Can Universities Be Considered Queer Institutions?

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Abstract

Universities have Queer staff and students and conduct Queer research, so are they Queer institutions themselves? Can universities be 'safe spaces' for Rainbow Communities? Unfortunately, there is insufficient data in Aotearoa/New Zealand to be able to conclusively test that, so the historical and contemporary relationships with and treatment and experiences at university of women, Māori and Pacific Peoples are considered as alternatives for those with Rainbow Communities. For each of these marginalised groups, similar patterns of oppression and discrimination present through consistent lack of career progression, pay equity and representation in senior leadership, short-term and precarious employment, harassment and violence, and sidelining into small and out-of-the-way departments and disciplines held in lower validity to 'traditional' subjects. However, scholars from these communities are forming their own research and support networks which are inclusive, intersectional and interdisciplinary. Within this framework of bottom-up initiatives, universities *could* be Queer institutions in the same way that they *could* be feminist and Indigenous institutions. It is entirely possible—but may involve rebuilding our institutions from the ground up rather than applying a new coat of paint.

Keywords: Queer; Rainbow Communities; LGBTQIA+; universities

In an untitled presentation at the 2015 Queers in Tertiary (QIT) hui, Welby Ings explored the historical role of educational institutions as safe spaces. He highlighted that Queer youth in high school often gravitate towards libraries, art rooms, drama studios and music practice spaces. These areas, he argued, are chosen—perhaps unconsciously—because they are supervised and therefore safer due to the presence of teachers. This sense of relative security contributes to Queer students performing better academically and being more likely to pursue higher education. From this, universities are often theorised as 'safe spaces' where like-minded individuals are protected from the perceived dangers of the 'real world'.

But does this make universities Queer institutions? Are they Queer spaces?

Research into Rainbow Communities within universities is limited, largely because data has historically not been collected. Ings observed, in the same talk, that Rainbow Communities are among the "most studied and least communicated with" in the world. Within universities, Rainbow Communities often remain invisible—ephemeral; present yet unsupported. Although universities have recently begun collecting data on Rainbow Communities, these efforts are nascent and incomplete, and no studies have yet been published. Furthermore, in hostile environments, staff may choose not to disclose their identities, rendering the data inaccurate or incomplete. Within Aotearoa/New Zealand (hereafter, Aotearoa), recent studies have begun to focus on Queer university students (for example, Brown et al., 2020; Collens & du Preez, 2021; Fenaughty et al., 2021a, 2021b; and Garcia et al., 2024) and the 2023 Census was the first to collect gender and sexual identity from everyone in Aotearoa (Ludlam et al., 2024), although wider studies have not yet been published. These studies tend to be survey-based, with a limited number of interviews or focus groups, rather than population studies like those used to examine specific ethnicities or women in universities. In 2023, Te Wānanga Aronui o Tāmaki Makau Rau | Auckland University of Technology (hereafter, AUT) launched *Ia*, the world's first e-portal dedicated to collating Rainbow research (Auckland University of Technology, 2023; Ings, 2023).

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Limited data on Queer experiences in universities (see Crowhurst & Emslie, 2014) necessitates using proxy methodologies. This article examines how the marginalisation of women, Māori and Pacific Peoples can illuminate broader institutional inequities affecting Rainbow Communities. Sara Ahmed (2012, p. 20) suggests that the exclusion of one group reveals systemic practices of marginalisation, but warns that research can inadvertently stabilise harmful institutional norms. Similarly, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) shows how Indigenous experiences highlight structural inequities, but cautions that colonial institutions often perpetuate their power structures, presenting ethical challenges for scholars.

Proxy methodologies, though valuable, have limitations. While the concerns of these groups differ from those of Queer students and staff—and Queer identities are far from homogenous—an intersectional understanding of kyriarchy in Aotearoa views these communities as distinct but interconnected. This approach offers a more relevant local measure than small-scale studies from the United States. Other marginalised groups, such as those from non-Western cultures, working-class families and people with disabilities, also face systemic barriers that warrant further exploration. Like Rainbow Communities, these groups are understudied and deserve greater scholarly attention.

