# T W I S T

# Lecturers' Knowledge and Perceptions of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) Community in Higher Education Institutions in Johannesburg, South Africa

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**Abstract**
This study explores lecturers' knowledge and perceptions of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) community in higher education institutions in Johannesburg, South Africa. Using a qualitative research approach, purposive sampling was employed to select participants. Data was collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with ten consenting lecturers and analysed thematically. The findings revealed four key themes: (1) lecturers' perceptions of LGBTQIA+ students, (2) engagement and interactions with LGBTQIA+ students, (3) collaboration with other communities to support LGBTQIA+ students, and (4) concerns about misgendering. While lecturers demonstrated a general but limited understanding of the LGBTQIA+ community, they emphasized equal treatment of students regardless of gender or sexuality. Some lecturers actively involved external communities in lecture sessions to foster inclusivity. However, discussions on sexuality and gender remained limited among heterosexual lecturers. The study highlights the need for stronger collaboration with internal and external stakeholders to support LGBTQIA+ students through awareness campaigns and capacity-building initiatives. Although lecturers expressed concerns about misgendering, challenges persist in using appropriate terminology and pronouns. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of policy awareness, psychosocial support, and enhanced institutional support for LGBTQIA+ students.

**Keywords**
Higher Education Institutions, Knowledge, Lecturers, LGBTQIA+, Perception, Students

**INTRODUCTION**
In recent years, there has been a rising awareness regarding the crucial importance of establishing inclusive and supportive learning environments within higher educational institutions, central to this initiative lies the importance to comprehend the knowledge and perception of lecturers towards students within the LGBTQI+ community (Buthelezi & Brown, 2023). In a study conducted by Hall and Rogers (2018) in a college in the United States, it was established that educators with fundamentalist religious orientations generally displayed more negative attitudes towards homosexuality compared to those with more progressive religious orientations. According to Blechinger (2016) LGBTQI+ community is a diverse and inclusive community composed of individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and other sexual orientations and gender identities that do not conform to traditional societal norms. The "+" symbol signifies the inclusion of additional identities and experiences beyond those explicitly mentioned (Blechinger, 2016). Mollura (2017) states that this population frequently encounters high levels of homophobia, internalized homophobia, harassment, victimization, and bullying due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. LGBTQI+ youth

are particularly vulnerable to high rates of depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, homelessness, substance abuse and involvement in criminal activities (Mollura, 2017).

Individuals with these various sexual identities and orientation are present across the globe, with Africa facing particularly stringent laws concerning same-sex relationships (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2017). While many African nations regard non-heterosexual orientations and gender non-conformity as taboo, some, like Kenya and South Africa, have constitutional provisions safeguarding individuals from the stigma and discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity (Mogotsi et al., 2017). Understanding lecturers' knowledge and attitudes toward LGBTQI+ students is critical not only to encourage inclusivity and equality in higher education but also to focus on the specific needs and difficulties that LGBTQI+ students face. This study explores lecturers' perceptions, awareness and practices towards LGBTQI+ students to discover areas for advancement in training programs and institutional policies aimed at improving support and inclusivity for these students in university settings to improve and strengthen the support of LGBTQAI+ students from both the lecturers and other university structures. Finally, the findings of this study will help in expanding awareness and advocacy initiatives for LGBTQI+ rights and inclusivity in educational setting. The study anticipates the importance of targeted training and institutional policies in enhancing lecturers' capacity to support and advocate for LGBTQI+ students, thereby fostering a more inclusive educational environment. More professional development opportunities for educators are necessary to reduce negative experiences for LGBTQI+ students.

