues by participants centred on non-recognition of their sexual or gender identity and expression. Regarding how the university lacked inclusion and diversity, Josh who self-identified as gay and a postgraduate student majoring in Geology, shared:

for a university that is over a century old, we are still backward. Can you imagine how many thousands of the queer students have walked in and out of this university without their sexual identity being acknowledged. It all starts from the admission forms that are nonbinary, an indication that the university does not celebrate diversity.

Amy, who identifies as lesbian and a final year student under the Management and Commence faculty, felt the university still had a long way to go despite, the Vice Chancellor (VC) sentiments during the official opening of the 2022 academic year stating otherwise. She recalled:

We are in 2022 and a 106 years old and the Vice Chancellor said we are removing the rurality in us and call it a smart rural university; but we do not have a policy that is inclusive and this has made perpetrators committing harassment against us as queer community to get away with facing disciplinary action because they think we do not have any rights...If we are still lacking visibility and representation in 2022 then we are still rural. There are some of the services we need that form our core existence and these are not existent hence we still navigate gendered spaces in this university such as access to health queer students.

Phila, openly transgender and postgraduate student in the Social Sciences and Humanities, felt that failure to mask his identify had resulted in a sour relationship with his supervisor:

I am still not ready to talk about the experiences that I encountered with my supervisor. I don't know if I will ever be ready, the more I think about the about the injustices that occurred, how my rights to human dignity and education were violated, the more the anger. Unresolved trauma is triggered anew every time I think about it I knew even if I reported no one would believe me, so much for a university that has been in existence for over a century.

Visibility and inclusion of queer students in university under study remains low. Jodie, Robinson and Khan (2022) suggest that to improve visibility, universities should promote queer information, successes, news and events throughout the academic year, rather than exclusively during Pride or LGBTQ history month. Further promotion and visibility of queer students' societies should be made visible and supported by university leadership as this will promote a sense of belonging and connecting with other queer students and allies from the community (Mearns et al., 2020). Woodford et al., (2018) also suggest in their research that 'if not for the queer student organizations and the connections made there,

some queer students may not stay at their institutions and might have left higher education all together' (p. 124). Borrowing from [Leung \(2021\)](#) thus intersectionality in this case remains the answer to fully unpack and understand the vulnerability and frustrations queer students encounter. For instance, issues of gender, class, ethnicity, and culture, lack of diversity and inclusion are brought to the forefront such that queer students do not feel fully represented in campus spaces. For instance, though Phila was openly transgender, the internal stress he experienced from the supervisor impeded on his sense of belonging as well as his right to access to education. The findings have implications for ongoing educational programs that will promote inclusion, diversity and social justice. Further to this, inclusive leadership would also go a long in promoting visibility of queer population in university spaces. Undoubtedly, presence of inclusive leadership is bound to promote human rights, social justice through advocacy and activism and put at the forefront the visibility, involvement and presence of queer students in the facets of campus climate ([Ryan, 2013](#)).

LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum

There remains a dearth of intersectionality of queer issues in university curricular and programmes as highlighted by the participants. Bertha an Ally who identified as heterosexual and a final year student in Social Work cemented relayed how lack of inclusive curriculum led to continued microaggression towards her gender expression:

there is need for university community to know about marginalized identities through inclusive teaching and learning to avoid those weird looks and comments that we sometimes get. It is the jokes that are mostly disgusting and demeaning to queer students. This happens in class and even though we know we have to speak up and fight, we get scared for fear of being ostracised, being marked down by lecturers and also being excluded in groupwork by our peers.

Comment given by Bertha may be the reason why some of the queer students feel compelled to remain in the closet for fear of being ostracized. Thus, if the curriculum offered is inclusive and integrated in all the teaching of learning across the university, this would promote diversity and support of the queer students. [Kosciw et al., \(2018\)](#) also concluded as follows:

"a curriculum that is inclusive of diverse groups... instils a belief in the intrinsic worth of all individuals and in the value of a diverse society. Including LGBTQ-related issues in the curriculum in a positive manner may make LGBTQ students feel like more valued members of the school community, and it may also ... [result] in a more positive learning climate" (p.70).