This discussion begins by examining the role of universities in colonisation and the concept of safe spaces, exploring how such spaces contribute to queering an institution. It then delves into the experiences of different marginalised groups, contextualising Rainbow Communities within the broader framework of Aotearoa universities. Finally, the discussion returns to the notion of safe spaces and the idea of the Queer university.

A Queer university would provide safety and support for Rainbow Communities and other marginalised groups. It should challenge heteronormativity, cisnormativity and systemic violence, while equitably resourcing Queer disciplines with the same validity and respect accorded to others. By advancing intersectionality, embracing fourth-wave feminism and integrating Indigenous knowledge, such an institution could transform academic spaces.

Definitions and scope

This article uses *Rainbow Communities* and *Queer* as umbrella terms for a wide variety of sexual orientations and gender identities. While these terms are inclusive, they reflect anglophone concepts of identity and may not fully encapsulate Indigenous terms like takatāpui (Māori) or MVPFAFF (Pacific Peoples) (Hamley et al., 2021; Kerekere, 2017; McLennan, 2021; Thomsen & Brown-Acton, 2021). Queer encompasses both identities and a theoretical framework challenging heteronormativity (the assumption of heterosexuality as the norm) and cisnormativity (the assumption that gender identity always aligns with biological sex) (Brickell & Collard, 2019; Cui, 2024; Das, 2020; Hoad & Gunn, 2019; Nguyen, 2018; Ryan, 2020). The words Queer and Rainbow Communities are capitalised throughout to centre our scholars and communities. The focus of this article is on the eight extant universities in Aotearoa.

Fourth-wave feminism, responding to the historically white focus of earlier waves, emphasises intersectionality—the interconnectedness of identities such as gender, race, class, sexuality and culture—and the overlapping systems of oppression they face (Parry et al., 2018; Phillips & Cree, 2014). Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), *intersectionality* allows for the highlighting of differences within Queer groups (for example, cis- and transgender) and across identities (for example, white trans women and fa'afafine).

Coming out (of 'the closet') refers to the public declaration of one's sexuality, seen as both personal empowerment and social revolution in Queer liberation movements (Allan, 2017; Brickell, 2008; Gamage, 2019). *Passing* describes being perceived as belonging to a dominant identity group, such as heterosexual or cisgender, often as a survival strategy in hostile environments. Passing intersects with race, gender expression and class, complicating how identities are navigated in public and private (Dawson, 2018). Historically, academia was dominated by white heterosexual men, with gay men having comparatively greater access due to their ability to pass as straight. Some men were known or suspected to be Queer but could maintain their positions if they adhered to heteronormative behaviours in public and did not openly disclose their identities. This was particularly true for white men, who had greater societal privilege and access to power (Atmore, 1995; Das, 2020; Smith, 2020).

Universities as place of colonisation

Racism and misogyny in universities are not merely products of individual bias but are embedded in the institution's structure and history. Systemic racism operates through exclusionary practices that prioritise Anglo-European knowledge and methodologies (Smith, 2012). Similarly, misogyny manifests in undervaluing women's contributions and relegating women to precarious roles. These dynamics provide a lens for understanding how heteronormativity and cisnormativity might also shape universities' treatment of Queer individuals.

Universities in Aotearoa benefit materially, socially and financially from the legacies of colonisation. They were founded using profits from colonial invasion, built on confiscated land, and continue to claim credibility as safe and inclusive spaces while profiting from the diversity they purport to celebrate (Naepi, 2024; Smith et al., 2021). Historically, universities also held significant landholdings which provided income to offset operational costs (Beaglehole, 1937; Naepi, 2024; New Zealand University Reserves Act 1875; The University Endowment Act 1868; University of New Zealand, 1871, 1879). This practice, though starkly visible in Aotearoa, mirrors patterns in other colonial contexts (Gardner, 1979, pp. 38–39; Stein, 2020).