LGBTQI+ students experience a lot of challenges within university settings (Sithole, 2015). The study conducted by Sithole (2015) found that 67% of LGBTQI+ students reported feelings of marginalization by their lecturers in a South African university. Regardless of the expanding awareness and advocacy initiatives for LGBTQI+ rights and inclusivity in educational settings, there is a lack of research on lecturers' knowledge and attitudes towards LGBTQI+ students (Mogotsi et al., 2017). This creates a gap given the prevalence of discrimination, bullying and exclusion faced by LGBTQI+ students in higher education (Mogotsi et al., 2023). Yet, the level to which lecturers comprehend the challenges faced by LGBTQI+ students, are familiar with the LGBTQI+ terminology and employ inclusive practices in their teaching remains unexplored and insufficiently understood (Mogotsi et al., 2023). Gegenfurtner et al. (2023) stated that lecturers who are unfamiliar with LGBTQI+ vocabulary, who do not understand the difficulties that LGBTQI+ students encounter or have unfavourable views towards this student population might unintentionally contribute to an uncomfortable and hostile learning environment. This knowledge gap represents a significant barrier to creating inclusive and affirming learning environments in higher education. As a result, there is a necessary need for research into lecturers' knowledge and perceptions of LGBTQI+ students, to identify areas for improvement and develop strategies to improve support and inclusivity of these students within higher educational settings.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research adopted the social constructivist theory which emphasizes the role of social interactions, cultural context and shared meanings in shaping individuals' identities, behaviours and experiences (Adams, 2006). The theory suggests that knowledge and reality are constructed through social processes and are influenced by cultural, historical and contextual factors (Adams, 2006). According to this theory, cognitive development is a result of internalizing the processes first experienced in social contexts, highlighting the importance of social interactions and cultural tools in the learning process (Kim, 2001). Knowledge is often developed through collaborative efforts and dialogues between individuals, as people share ideas, challenge each other's viewpoints and work together to solve problems, they collectively construct new understandings (Akpan et al., 2020). According to Kim (2001) social constructivist theory informs assessment, intervention and advocacy efforts by recognising the subjective nature of reality and the importance of understanding clients' perspectives within their social and cultural contexts. The advantages of the theory include that by emphasizing the social and cultural contexts in which knowledge is constructed, social constructivist research can provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of phenomena (Adams, 2006). Secondly, the theory is adaptable to various settings and can be used to study a wide range of social and cultural phenomena. And lastly, participants are often more engaged and invested in research that values their experiences and perspectives, leading to richer data (Adams, 2006).

Applying social constructivist theory to the topic of this research study includes examining how social constructions of gender and sexuality shape the interactions and experiences of both lecturers and students. Moreover, by understanding how knowledge and perceptions are socially constructed, educators and institutions can work towards creating more inclusive and supportive environments for all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The theory values individual experiences and interpretations, which is crucial for understanding the varied perspectives of lecturers. This focus allows the research to capture the complexities and differences in attitudes toward LGBTQI+ students, revealing personal and professional experiences that shape these perceptions. Social constructivism underscores the importance of communication in shaping knowledge and attitudes. The research can explore how communication practices within the university, such as discussions about diversity and inclusion policies, influence lecturers' understanding and acceptance of LGBTQI+ students. A researcher can benefit from using a social constructivist theory by gaining insights into how individuals and groups interact and create meaning within their social contexts. The theory will aid the researcher to understand the lecturers' different social and cultural backgrounds seeing that lecturers come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and their knowledge and perspectives may be different from one another.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Approach

A research approach refers to the overall strategy that directs the selection of methods and procedures for data collection, analysis, and interpretation in a study (Cleland, 2017). This study employed a qualitative research approach due to its focus on gaining an in-depth understanding of phenomena and exploring individuals' experiences and perspectives. By acknowledging the complexity of LGBTQIA+ inclusion in higher education and prioritizing participant viewpoints, qualitative research provides deeper insights and informs strategies for promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in tertiary institutions.

### Research Design

Research design serves as a strategic framework that systematically guides the research process from problem formulation to result presentation (Singh, 2021). This study utilized an exploratory case study design, which is particularly suitable for investigating topics that are not well-defined or widely understood (Creswell, 2014). This approach was particularly valuable in exploring the under-researched area of LGBTQIA+ inclusivity in academia, allowing for the identification of emerging themes and contemporary concerns.

### Population, Sample, and Sampling Procedures

#### *Population*

A research population consists of the specific group of individuals or cases that a study seeks to examine and generalize findings to (Weyers, 2011). The target population for this study comprised lecturers employed at a higher education institution in Johannesburg. The research focused on lecturers from the Faculty of Humanities who directly interact with LGBTQIA+ students. This population included lecturers from various schools, academic disciplines, and levels of experience.