Phila felt the problem was that the university did not have any course/module on queer issues, instead only the acronym LGBTQ was used in one of the compulsory courses offered to first year students called Life Knowledge and Action (LKA).

the basics in Life Knowledge and Action (LKA) would a starting point towards inclusion of queer research and scholarship but currently it is only the acronym 'LGBTQ' that is included in whole module which covers the whole semester no further explanation is given... though this module is meant to be tough to first years, students are also given an option to do the module before their exist university that on its own shows lack of serious on inclusive curriculum.

Tatlicous, a third-year student in Agricultural economics who preferred to call just queer raised the issue how the inclusion of queer studies in LKA was treated as a *laissez faire* approach:

though the course on LKA is compulsory I noted when we did the course that the facilitators that offer LKA do not even know the meaning of LGBTQ and what it stands for I think this affects how university students and staff are not inspired to embrace queer students.

Desire, a postgraduate lesbian student in Human Science Movement (HSM) said failure to acknowledge queer curriculum played a role in how queer students were bullied in the most salient manner especially in sports.

our lectures do not mention anything about queer issues during teaching and learning they do not have any empathy and understanding of queer identity hence we are bullied.... HSM is silent about it as well, yet this were cases of unfair treatment experienced by non-gender conforming students from sporting fraternity come from.

Thuli underscored how lack of information by her peers and lecturers made it difficult to navigate the challenges and antagonism that she was queer and this affected her sense of belonging in and out of the classroom. She explained:

because of little information and awareness that has been here since I registered as first year I feel as if some of the students and staff get annoyed with the idea of me self-identifying as queer.... though it is not said straight to my face but it is the behaviour and the manner in which some of the students and staff distance themselves from me....it is only when I am with my 'family' as I call the them that I feel a sense of belonging.

Unpacking the meaning of LGBTQ for a holistic understanding in university spaces is needed (Leburu et al., 2022). Further, student's comment speaks to what Moorhead and Jimenez (2020, p. 13) call the 'sidebar' phenomenon of marginalized communities' experiences whereby issues pertaining to the queer community in universities are relegated or given very smaller sections of the module. This suggests that queer issues are less significant aspects to be included in teaching and learning or, at worst, go unread. As such lack of inclusive curricula denies queer students what Helmsing (2016) called a space for becoming, in university spaces which allows for the consideration of one's changing, forming and reforming. While Steiner (2021) and Logan et al. (2016) propose in their research that open support for queer students using inclusive curriculum

can deter bullying and victimization through the use of teachable moments, curriculum relevance and literary merit. However, research done by [Schneider and Owens \(2000\)](#) shows that university mission and vision statements that tap on the principles of inclusion, diversity as well as, sexual orientation of its students and staff have not been implemented. As such campus climate that spell out respect for all individuals is rarely found because universities still lack critical pedagogy which is underpinned by social justice, democracy and emancipation. I borrow from [McLaren's \(2005, p.197\)](#) definition that there is need for critical pedagogy because:

“it asks how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does, and how and why some constructions of reality are legitimated and celebrated by dominant culture while others are clearly not. The critical factor here is that some forms of knowledge have more power and legitimacy than others.” (p. 197)

Toxic vibe in and out of the queer community

Discrimination in rural universities remains more virulent, or as [Kilman, \(2007\)](#) would say, universities remain ‘a fucked-up place to be queer’. As such raising awareness regarding the severity of this crisis through queer activism and scholarship in university spaces remain critical. In her example, Desire a well-known activist and advocate queer community in and out of university spaces lamented on violation of human rights of queer community:

Lack of recognition has injured our dignity so much, I was beaten up and injured severely for talking to girl and to date my perpetrator though well-known is yet to be brought to book. So, you can blame me (us), if in future if we choose not to report these incidents.... there's not much you can do; the system has been unfair to us... our rights as are not recognised.

In the same line of thought Marx, who is openly gay and a third-year student in the Agricultural Sciences and Extension said that GBV against queer community was rife in and outside campus spaces but some of the students were scared to report because they were not yet out of the ‘closet’ concerning their sexuality:

there have also been cases of queer students being severely beaten up and harassed in drinking spots outside campus by fellow students, but in most cases, they refuse to report for fear of revictimization and being known that one is queer by the whole university community.

Tatilicious also brought in a crucial point that the issue of harassment and sexual abuse was also rife among the queer community and this made it hard to make formal reports:

Even within the queer community it can be toxic and other queer students do not accept others. There is serious GBV amongst us as well as, and we cannot report because already we do not have enough support from the university.....so we try and keep these cases amongst ourselves as much as possible....to make matter worse our hangout places are more like

“hoop up” places and as such we have experienced intimate partner violence and cases of double crossing each other in sexual relations, instead of educating ourselves and how best we can promote our visibility, I feel at times we do the opposite.