However, universities are not merely passive inheritors of colonial wealth—they can also be considered active participants in colonial oppression. These institutions are structured to protect elite interests and uphold traditional power hierarchies, perpetuating systemic and endemic forms of oppression (Kidman & Chu, 2017; Mayeda et al., 2022; McAllister et al., 2019; Pitcher & Simmons, 2020; Smith et al., 2021). Indigenous scholars are often coerced into adopting colonial methodologies for career survival, with rewards disproportionately granted to those who conform to these norms or exploit others in their research practices (Allen et al., 2022; de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015; Leenen-Young et al., 2021).

If universities systematically fail to accommodate individuals who do not fit the mould of conservative, affluent white men—and instead perpetuate discrimination based on class, race and gender—then we must ask whether they can ever be safe spaces for Rainbow Communities.

Universities as a 'safe space'

Universities house Queer staff and students and produce Queer research—but does this make them Queer spaces? While universities might appear as safe havens, clustering marginalised groups together and segregating them from the real world, this perception is fraught with contradictions. The long-standing 'town versus gown' debates highlight the notion of universities as isolated entities, often at odds with the surrounding community (Heaney, 2013; Miller, 1963).

Historically, universities were physically and culturally separated from society. Early institutions focused on theological and legal education, housed their populations apart, adhered to distinctive dress codes, and even spoke in Latin to reinforce their exclusivity (Cox, 2001, 2006; MacCulloch, 2009; Shaw, 1995; Smith, 1970). This history has perpetuated the idea that universities are insular spaces, detached from societal realities, and home to individuals perceived as disconnected from the real world.

In theory, this separation positions universities as potential safe spaces for the ultra-liberal, vulnerably Queer and socially unconventional. However, this same environment also provides refuge for hyper-conservative ideologies, morally ambiguous actors, and even proponents of alt-right agendas. Universities' dual nature—as conservative institutions with deeply entrenched traditions and as centres of innovation—creates a complex and often contradictory relationship with their communities. This tension persists today, evidenced by the ongoing fascination with pseudo-science, including eugenics and 'racial science', gender and biological determinism, 'gender critical' biology, and scientific universalism and imperialism which have historically found a foothold within academic circles.

Despite their reputation for being progressive and liberal, universities are steeped in heteronormativity and cisnormativity, which remain pervasive across institutions (Brown et al., 2020; Garcia et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2021). Unlike other marginalised groups, however, many Queer individuals have the ability to pass as cis and heterosexual, and become effectively invisible as a means of self-preservation (Brown et al., 2020, p. 153). While this can offer a form of protection, it also contributes to their erasure within the university context and exacerbates the lack of comprehensive data on Queer staff and students.

Queer individuals have likely existed within universities for centuries. While institutions have a long history of marginalising Queer students and failing to protect them from discrimination and violence, Queer students also have a history of surviving and thriving in these environments (Pitcher & Simmons, 2020; Pryor, 2021). For some, universities—much like monastic life in earlier eras—offered a way to escape the heteronormative expectations of broader society.

Kristen Renn (2010) describes this duality in her foundational work *LGBT and Queer research in higher education*, highlighting how Queer people and Queer research are embedded within a paradox. Universities are both the birthplace of much Queer theory and spaces largely untouched by the Queer agenda, remaining controlled by conservative forces. Pitcher and Simmons (2020, p. 477) expand on this, noting that universities have "sought to eradicate queer presences on campus both historically and presently".

Gender

Universities in Aotearoa were early admitters of women to the academy. The first woman graduate in the British Empire was Kate Edger (later Evans) in 1877, marking a milestone not only for Aotearoa, but also for women's access to tertiary education worldwide. During this period, most students were part-time, so while universities had existed for eight years, Edgar was only the third student in the country to graduate with a degree (University of New Zealand, 1882, p. 112).

Winifred Boys-Smith became the first female professor in Aotearoa in 1911, soon followed by Helen Rawson, both at University of Otago (McDonald, 1996). Despite this long heritage, women's inclusion in Aotearoa universities has consistently been marked by systemic barriers. Early appointments often relegated women to marginalised spaces. For example, Boys-Smith and Rawson were relegated to "the tin shed", a building previously used by the Dunedin School of Mines, where they taught a degree and diploma in domestic science for women, and often had to work from Boys-Smith's home due to a lack of on-campus facilities (McDonald, 1996).