*Inclusion Criteria:*
- Must be a qualified full-time or part-time lecturer.
- Aged 25 years or older.
- Must have direct contact with LGBTQIA+ students.
- Open to male and female lecturers.
- Must be from the Faculty of Humanities.

*Exclusion Criteria:*
- Individuals from professions other than lecturing.
- Lecturers who do not interact with LGBTQIA+ students.
- Individuals younger than 25 years.
- Lecturers from the faculties of Health Sciences, Engineering, Science, and Commerce, Law, and Management.

#### *Sample*

A sample is a subset of the larger population that is selected for study (Zhi, 2014). This study's sample consisted of 10 lecturers from different schools within the Faculty of Humanities, all of whom engage with students from diverse sexual identities. To ensure diversity, the sample included lecturers with varying levels of qualifications and experiences. Participants included those actively involved in advocating for LGBTQIA+ students as well as those who engage with them minimally.

#### *Sampling Procedures*

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who have direct interactions with LGBTQIA+ students. This non-random technique is commonly used in qualitative research to ensure the selection of participants with relevant experiences (Etikan et al., 2016; Palinkas et al., 2013). By focusing on this specific group, the study aimed to yield rich, relevant, and insightful findings that contribute to advancing LGBTQIA+ inclusivity in higher education. Additionally, snowball sampling was used alongside purposive sampling. This technique involves existing study participants recruiting additional participants from their networks (Palinkas et al., 2013). Since LGBTQIA+ advocacy can be a sensitive topic, this approach helped establish trust and rapport, leading to more open and honest responses. Snowball sampling also proved efficient in accessing knowledgeable participants within a relatively short period (Singh & Masuku, 2014). To recruit participants, the researcher collaborated with various university structures which advocate for gender and sexual rights within the institution. Following the purposive sampling method, initial participants were recruited through these university structures. They were then encouraged to refer other lecturers who met the study's criteria, aligning with the snowball sampling approach. The recruitment process continued until data saturation was reached.

### Method of Data Collection

Data collection involves systematically gathering information for research purposes (Mazhar et al., 2021). This study employed semi-structured one-on-one interviews, which allowed for flexibility in exploring lecturers' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of LGBTQIA+ students. Semi-structured interviews combine pre-determined open-ended questions with the ability to explore additional topics as they arise (Adams, 2015).

The interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and completeness (Rutakumwa et al., 2020). Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted in English, the institution's primary language of instruction. Interviews took place in private settings, such as lecturers' offices, at a time convenient for them. Participants provided informed consent before data collection began. The researcher commenced the data collection process immediately after receiving ethical clearance from the university's research committee.

**Method of Data Analysis**
Data analysis refers to the process of examining and interpreting collected data to draw meaningful conclusions (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). This study employed thematic analysis, a qualitative method that involves identifying patterns and themes within the data (Naeem et al., 2023). Following a six-step approach (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000), the researcher systematically coded and categorized the data, ensuring that emerging themes aligned with existing literature and theoretical frameworks. This approach provided comprehensive insights into the factors influencing lecturers' knowledge and perceptions of LGBTQIA+ students.

**Trustworthiness**
Trustworthiness in qualitative research ensures the credibility, dependability, confirmability and reliability of study findings (Williams, 2018). To maintain research integrity, the study adhered to established qualitative research principles, ensuring that findings accurately represented participants' perspectives.

**Ethical Considerations**
Ethical clearance was obtained from the Human Research Ethics (Non-Medical) Department at the University of Witwatersrand (Ref: SW/24/06/04).