Findings given by Tatilicious align with previous intersectional research titled, *Undocuqueer stress: How safe are 'safe' spaces, and for whom?* Whereby queer students experienced discrimination, violence and feelings of invisibility and exclusion within the queer community (Cisneros and Bracho, 2020). Meanwhile in support of the level of violence levelled against queer students. Lewis, Rowe and Wiper, (2018, p. 520) in their study concluded that GBV against queer persons has been conspicuous for many years. Whereas recent research also aligns with the findings of the study that ‘violence against queer students is often perpetrated based on the stigmatization of gender non-conformity, gender expression or identity, and perceived sexual orientation’ (Wirtz et al., 2020, p. 227). Further, Johnston (2016) contends over the years there has been a tendency to generalize GBV levelled against queer community without giving specific attention to gendered differences. As a result, this instils fear and pressure among queer individuals to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity as a means to protect themselves from GBV (Kiss et al., 2020). The findings of the study suggest that the monolithic heteronormative social structures that exist in and out of the campus climate cement GVB levelled against queer students (Leburu et al., 2022). Thus, it is these realities that instil fear of the queer students reporting each other when they experience intimate partner violence. To make matters worse, the university location and context has low tolerance of queer students, hence Kosciw et al. (2015) concluded in their research that queer students in rural communities experience more victimization than youth who come out in urban communities.

University student residencies as a hot spot for discrimination

Daunting practices that continue to be experienced by a majority of queer students coupled with queer scholarship and research that highlight negative experiences of queer students in university residences paint a very brutal picture. Even though previous research show that adolescents acquire opportunities to explore their sexuality upon arrival at universities and away from the home the opposite it true (Dugan and Yurman, 2011). Concerning their experiences in university residences Josh stated:

a large percentage of students come from the nearby villages and they just don't know how to interact with queer students.

Whereas as Bertha added that a form safety measures a majority of queer students tended to co-habitat or opted for single rooms for privacy.

as a way of avoiding harassment and discrimination as queer students we either co-habitat or share rooms and just get a single room of your own so that you have some privacy. That way you do not owe anyone an explanation about who you are.

Meanwhile, Amy excerpt also mapped the importance in understanding the role that family and cultural and traditional socialization plays in the manner in which they are treated by their peers in residencies.

as a queer student sharing a room with heterosexual peers has always been a problem to me because already at home where some of our peers come from they are not only questioned, but forbidden to interact with queer friends... but I don't have a choice because staying off campus is not safe for me.

Marx added that the fact that the university was in a rural setting made it worse because a majority of their peers and lecturers had very similar understanding and upbringing in terms of family expectations, cultural or and societal norms that being gay was taboo hence the need to learn and unlearn some of the harmful behaviours:

There is learning and unlearning some of the behaviours that we experience as queer community. Experiences of prejudice in class starts from residencies, sub wardens and roommates.....in my hostel our sub warden does not hide that he is homophobic.

Finally, Josh stated that cultural differences from other students who came from other African countries inhibited the bonds that they could form with their peers or even to open up to them about their sexuality and this led to social isolation and queer students having their own cliques:

The current residencies here do not create space for us to be fully expressive of who we are there are no bathrooms in and out of residency that are gender inclusiveso creating gender-inclusive housing options will take a long time in this university..... this is an international university with foreign students from African countries that view queerness as taboo so you can imagine how it feels like having to share a room is like with them.

Findings also align with earlier research that experiencing direct and indirect harassment and lack of support from resident assistants, roommates and peers tend to contribute to a hostile residency environment (Evans and Broido, 2002). Given the important role peers have in shaping the microenvironment of residence halls, their attitudes and opinions toward queer students and topics matter (Kortegast, 2017). Undoubtedly, campus residency currently reinforces binary understandings of gender. These views are cemented by Leung (2021) who asserts in his autoethnography that as a student he became confused where he stood or belonged. While Snapp states that queer identities are not accepted and this leads to lack of safe and comfort in university spaces. Hence, a need for rural universities to transform into more positive campus environment. This will help to redress the myths and misconceptions about queer students in residencies and why university and the surrounding communities continue to undermine their existence.