For women academics, achieving stable and permanent employment has proven arduous. Many women were offered only casual or semester-based teaching contracts, while those who accompanied their husbands to universities were largely excluded from the academic workforce altogether. Instead, they were consigned to the university Staff Wives Club, where they provided unpaid support to the university community. These clubs, while offering some social support, were classist and restricted to the wives of staff with societal status. Universities distanced themselves from these organisations, dismissing them as "external" and providing little institutional backing (Clarke, 2018; Segedin, 1983).

Beatrice Muriel Hill Tinsley (1941–1981), after whom the Hill Tinsley Medal (awarded by the New Zealand Association of Scientists) and the Beatrice Hill Tinsley Lecture (hosted by the Royal Astronomical Society of New Zealand) are named, exemplifies the systemic barriers faced by women academics. Born in England and raised in Aotearoa, Hill Tinsley was an astronomer and cosmologist whose pioneering work gained international recognition. Despite graduating from Canterbury University College with first-class honours in physics, she was unable to secure a position there because her physicist husband was already employed by the institution—a common practice that effectively excluded many married women from academic careers. After moving to the United States, she completed a PhD at the University of Texas at Austin, but she continued to struggle to find a permanent academic position. Eventually, she became Yale's first female professor of astronomy, a remarkable achievement overshadowed by her untimely death from melanoma at age 40 (King, 2012, pp. 420, 512–513; Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2020; Priestley, 2014; Royal Society Te Apārangi, 2017).

A lack of childcare facilities has long been an issue for women in universities. For many, having children spells the end of their studies or careers. In Dunedin, women from the Staff Wives Club and some students took matters into their own hands, establishing a creche in the old church hall of All Saints Anglican Church (Clarke, 2018, pp. 121–122). This lack of institutional support persists today, exemplified by AUT's decision to close its early childhood centre as part of a financial recovery programme (Duff, 2022). Ironically, AUT's creche, opened in 1978 with the students' association operating it as an incorporated society, had once been celebrated as a national model by the Social Welfare Department (Shaw, 2002, p. 96).

Women's careers in Aotearoa universities have thus been characterised by systemic neglect. They face significant discrimination in salaries, flexibility of working hours, and decision-making opportunities, particularly for those not on academic contracts. This divide is further exacerbated by an 'us versus them' mentality between academic and professional staff, perpetuating hostility and undermining solidarity (Ricketts & Pringle, 2014).

While women's participation in tertiary education surpasses men's, they remain underrepresented in senior academic and leadership roles, a trend reflected internationally (Bönisch-Brednich& White, 2021; Brower & James, 2020; Douglas & Ravenswood, 2019; Harris & Leberman, 2012; McAllister et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2016; Stringer et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2020). A 2020 study using data across all Aotearoa universities from 2012–2017, found women comprise only 31–36% of associate professors/HODs and 19– 26% of professors/deans, despite women comprising approximately 50% of the overall academic workforce (Walker et al., 2020). Of the eight Aotearoa universities, three currently have female vice-chancellors (VCs), but four have never appointed a woman to the role permanently. To date, no university in Aotearoa has had a Māori or openly Queer VC, and only in 2022, did AUT appoint the country's first Pacific Peoples VC. These patterns of systemic exclusion indicate that Aotearoa universities fall short of embodying feminist values in their structures and leadership. This ongoing failure raises serious questions about their capacity to embrace the values and changes necessary to be Queer institutions.

Race

Universities in Aotearoa have a long history of failing to support Indigenous students, stemming largely from their colonial origins and structures designed to protect their elite, Anglo-European nature. These institutions are dominated by academics who are protective of their status and privilege, perpetuating exclusionary practices that marginalise Māori and Pacific Peoples communities (Kidman, 2020; Kidman & Chu, 2017).

The political and social movements of the 1970s and 1980s, inspired by global civil rights activism, saw an increase in Māori and Pacific Peoples students—often the first in their families—attending universities and beginning academic careers (Kidman et al., 2015; King, 2012, pp. 486–487; Tocker, 2014). However, the next generation of Māori and Pacific Peoples scholars face greater barriers. They are more likely than their predecessors to carry significant student debt, experience job precarity, and delay milestones such as homeownership or starting families due to economic pressures (Kidman et al., 2015; Tocker, 2014).