**Table 1** Demographics of participants (N=10)

| Demographic factor | Symbol | Number |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Gender | Male | 4 |
| | Female | 4 |
| | Non-binary | 2 |
| Age | 25-35 | 1 |
| | 35-45 | 5 |
| | 45+ | 4 |
| Race | African black | 6 |
| | White | 2 |
| | Coloured | |
| | Indian | 1 |
| | Other | 1 |
| Marital status | Single | 5 |
| | Married | 4 |
| | Widow | |
| | Widower | |
| | Divorced | 1 |
| Employment status | Full-time Employed | 8 |
| | Part-time Employed | 2 |
| Department | Film and Television | 1 |
| | Sociology | 1 |
| | Psychology | 3 |
| | Demography and population studies | 1 |
| | Speech pathology | |
| | South African sign language | 1 |
| | African Literature | 1 |
| | Modern Languages | 1 |
| School | Human and Community Development | 4 |
| | School of Arts | 1 |
| | Literature, Language and Media | 3 |
| | Social Sciences | 2 |

Table 2 Themes and subthemes

| Themes | Sub-themes |
|---|---|
| Lecturers' Perceptions of LGBTQIA+ Students | Understanding and knowledge on the LGBTQIA+ community |
| | Limited knowledge in understanding LGBTQIA+ terminologies |
| | Knowledge on LGBTQIA+ related theories |
| Engagement and interactions with LGBTQIA+ students | Engagement with LGBTQIA+ formally and informally |
| | Engagements with LGBTQIA+ students in classroom settings |
| | Provision of equal treatment of students |
| Collaborations with other communities in support of the LGBTQIA+ students | Participation of other communities and individuals to support and educate LGBTQIA+ students in lecture sessions |
| | Discussions on sexuality and gender among heterosexual lecturers |
| Concerns around mis-gendering | The use of LGBTQIA+ pronouns |

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Theme 1: Lecturer's perceptions of LGBTQIA+ students

Student at university comes from diverse backgrounds and needs to be embraced by lecturers and senior staff. Whilst it is important to have knowledge and understand bout them, it is also important to educate them and always be alerted to recognise such minority population group. However, some lectures have different perceptions towards such groups and this what they had to say:

### *Understanding and knowledge on the LGBTQIA+ community*

Generally, it was evident that some participants seemed to have insights and were able to share their understanding as follows:

*"Eh in my understanding, those are the people umh, who are neither male nor female. So that's why these days when we're doing the classification, we refer to them as other because they don't belong to these eh natural classifications of what males and what eh, which is either you can either be a male or female. These ones, they are not." [Dr Bokie]*

*"Okay, the term, for me, it encompasses people who do not classify themselves as either male or female, people who include different sexualities, different groups of sexualities, they don't comply to the ordinary, you know, categories that we have." [Dr Casey]*

### *Limited knowledge in understanding LGBTQIA+ terminologies*

Yet some participants had limited knowledge, and this is what they had to say:

*"I don't know the formal definition of it…people that don't identify as heterosexual." [Dr Innocent].*

*"I realized that I don't actually even understand quite what non-binary means." [Prof Emily]*

### *Knowledge on LGBTQIA+ related theories*

Some participants had knowledge regarding the theories related to the LGBTQIA+. The excerpts below confirm:

*"If you read queer theory, it is anything and everything that is not straight, cisgender or heterosexual."[Dr Hollard]*

The quotes from the lecturers suggested varied and limited understandings of LGBTQIA+ identities, particularly around non-binary orientations. Lecturers' descriptions range from uncertainty and assumptions to some awareness of LGBTQIA+ terminology, echoing findings by Oladipo (2021) that knowledge and perceptions of LGBTQIA+ students differ widely depending on regional, cultural and educational contexts. For instance, Dr. Bokie and Dr. Casey demonstrate perceptions rooted in binary classifications, viewing LGBTQIA+ identities as outside traditional categories, which aligns with the idea that some regions or institutions remain bound by rigid gender norms. Professors like Fezzy and Hollard show a more inclusive, though varied, whilst recognition of LGBTQIA+ identities, reflecting regions or academic environments where there has been a shift toward more acceptance, as described by Lee et al. (2021). However, statements like "I don't actually even understand quite what non-binary means" [Prof. Emily] highlight the gap in knowledge, suggesting a need for further awareness and training. These diverse perspectives underscore the importance of institutional support in educating academic staff to foster an inclusive environment for LGBTQIA+ students. The differences in understanding among lecturers reveal how perceptions can influence the level of comfort and support LGBTQIA+ students may experience, aligning with the broader societal influences that Lee et al. (2021) and Oladipo (2021) identified as factors shaping attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ students.

