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11 April 2019

UCT student aims to use graduation to highlight discrimination against queer people

University of Cape Town (UCT) student Nigel Patel, who is well known for their activism across the city, will graduate with a Bachelor of Laws degree on Friday, 12 April 2019 where they will also receive [UCT's Blumberg Prize](#) for service to the student community as well as working hard academically.

Choosing law was about the pursuit of justice and to "change the world a little towards good," Patel shared. "As I studied law, I really enjoyed the way in which it uses words and ideas to propel action and change."

Born in Blantyre, Malawi, Patel was primarily raised by their single mother and grandmother. With both women working in education, an appreciation for learning was instilled in Patel from an early age who believes they owe a huge amount of their current success to both of them.

Patel's life's work, fighting transphobia and discrimination against queer people, started in Malawi where they saw people like themselves being sentenced to jail and subjected to political and religious persecution.

Despite this, a brave Patel came out when they were just 15 years old. The difficulties around acceptance and safety were a significant motivator for the work they do today.

"I don't want other generations of children to have to live through what I went through and what the generations before me were subjected to. I want queer Africans to be able to live their lives to the fullest, free from being criminalised, and enjoying all their human rights and societal acceptance."

Patel left Malawi at the age of 18 to study at UCT partly because Cape Town and South Africa provide relatively queer-friendly spaces.

Patel has had two articles published in academic journals and has written a chapter for a forthcoming book. One of the articles, [Violent cistems: Trans experiences of bathroom space](#), earned them the [Yunus Mahomed Public Interest Award](#). Their short story (fiction) *The Masked Dance* was also recently selected for *The [Gerald Kraak Anthology](#)*.

Writing is just one way in which they contribute to the fight for equality. There's also [Rainbow UCT](#), the [Trans Collective](#), the Students' Representative Council, the university's sexuality policy, participation in the Fallist movement and work outside of the university.

"I never explicitly intended to be 'an activist'; it was a title that was sort of given to me because of the work that I found myself naturally inclined to do," added Patel.

"For me, at the core of all of these forms of activism was the aim of recognising and addressing the intersectionality of struggles that work to disenfranchise students based on their race, gender, sexuality and ability, particularly in a higher education context," they said.

Off campus, the activist has worked with [SistaazHood Trans Sex Workers](#) and [Irantí](#), as well as being a research consultant for the [International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association \(ILGA\)](#) where they are helping to write a global report on the laws in Africa that directly and indirectly criminalise trans people and those with queer gender expression.

"My ideal life goal is to help work and effect the decriminalisation of queerness in Malawi specifically, and the wider Africa and the world," they concluded.



Nigel Patel will use their degree to help effect the decriminalisation of queerness.

Photo: David Harrison

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