Māori and Pacific Peoples staff were often relegated to small, peripheral departments designed to cluster and contain them, limiting their ability to challenge broader institutional structures. Barber and Naepi (2022, p. 2) observe: "It is clear that universities … prefer to sterilise the threat of this subterranean unsettling of disciplinary formations by keeping Māori and Pacific Peoples contained in Māori and Pacific Studies departments", which were established as separate entities late in the twentieth century (Clarke, 2018, pp. 145-147). Similar patterns are evident in Australia, where Indigenous scholars are similarly isolated within Indigenous centres (Sullivan & Day, 2021). For those who remain in mainstream departments, systemic issues such as cultural safety and workplace toxicity persist (for example, see Shaw, 2002, p. 139).

Barber and Naepi (2022, pp. 2–3) further highlight that Māori and Pacific Peoples scholars are disproportionately confined to lower levels of academia. They are simultaneously underpaid and under-promoted (McAllister et al., 2019; McAllister et al., 2020; Naepi, 2019; Naepi et al., 2020), a direct consequence of institutional structures that perpetuate their exclusion (Kidman, 2020; Kidman & Chu, 2017, 2019; Kidman et al., 2015; Naepi, 2021).

Studies in 2019 and 2020 revealed that Māori scholars hold only 3.5–4.1% of senior academic positions, and Pacific Peoples scholars hold a mere 0.9%, despite Māori and Pacific Peoples comprising approximately 5.6% and 1.5% of the overall academic workforce, respectively (McAllister et al., 2019; McAllister et al., 2020; Naepi, 2019; Naepi et al., 2020). Compounding this, Māori academics often begin their careers later than their peers, with the average age of Māori doctoral students being 49 years (Kidman et al., 2015).

Like other academic minorities, including women and Rainbow Communities, Māori and Pacific Peoples scholars face discrimination, microaggressions and disproportionately high expectations. They are required to fulfil the same academic responsibilities as their colleagues while also shouldering additional demands. Within universities, they are often called upon to mentor students and colleagues, serve on diversity panels and participate in tokenistic roles. Outside academia, they are expected to engage in community leadership and support (Kidman, 2020; Kidman et al., 2015; Naepi, 2021; Naepi et al., 2019).

A further challenge lies in the categorical separation of knowledge systems. Indigenous knowledge, such as Mātauranga Māori, is often ignored, discredited or confined to specialist departments, keeping it out of sight and disconnected from the broader academic landscape (Barber & Naepi, 2022; Kidman, 2020; Leenen-Young et al., 2021; Naepi et al., 2021).

These systemic exclusions are reinforced by public racist attacks. Recent examples include hostile criticism from prominent figures such as English biologist Richard Dawkins and the '*New Zealand Listener* Seven', a group of white academics who denounced the inclusion of Mātauranga Māori as science (Newshub, 2022). Although these attacks specifically target Māori, they reflect broader ideologies that also harm Pacific Peoples and other marginalised scholars. Similar violent rhetoric is directed at women and Rainbow Communities, with trans and gender-diverse individuals bearing the brunt of these attacks.

In response, marginalised groups within academia have called for collective action. Smith and Wolfgramm-Foliaki (2022, as cited in Barber and Naepi, 2022, p. 11) advocate "pikipiki hama – lash our canoes together in order to transform our tertiary land/seascapes for our communities." This ethos of solidarity highlights the need for systemic change to create inclusive, equitable universities.

This endemic, systemic oppression underscores that Aotearoa universities fail to embody the principles of Māori, Pacific Peoples or Indigenous institutions. Their reluctance to confront and challenge colonial histories, structures and practices further entrenches exclusion and inequity. This persistent failure not only hinders progress towards inclusivity but also raises serious doubts about their capacity to evolve into Queer or genuinely intersectional spaces.

Sexuality

Sexual and gender diversity has emerged as a relatively new focus for universities, particularly in Aotearoa. One reason for this is the relative invisibility of Rainbow Communities compared with other marginalised groups such as women and Māori and Pacific Peoples. Unlikely these groups, members of Rainbow Communities can often pass in other departments or social contexts, reducing the perceived urgency for institutional action.