### Theme 2: Engagement and interactions with LGBTQIA+ students

Lecturers engage with students in various ways, and this is likely to improve learning outcomes, academic success and motivation. Engaged students are also more likely to engage with other students to offer the support to others. In

remaining engaged and interacting with students, on can identify the challenges facing students sooner, however – this depends on the type of treatment and the relationship lecturers has with students. Below, lecturers confirmed to have been engaging an interacting with students in various ways:

*Engagement with LGBTQIA+ formally and informally*
*"And also, in my line of duty as a therapist, I have counselled some of them, I've interacted with them formally some of them eh in drinking places." [Dr Bokie]*
*"So, the first class I had the student was a bit upset because I had said, uhm, there was one slide where I had said, one can choose, if they feel uncomfortable in the body that they are in, they can choose to transition from the sex that they are into the one that I feel comfortable with. And the student was just so angry that I used the word choice. So, I said, "Okay, what word would you like to use?" can you suggest, the word that you feel comfortable with us using? The student was just like, "Nah, I don't have a word that you can use, but you can't use the word choice."[Dr Casey]*

*Engagements with LGBTQIA+ students in classroom settings*
Lecturers can interact and engage with students at different levels to embrace them equally and fairly:
*"I have very small classes, so my first year, like in this moment, they are 11 or 20 students...they answer personally, so I get to know them personally."[Prof Amy]*
*"So, I engage with students in my classroom because I teach gender and sexuality, I supervise students who are part of the queer community who also research some of these issues. In the past, I've led a research project which was on gender and sexuality, so I also interacted with postgraduate students who were both part of the community and were researching sexuality or queer issues." [Prof Gabrielle]*
*"I don't know if there's anything unique or different between my engagement with students in the LGBTQI+ community and other students." [Dr Darell]*

*Provision of equal treatment of students*
Furthermore, there is evidence of just treatment provided to the students. This means lecturers embraced diversity and are culturally competent:
*"So, I would engage with them in any other the same way I engage with any other students who are cisgendered or who doesn't have another classification, you know, just chooses to be heterosexual like that's their choice. So, as a lecturer, it's not my place to judge you based on your gender, based on your sexuality, based on your race. So, my role is to treat you equally as I would with anyone." [Prof Fezzy]*
*"Because I do not know who LGBTQI is and who is not in it because it's self-refined. And I haven't had that experience where I interact with people based on their sexuality or identities. I just interact with them as students." [Dr Innocent]*

The lecturers' quotes illustrate a range of engagement levels and interactions with LGBTQIA+ students, with some actively integrating gender and sexuality topics into their curriculum and research supervision, as shown by Prof. Gabrielle's involvement in queer studies and research supervision. Such active engagement, as supported by Raja et al. (2023), plays a critical role in creating a more inclusive and affirming campus climate, which can promote LGBTQIA+ students' academic and social well-being. Lecturers who engage meaningfully are better positioned to foster a sense of safety, especially by showing an understanding of LGBTQIA+ identities and addressing related issues in the classroom (Ainscow, 2020). On the other hand, some lecturers approach their engagement from a neutral perspective, treating all students equally, as noted by Dr. Darell and Prof. Fezzy, or without distinguishing based on identity, as Dr. Innocent expressed. This approach can involuntarily overlook the unique experiences and challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ students, potentially missing opportunities for specialized support and understanding (Ainscow, 2020). Dr. Casey's experience with a student being upset about using "choice" to describe transitioning highlights the need for sensitivity to language, which is crucial in fostering a supportive learning environment. Sensitivity and openness to learning preferred language and terms are vital, as Raja et al. (2023) emphasizes, in positively engaging with LGBTQIA+ students. These varied responses align with research findings that emphasize the importance of active, informed engagement to support LGBTQIA+ inclusivity. Positive lecturer-student interactions, as well as knowledge of inclusive policies and sensitivity to terminology, are all instrumental in creating a campus environment where LGBTQIA+ students feel valued and respected (Ainscow, 2020).