Conclusion

In this study I argue that rural universities have to transform into more positive campus environment by implementing strategies that are inclusive, supportive and diverse using past experiences for solutions based on current myriad of challenges encountered by queer students. Thus, a one-size fits all approach used to recruit and retain students in this rural university means that only the needs of heterosexual students are met instead of all identities being served. Findings show that inclusion, diversity and support of queer students can only work better if all human needs of students are met as supported by [Bolman and Deal \(2013\)](#). Thus, to deny queer students their right is only aiding in the process of silencing them while promoting queerphobia. I further contend that queer students' voices including queer student groups must constitute a core part in pushing for change, this will create a 'critical space to hear, share, and learn' from one another as advanced by [Brooms \(2019, p. 763\)](#). However, as could be deduced from the findings, the problem is that resistance to change remains a major problem in rural universities due to the deeply entrenched religious, cultural and traditional beliefs that view queerness as unAfrican. Moreover, through the voices of queer students there is evidence that the rural university under research has bluntly ignored the violation, protection and promotion of human rights of queer lives as found in a study by ([Badgett. and Crehan, 2017](#)). Thus, to date mention of existence of queer students and staff remains on the periphery with little or no changes being made over the years. As such the steps taken by the queer students to form a student's groups leans towards promotion of their visibility and inclusion in curriculum, and university programmes. This will to a large extent eradicate the exclusionary practices that promote what [Reygan and Lynette \(2014\)](#) term heteronormative culture which has contributed to the erasure of the lived experiences and realities of queer students in a majority of South African universities particularly in rural settings. As such it is imperative for the university stakeholders to support queer students' group as these play a critical role towards redress of inequality as well as linking queer students with support network in campus that span beyond queer issues by including intersectional issues of ethnicity, gender and discrimination ([Poteat and Scheer, 2016](#)).

Rural universities have imposed and continue imposing brutal and inhuman conditions for a majority of queer students. The current status quo spells out denigration and humiliation of queer students by peers and lecturers an indication that there is a lack of support mechanisms that are meant to redress heteronormativity from the office bearers. An important implication of this research is what it offers regarding the inclusion of empirical queer scholarship, research and teaching and learning. It is important that rural universities must transform into more positive campus environment by implementing strategies using past experiences for solutions based on current myriad of challenges encountered by the queer students. Further understanding the lived experiences of the queer students will give room to a deeper understanding of the fragmented information about stories of their identity and lived experiences which remain undetected and untold. As such an examination of how the existing institutional policies prioritize the inclusion of queer students towards promotion of visibility and diversity through students' organizations, programs and events cannot be understated. Reason being, findings point to discrimination at institution level that takes places in different forms and

levels both in overt and covert ways an indication that existence of institutional policies is not a guarantee of a positive and inclusive university as well as its leadership. Levels of violence targeted at queer students in and outside campus environment require all university stakeholders to embrace more complex understandings of marginalization and the violence that enforces it. Findings further reveal that existence of queer students threatens the organizational culture and traditions on which a majority of rural universities are founded on. Undoubtedly, such an environment has only worked to perpetuate transphobic, biphobia and homophobic attitude within university spaces, as found through this research and further supported by [Reygan and Lynette \(2014\)](#). If universities remain a hub of queer discrimination either in covert or overt ways, it becomes difficult for queer students and staff to share and validate their experiences, existence and visibility in university spaces.

Limitations of the study

Despite a call being made a limited number of the students responded and this affected the amount of collected data. There were no bisexual students that participated in the study. This could be linked to the geographical area of the university under research which is openly discriminatory on queer perspectives. Moreover, queer students who are not out of the closet may have found it difficult to take part in the study based on the assumption that their sexuality might be disclosed. Therefore, it was important for me as a researcher to emphasize on the importance of ethics with the participants especially on privacy and confidentiality and use of pseudo names.

Implications for further research

Based on the emerging findings of the study, future research should focus on a university wide study to capture on the inclusion and visibility of queer students in teaching and learning spaces. This should be inclusive of all university stakeholders if institutional change is to realized using top down and bottom up approaches. Research should also be carried out on teaching and learning of inclusive queer curriculum as well programmes earmarked in promoting social justice and human rights for all. Such a study has the potential to dismantle heteronormative behaviour and attitudes that currently remain deeply entrenched in rural universities in South Africa.

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