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Institutional needs of the transgender student community at the University of the Witwatersrand

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UNIVERSITY OF WITWATERSRAND

Abstract

Transgender students in higher education in South Africa are increasingly coming out. Though this coming out comes at huge to cost for them in terms of personal safety, alienation, potential harassment, bullying and discrimination, this group of students are insisting that campuses should be inclusive and safe for everyone irrespective of their gender, sex, sexuality and/or sexual orientation. In this regard, student organisations such as Activate and Ctrl Alt Gender are doing profound advocacy work in putting pressure on the university management to recognise, affirm and acknowledge transgender students as part of the university community.

It is through researching the institutional needs of students who are openly identifying as transgender at Wits that one can observe the full conseqences of the compartmentalising system that activist Mock (2014) describes when reflecting on her experiences as a transgender woman. Ratele & Kessi (2016) maintain that the biggest success in terms of transformation since 1994 in higher education is the increase in diversity of student bodies with regard to race and gender; however, Francis & Msibi (2011) suggest that issues of sexual identity, as they intersect with other identities need more exploration. This is consistent with what Ratele & Kessi (2016) assert that research that takes a more integrated approach to students' experiences is required. It is important to recognise that inasmuch as scholars such as Higham, 2012; Kiguwa, 2014; Vincent, 2008; & Woods, 2001 have done studies in issues of power, dominance, subordination in higher education, on how power perpetuates itself and how it might be undone, Ratele & Kessi (2016) insist that more research is needed to marginalised students, and making their experiences central to the transformation and decolonisation debates. This study is an attempt to do precisely that by focusing particularly at the institutional needs of the transgender student community at Wits University.

University in particular and Higher Education in general is often the first opportunity many transgender students have to question their gender and sexuality. Transgender students form

one of the most vulnerable groups of people who experience serious difficulties on campus because their existence is negated and/or is not sufficiently recognised.

The themes arising from the thematic analysis of student interviews relate to campus awareness, campus climate, campus experience, campus incidences of harassment/discrimination, toilet experiences, student group participation, things that could improve transgender student experiences if they were to be introduced at Wits, student support services, Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU) experience, campus health experience, residence experience, pronoun usage experience, trans community on campus, knowledge of the Safe Zones@Wits advocacy programme. These themes reveal the needs and experiences of transgender students on campus. Thematic analysis is a process for encoding qualitative information (Gibb, 2007).

Ten key needs emerged from this study: policy, health care, gender neutral toilets, residences, Safe Zones@Wits, pronouns, transitioning, coming out, campus climate, and campus awareness.

In the South African context there is not much literature as yet in this field of study. However, I am confident that with the developing interest in transgender communities, accurate understandings will begin to emerge as advocacy programmes and institutional policy regimes that offer support to transgender students facilitate safe spaces in which they can come out, self-disclose their transgender identities and in the process claim their full humanity.