**Theme 3: Collaborations with other communities in support of the LGBTQIA+ students**
The interaction is not only limited to the existing undergraduate students but also expanded to include post graduate students to come and offer the support to junior students.

*Participation of other communities and individuals to support and educate LGBTQIA+ students in lecture sessions*
*"The first lecture I invited a student who's doing their master's dissertation, the student is a transgender man. Yeah, then I invited another transgender person, the following lecture, this person also transitioned from being a woman to a man and they shared also some of their experiences. The following class, I invited a lesbian couple to come and talk to the class, sharing experiences as well and all the things that happened there. Then the following lecture, I invited a lesbian professor to just give a lecture on some of the things and the paper she's written on." [Dr Casey]*

The lecturers are also willing and opened to include another department to work and support one another to benefit the students' academic outcomes.

*"The deaf community, well…we do in our second year, we teach deaf identity, and deaf identity is not just deaf identity. We don't have an essentialised approach, because deaf people can be gay, deaf people can be lesbian, they can be non-binary. They can be lots of things, bisexual, transgender, everything that we find in mainstream society also plays out in the deaf community. So, we do bring in guest speakers from the community and one of them is openly gay and openly HIV positive, and he usually comes and talks to the students about his experiences as a gay, black and deaf person." [Prof Emily]*

### *Discussions on sexuality and gender among heterosexual lecturers*

Some lecturers are very supportive to their students and in doing so, the prefer to invite other lecturers to transmit information, to motivate students, to enhance and strengthen students' understanding in their academic work. In return, students are likely to learn more, improve their knowledge and skills.

*"So, I think it's always good for students to get a sense of what's happening, I mean, and I do, I've had guest lecturers from GALA, for instance, come and talk about their work or the history of pride and show images and things like that." [Prof Gabrielle]*

*"My colleagues, to my knowledge, they're into heterosexual. So, the challenge is, when you interact with people in the workplace, mostly the interaction is about work. And depending on especially in our department, we don't have the scope to discuss sexuality and gender." [Dr Innocent].*

The quotes provided from lecturers highlight active efforts to bridge classroom learning with real-world LGBTQIA+ experiences through guest speakers, fostering inclusivity and deeper understanding among students. For example, Dr. Casey's approach, which includes inviting guest speakers from the LGBTQIA+ community, provides students with direct insights into transgender and lesbian experiences, helping contextualize LGBTQIA+ issues beyond theoretical knowledge. This aligns with research by Snapp et al. (2018), which emphasizes the importance of collaborative efforts with LGBTQIA+ community members to create supportive learning environments. Engaging external speakers can enrich students' awareness, offering them diverse perspectives on LGBTQIA+ identities and challenges. Similarly, Prof. Emily's efforts in presenting diverse identities within the deaf community, including LGBTQIA+ identities, reflect a nuanced understanding of intersectionality. Such approaches resonate with Hasen's (2018) findings that community partnerships are vital for promoting LGBTQIA+ inclusivity in higher education settings. By integrating various identities into the curriculum, educators can significantly reduce feelings of discrimination and isolation that LGBTQIA+ students might otherwise face (Hasen, 2018).

The strategy of including community voices and historical perspectives align with best practices identified by Leung et al. (2022), who found that such community-based interactions and professional development initiatives enhance LGBTQIA+ students' sense of safety and belonging. Prof. Gabrielle's use of historical perspectives from the GALA Queer archives exemplifies how incorporating historical and cultural resources into teaching can deepen student understanding of LGBTQIA+ experiences and contributions. In contrast, Dr. Innocent's remarks on limited discussion opportunities within his department underscore the continuing need for institutional support to foster LGBTQIA+ inclusivity, as lack of engagement can limit broader inclusivity initiatives.