This invisibility was further reinforced by the criminalisation of homosexuality in Aotearoa until 1986 and prevailing conservative societal attitudes, which pushed Rainbow Communities underground. It was not until the late 1970s that these communities began to emerge as a visible force. Consequently, universities lacked both the pressure and the data necessary to address systemic inequities. Even now, comprehensive data on Queer staff and students remains sparse, with universities only recently beginning to collect relevant information.

While there are no published records of overt or institutional exclusion based solely on sexual or gender identity within Aotearoa universities, historical parallels can be drawn from documented purges of Queer individuals in military and government departments following World War II. These purges, fuelled by homophobia and paranoia about national security, targeted individuals perceived as threats due to their sexual orientation (Brickell, 2008, 2018, 2024; Laurie, 2011; Willett & Brickell, 2016). Such systemic exclusion underscores the broader societal context within which universities operated, making it likely that similar attitudes permeated academic institutions, albeit less visibly.

Despite these systemic gaps, universities continue to position themselves as liberal and progressive institutions. In his history of the University of New Zealand, J. C. Beaglehole (1937, p. 75) wrote: "The University of New Zealand might have its faults: it was never to be accused of a narrow spirit of exclusiveness." This assertion is particularly striking given Beaglehole's own exclusion from Auckland University College the decade earlier due to his socialist and pacifist views (Munro, 2007; Sinclair, 1983, pp. 151–157). His statement reflects the paternalistic mindset of early institutions, which equated inclusivity with the absence of overt exclusion for white men. Such an outlook disregards the systemic barriers faced by women, Māori, Pacific Peoples and Queer scholars, which persist today in the form of precarious employment, microaggressions and tokenistic inclusion.

'Modern' universities

Universities often portray themselves as modern, progressive and cutting-edge social institutions. However, ongoing research exposes deeply entrenched patterns of discrimination, particularly against women and non-white staff. Studies highlight systemic inequities in pay, precarious employment, and limited opportunities for promotion among women (Brower & James, 2020; Douglas & Ravenswood, 2019; McAllister et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2016; Stringer et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2020) as well as Māori and Pacific Peoples academics (McAllister, Kokaua, et al., 2020; McAllister, Naepi, et al., 2020; Naepi et al., 2019; Naepi et al., 2021; Theodore et al., 2021). These inequities are compounded by disparities in the allocation of student scholarships, which disproportionally affect vulnerable populations (Soar et al., 2022). Discrimination on campus extends beyond pay and career progression. Harassment and bullying remain pervasive, especially for those who are not affluent, cisgendered white men (Clark et al., 2022; McAllister et al., 2022). Sexual harassment, predominantly targeting women, has frequently been brought to public attention, yet university systems often protect the perpetrators rather than addressing systemic issues. Cases highlighted in both academic research and media reports reveal institutional failings in safeguarding victims and ensuring accountability (Besley et al., 2021; McCulloch, 2022; Shaw, 2002; Showden, 2018; Smolovic Jones et al., 2013; Sumner, 2022).

Are universities Queer spaces?

Building on the historical patterns of marginalisation based on class, gender and race within universities, it is critical to examine how these institutions engage with Rainbow Communities. This section explores whether universities can be considered Queer spaces and evaluates their potential to evolve into Queer institutions.

Over the last half-century, civil rights movements and student activism have made universities key incubators for social change (McDonagh, 2019). Since the 1970s, universities have been pivotal in advocating for marginalised groups, with campus-based organisations often spearheading decriminalisation efforts and other progressive reforms (Aldrich, 2004; McDonagh, 2019; Pryor, 2021; Renn, 2010). Even in unwelcoming environments, Queer students have played critical roles in activism and protest movements (McDonagh, 2019; Pryor, 2018).

