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# UNIVERSITIES AS SITES OF ACTIVISM AND PROTECTION

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Universities globally are facing acute challenges. These range from privatisation to enhanced government scrutiny and ‘closing academic space’ (ICNL, 2019). The wider political environment in which universities operate is characterised by a rise in populist politics, democratic backsliding, increased authoritarianism, and shrinking civic and political space. Against this backdrop issues of risk and protection relating to activists and civil society, and attacks on political and democratic space, have garnered attention in the academy and from human rights practitioners (CIVICUS, 2022; SAR, 2022). Universities are also facing more progressive challenges, to decolonise teaching and research and to be more inclusive and accessible.

In this complex context, universities display ‘two faces’ (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000). They can both foster and inhibit freedom of expression; provide ‘safe spaces’ and be sites of violence; and function with greater freedom than civil society organisations and be subject to specific forms of state control and capture (Choudry and Vally, 2020(a); ICNL, 2019). However, this Policy Brief argues that universities frequently have more political room for manoeuvre – or face less harsh repression – than activist counterparts.

The Policy Brief contains core findings in relation to **values, activism** and **protection**.

- A **values** base for collaboration between universities and civil society exists, but not in terms of a straightforward alignment of values. As such, there is a need for both academics and activists to make their values and priorities **legible** for potential partners.

- Universities often have long histories as **sites of activism**, adding value through qualities such as legitimacy, status, access to knowledge, resources, and local and global networks. The Policy Brief identifies several specific contributions universities make to activist agendas, as instigators, incubators and collaborators.
- A further contribution is that universities can act as **sites of protection**, for particular groups of people (activists, scholars, refugees), values, and diverse forms of knowledge (activist knowledge). A central argument of this Policy Brief is that these three forms of protection – of people, values, and knowledge – are interdependent.

The research draws on 22 online interviews conducted with academics and practitioners in 2021 and 2022, from a range of different countries. Interviewees were selected by a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling, drawing on the networks of the authors and the Centre for Applied Human Rights (CAHR), University of York. As such, the sampling privileges those who are predisposed to be interested in university activism and protection.

The Policy Brief addresses each of the three themes introduced above – values, activism and protection – in more detail below.

<sup>1</sup> This Policy Brief was originally published as a longer Working Paper: Gready, P. & Jackson, E. (2023) Universities as Sites of Activism and Protection, York: UNESCO Chair in Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space, Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York, Working Paper No. 1

## University Values

This section identifies the multiple and clashing values currently at play within universities; highlights academic freedom and social justice as two important progressive values; assesses challenges in implementing these values; and showcases the languages in which core values are framed.

Universities are values-based institutions, but the values-base can be contested – for example, are universities public institutions mandated to serve the whole of society or is privatisation shifting the focus to the entrepreneurial student-citizen and the competitive economy? Alongside external pressures for change, internal campaigns have a values component (decolonisation, enhanced access); values can also be progressive or reactionary.

The core value of universities has traditionally been academic freedom. This implies the freedom of academics to teach and research without risk of official interference or professional disadvantage, and for students to learn in a similarly open environment. Several interviewees identified academic freedom as an entry-point for human rights-related work – a lot of activity that ‘might look like protection’ happens ‘through that term’ (Anon(d)) – and NGOs confirmed that their pitch to universities for support was framed so as to align with the defence of academic freedom (Dyvik / ICORN; Wordsworth / CARA).

A second relevant value which is prioritised by some universities is a commitment to social justice or social responsibility.<sup>2</sup> This commitment can take a variety of forms, including citizenship education, community engagement, support for democracy and socio-environmental causes, and protection of people and organisations at risk (Eriksson, 2018; Symaco, and Tee, 2019). Like all values commitments, social justice is shaped by history and context – for example, the work of Freire, Borda and others in Latin America (Appe et al. 2017: 17-20) – and can be depoliticised as values are adopted institutionally within universities (Boontinand, 2021).

Implementing values in a meaningful way is often challenging, as theoretical propositions and normative assertions need to be translated both internally within the institution and externally in local and global engagements (Colucci, et al., 2012; Gourley, 2012). Value translation often needs to address historical legacies as well as institutional complexity. The #RhodesMustFall movement demonstrated that values have to be embedded in pedagogy, curricula and infrastructure to be realised by the student population (Symaco and Tee, 2019).

A final issue in this section relates to the language in which value commitments are framed. Terms like ‘human rights’, ‘human rights defender’, and ‘protection’ are not widely used or understood within most universities. More specifically, human rights defender and protection are seen by some as reactive, paternalistic, externally imposed and even patronising. Proposed alternatives include terms like activist and prevention, which for several interviewees implied pro-active (rather than reactive) responses and agency (Brems / Ghent; Chamberlain / Wits; Shtokvych / CEU).

What this section indicates is that a set of values and language framings exist which allow universities to engage in activism and protection activities. However, these values and framings are not shared by all universities, face internal competition and critique, and do not always align with the values and framings of civil society partners. As such, there is work to be done on better alignment and translation, to enhance mutual legibility and collaboration. Showing an awareness of these requirements, Dyvik (ICORN) provided an excellent checklist for NGOs (see Box 1).

2 Appe et al. (2017) argue that the concept of social responsibility attempts to combine the strengths of the market and social justice.