### Theme 4: Concerns around mis-gendering

### *The use of LGBTQIA+ pronouns*

There are various pronouns for LGBTQ people and not everyone knowns them and this can be challenging to others for not being sure of the correct pronouns. Using the incorrect pronouns for other they can interpret it as challenging due to several factors, such as personal belief, personal attack, gender stereotypes, or some might feel some discomfort. Therefore, some of the lecturers as well were not sure of the pronouns to be used when engaging with students, some even ask the students their preferences. This is what they had to say:

*"I struggle with the pronouns, not because I have any issues with them…It's just always, perhaps some maybe too sensitive, basically not wanting to use or refer to someone incorrectly and offend them." [Dr Darell]*

*"So, when I'm lecturing, I obviously ask you, if that's your chosen gender. Is that how you identify yourself? As I've currently just taught group of where there's two male students and I had to ask like, Are you male? Is that how you identify as? Would you prefer me to refer to you as them and them? Or would you prefer for me to use he and him? and so if the person says to me that they have chosen their pronouns, then that's the pronoun that I'll use in respect of that." [Prof Fezzy]*

There seems to continuous changes of pronouns from the LGBTQIA, and one would need to familiarise themselves with the changes. This is what Dr Innocent alluded to base on own experience.

*"I wouldn't know simply because of a layer of complexity that I think that might bring because before I worked here, I worked with a gay young person and throughout the period that I worked with him, it changed his pronouns two times. So that made me think of, okay, how it is a layer of complexity to other people. Especially those that are not associated with him, that today you might refer to the person as him and tomorrow he's changed, and if you use yesterday's pronouns, then your mis-gendered the person. So, in a way, we would then need to be constantly updated and updating a person's perception the same way we update our apps on the phone, it's not sustainable in my perception." [Dr Innocent]*

The quotes demonstrate the varying levels of comfort and challenges lecturers experience with the use of gender pronouns, reflecting a nuanced understanding of LGBTQIA+ issues. For example, Prof. Fezzy's proactive approach in asking students about their chosen pronouns and respecting their responses showcases an effort toward respectful communication and inclusive language use, key aspects highlighted by Waling & Roffee (2018). This approach emphasizes how respecting pronouns can affirm LGBTQIA+ identities, helping students feel seen and valued within their educational environment (Waling & Roffee, 2018). On the other hand, Dr. Darell and Dr. Innocent express difficulties with pronoun usage and the fluidity of gender identities, which they view as challenging to navigate without the risk of offending or mis-gendering. Dr. Innocent's experience with a young person who changed pronouns highlights the complexities lecturers face in keeping up to date with individual identity changes, which he compares to constantly updating technology. This sense of uncertainty and discomfort resonates with Clement et al.'s (2017) findings that limited knowledge and awareness of LGBTQIA+ issues among educators can result in misinterpretations, reinforcing the need for targeted education and resources to bridge these gaps. Clement et al. (2017) and suggest that such challenges can be alleviated through training in LGBTQIA+ terminology and identities, fostering an inclusive educational environment where faculty are better equipped to understand and adapt to diverse student identities. The discussions reveal that while some lecturers like Prof. Fezzy have embraced inclusive practices, others face barriers, underscoring the need for on-going education on inclusive language and LGBTQIA+ support within higher education (Waling & Roffee, 2018).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study explored the Lecturers' Knowledge and Perceptions of the LGBTQIA+ Community in Higher Education Institutions in Johannesburg, South Africa. A total of four themes emerges from the findings, namely: lecturers' Perceptions of LGBTQIA+ Students, engagement and interactions with LGBTQIA+ students, collaborations with other communities in support of the LGBTQIA+ students, and concerns around mis-gendering. The findings suggest a general understanding of the LGBTQIA+ community among lecturers, those specializing in gender and sexuality courses possess deeper knowledge of queer theories. However, lecturers not engaged in these fields often lack familiarity with LGBTQIA+ terminologies. Lecturers interact with LGBTQIA+ students both formally and informally, primarily in classroom settings, ensuring equal treatment regardless of gender or sexuality. They also support LGBTQIA+ students by involving other communities in lecture sessions. Despite this, discussions on sexuality and gender are limited among heterosexual lecturers.

There is need for collaboration with internal and external stakeholders in supporting LGBTQIA+ students by employing campaigns and capacity-building initiatives. Although lecturers expressed concerns about mis-gendering students, there seem to be challenges of using correct terminologies and pronouns. Overall, there is need for knowledge of policies and psychosocial support for LGBTQIA+ and enhance institutional support for LGBTQIA+ students.
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