The first documented gay student organisation, the Student Homophile League at Columbia University, was established immediately after the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York ("Birth of the gay movement"; 2022; Renn, 2010). In Aotearoa, Queer student activism surged in 1972 when Ngahuia Te Awekōtuku(Te Aramawa, Tūhoe)challenged her peers to form a gay liberation movement. After being denied entry to the USA, she and 40 students founded the Auckland Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in her flat just six days later ("Birth of the gay movement"; 2022; Burke, 2007; Hansen, n.d.; Hansen & Pollock, 2022). While Rainbow Communities groups began to emerge alongside these global movements, organised and sustained Queer advocacy within universities gained traction only in the early 1990s. However, campuses were not immune to violence. A 1994 New Zealand University Students Association revealed that 55% of respondents from Rainbow Communities reported verbal harassment and 12% experienced physical assault while they were students (Bennachie, 2009).

It is essential to highlight the lack of research, resources and institutional support for trans and gender-diverse individuals, as well as for those who navigate multiple layers of marginalisation (Allen et al., 2020; Greathouse et al., 2018; Hansen, n.d.; Hansen & Pollock, 2022; Pitcher & Simmons, 2020; Pryor, 2021; Renn, 2010). For instance, Te Awekōtukucontributed to the Auckland GLF for a year before directing her energy towards Māori activism with Ngā Tamatoa (Hansen & Pollock, 2022), underscoring the intersectionality of cultural and Queer identities.

One promising area for universities lies in fostering intersectional spaces, policies and structures that address the multifaceted identities of Queer individuals. While many within Rainbow Communities are able to pass as cisgender or straight, others cannot simply 'turn off' aspects of their identities, and it is incumbent upon universities to create environments that reflect and support this complexity (Pryor, 2018; Sullivan & Day, 2021).

Patrick Thomsen (2022) critiques the lack of research and support for Pacific Peoples Rainbow Communities in Aotearoa and globally. He contributes this to colonial dominance in knowledge production and safety concerns for Queer researchers. Despite these barriers, Thomsen (2022, p. 122) highlights the "foundational whiteness" of Ango-settler universities as creating "side-spaces" where Pacific Peoples Queer scholars carve visibility and redefine academic engagement.

Rainbow Tick and 'inclusion'

While some universities in Aotearoa have signed up to the Rainbow Tick—a diversity and inclusion certification organisation—this does not necessarily mean that universities are inherently Queer/Rainbow institutions. Critics frequently question whether such accreditations serve as genuine commitments to inclusivity or merely as window dressing to attract the 'pink dollar'. Despite these certifications, problematic behaviour often persists within universities, ranging from requests for individuals to 'tone it down' to instances of outright transphobia (personal communication; Hansen, n.d.). Certifications like the Rainbow Tick exemplify pinkwashing—superficial diversity initiatives that project inclusivity while neglecting meaningful structural reform. Sullivan and Day (2021, p. 3) describe such efforts as "descriptive" and "performative", reliant on symbolic gestures and buzzwords rather than actionable policies. Sara Ahmed (2012, pp. 84–85) describes this institutional behaviour as "performance culture", where universities prioritise appearances over substantive change. According to Ahmed, such efforts aim to convey that institutions are "doing the right thing", even when those actions fail to address systemic inequities. This focus on optics mirrors the experiences of women, Māori and Pacific Peoples where tokenism often obscures the absence of meaningful structural support (personal communication with Māori and Pacific Peoples cultural advisers and Women on Campus staff).

While significant research addresses the underrepresentation of women and Māori and Pacific Peoples in senior academic roles, data on Rainbow Communities remains sparse. Anecdotal evidence points to similar challenges for Queer researchers, including marginalisation into specialised spaces, physical isolation and invisibility within broader academic structures. The presence of a Queer Studies department might suggest that a university is inherently Queer. However, as seen with Māori/Pacific/Indigenous Studies or Women/Gender Studies departments, such initiatives do not necessarily translate into safe or equitable environments for their associated communities. Matt Brim (2020) critiques Queer Studies departments as serving institutional managers and publicity goals rather than the needs of Queer staff and students. These departments are often underfunded, marginalised and treated as holding areas for 'troublesome' Queer academics—experiences echoed by Māori, Pacific Peoples and Indigenous Australian researchers (Barber & Naepi, 2022; Sullivan & Day, 2021). Institutional support for Rainbow Communities and Queer staff does not guarantee their safety or sense of belonging on campus. Research highlights a continuum of challenges, from microaggressions to overt harassment, that persist despite diversity initiatives (Brim, 2020; Greathouse et al., 2018; Pryor, 2018, 2021; Showden, 2018). Ultimately, superficial reforms and the pinkwashing of universities fail to dismantle systemic oppression or foster genuinely inclusive, intersectional institutions. The tokenistic inclusion yet systemic exclusion of Māori, Pacific Peoples and women demonstrates the broader Indigenous and feminist failings of these universities, raising significant doubts about their capacity to embrace meaningful change for Rainbow Communities.

Discussion and conclusion

In lieu of sufficient data on Queer people in universities, the treatment of women, Māori and Pacific Peoples scholars serves as a revealing proxy for understanding the systemic oppression faced by Rainbow Communities. These groups expose an endemic culture of exclusion designed to suppress the 'dangerous', 'difficult' and 'problematic' ideas of marginalised academics. Simultaneously, universities preserve their conservative core—protecting the interests of political and financial backers—while projecting a progressive image of inclusivity. This duality allows universities to benefit socially, materially and financially from their perceived liberal ideals, all while perpetuating deeply ingrained inequities.

Intersectionality underscores the need for solidarity among marginalised groups. The maxim "Until we're all free, none of us are" highlights how liberation for one group must encompass the struggles of others. Rainbow Communities that may not be able to pass—including trans, gender-diverse and Queer individuals of colour—often experience intensified marginalisation. By being out and proud, Queer scholars can serve as allies to other intersectional identities, embodying a collective resistance to systemic exclusion.

True allyship requires shared responsibility for advancing the rights of all marginalised identities in academia.

Marginalised scholars are frequently employed in precarious roles, underpaid, under-resourced and under-promoted. Subject to both tangible and intangible violence, they are often relegated to specialist departments or peripheral spaces that limit their ability to challenge broader institutional hierarchies. Tokenistic inclusion exacerbates their invisibility, with early career researchers and students from marginalised backgrounds disproportionately bearing the brunt of short-term contracts and limited opportunities and being the first targeted in financial recovery plans. These constraints delay career progression and prevent these scholars from establishing long-term roots within academia.

Despite these systemic barriers, universities have the potential to evolve into Queer institutions, just as they could aspire to become feminist or Indigenous institutions. However, such transformation requires a fundamental reimagining of institutional structures and philosophies. A growing movement of scholars—particularly within Aotearoa—is forging collaborative, interdisciplinary communities that disrupt the status quo. These networks focus on creating vibrant, fit-for-purpose research ecosystems that address the intersections of gender, race and sexuality. Scholars within these ecosystems have gained significant visibility through their roles as keynote speakers, journal editors, governmental advisers and thought leaders. By working within and against the university system, they are advancing equity-focused goals.

Universities, while not inherently safe spaces, have the capacity to foster smaller safe spaces and incubate transformative research and ideas. These environments enable Queer scholarship to flourish while supporting intersectional identities and communities. By actively addressing the interconnected nature of marginalisation, universities can create opportunities for Queer individuals and allies to lead the way in driving meaningful change. This leadership not only advances scholarship but also provides role models and guidance for future generations of Queer individuals, proving that systemic transformation is achievable. In this context, universities can become Queer institutions, just as they can become feminist and Indigenous institutions.

To realise this potential, universities must dismantle structural inequalities that perpetuate heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Intersectionality must be embedded into every aspect of academia, recognising and addressing the overlapping identities of Queer individuals, women and Indigenous communities. Collaborative, equity-driven networks across disciplines can lead this charge by challenging entrenched academic hierarchies and fostering meaningful change.

Queer academics must align with feminist and Indigenous scholars to reimagine a truly intersectional academy—one that values diverse knowledge systems, prioritises equity, and actively resists oppressive practices. This reimagined academy would empower staff and students to work freely across disciplines, challenge harmful norms and create environments free from violence and discrimination. Such an academy would not only serve as a model for inclusivity but also inspire broader social change, setting a foundation for a more equitable and inclusive future.

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