### Box 1: How to Work with Universities

1. Find a person/centre/department who is interested.
2. Be prepared to work with the university, don't try to change it.
3. Learn what the university needs from other partners in order to engage.
4. Understand and follow their academic lead, priorities and standards.
5. Don't think they are an NGO.
6. Burden-share, if collaborators are afraid of the risks (financial, reputational).

## Universities as Sites of Activism

This section investigates the unique identity that universities have in terms of activism, and the autonomy or relative autonomy that universities can enjoy as an activist space. The discussion then moves on to consider four specific roles that universities can play: instigator, incubator, collaborator, and protector (this latter role is addressed in the next section).

While it is important to acknowledge that in many parts of the world a component of closing civic and political space is a 'closing of academic space' (ICNL, 2019), it is also true to say that universities often still have a degree of autonomy that allows them to act in ways that other organisations, such as NGOs and social movements, cannot. This autonomy arises from a range of factors, including legitimacy, status, access to knowledge, resources, and local as well as global networks. Such freedom usually applies both externally and within the university itself, with the drivers for change being universities as institutions, departments or centres, academics / staff individually or in groups, and student mobilisation.

Interviewees talked about the ability of universities to 'go around' repressive measures, and provide a space to 'talk about different issues' and find 'safety' (Anon (b)), and legitimise causes and organisations, reducing

the 'temperature', 'buying time', and providing 'space' for activism to continue to breathe (Shtokvych, CEU). These forms of autonomy can be used to increase the political cost of government oppression, making universities a valuable ally as well as a potential source of protection.

With reference to core roles, universities have a long history of **instigating** activism. Students as 'unruly subjects' have often led protests (Boren, 2001). While recent student movements in places such as Iran, Chile, Hong Kong and South Africa were sparked by issues internal to universities, they also spoke to wider societal challenges and gained traction outside of the academy. As such, they are seen as a threat by the state:

*Of course, there is still that energy, the first thing that happens when there is a riot in Kampala or a protest in Kampala for any reason, the first thing the security forces do at the university (Makerere University) is close the students in their hostels and in their halls of residence and to close the main gate...*

**(Anon (b))**

Student activism and scholar activism have specific qualities, which are set out in Boxes 2 and 3 below.

### Box 2: Student Activism

Student activism is shaped by the short-term tenure of students at universities, which makes it ephemeral and fleeting – a conveyor belt that any succeeding cohort can step off, making 'usable histories' of activism and intergenerational learning difficult to gather (Choudry and Vally, 2020(b): 2). But it also renders such activism generative, uniquely unbound by established codes and structures of activism – e.g. those linked to economic production and tied to earning an income, or linked to organisational forms such as NGOs – and a laboratory for alternative activist futures.

### Box 3: Scholar Activism

Scholar activism involves working towards social change through academic activities, including teaching and research. Richter et al. (2020) use the term ‘tempered radicals’ for those who are committed to social justice within and outside the university, but are nonetheless complicit in educational institutions that are elitist and often dominated by other values. Such academics work ‘at the hyphens’ of scholarship-activism, the academia-civil society, internal-external concerns, and individual achievement-a collaborative ethos. Scholar activism can create new forms of lived and applied knowledge (Lennox and Yildiz, 2020), and ‘resource activism’ (Derickson and Routledge, 2015), for example by using time, technology, space and expertise to advance the agendas of external collaborators.

Second, universities can serve as an **incubator** of ideas, movements and even new, post-independence states. In conflict settings, for example, universities can both reproduce and accentuate the divides within the society, or model and in a sense prefigure a more inclusive future. Universities were also crucial drivers for independence movements in many parts of the world, and trained postcolonial political leaders as well as cadres of civil servants.

Brewer (2017) argues that Queens University, Belfast, evolved to become a zone of civility (Kaldor, 1999) in the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process, shaping ideas, movements and the state: enabling students to experiment with identities beyond conflict identities, and expand their horizons to a world beyond the conflict; conducting research on the conflict that generated local and comparative knowledge as well as ‘soft skills’ for students on collaboration and inclusion; incubating the Catholic middle class and hence the local civil rights movement; and modelling a new inclusive society through its own structures and policies, notably relating to gender equality (Brewer, 2017).

In the realm of ideas, universities can incubate forms of activism, citizenship, freedom of expression, equality and inclusion, and support for democracy through their teaching, research and wider political cultures. Both within and beyond

conflict settings, where sufficient autonomy exists universities can serve as incubators for organisations and movements that go on to perform significant roles in wider society.

*I think at the beginning NGOs in Thailand were not that well known, so at the beginning the university, and particularly my centre played an important role in helping NGOs to plan their activities... to evaluate their activities, and provide a space for NGOs to discuss and to share their experience with students and with lecturers... At the beginning, yes, they depend upon us, but now NGOs can do their own job without depending upon the university.*

**(Vaddhanaphuti / Chiang Mai)**

A third activist role for universities is that of collaborator. There is extensive work on what is required to make research collaborations with external activist groups meaningful, in terms of ensuring mutual benefits for all parties and co-production from inception to completion (Derickson and Routledge, 2015 – see Leach et al., 2016; Rethinking Research Collaborative, 2018; Stevens et al., 2013). Collaborations also provide a useful training ground in citizenship for students, expanding their capacity to understand and participate constructively in society (Arthur and Bohlin, 2005: 2), and a range of potential benefits for activists (see Box 4 below).

### Box 4: Community Leaders as Educators

The Community Knowledge Learning Hub, University of Toronto Scarborough, is a collaboration between Health Sciences, Development Studies, and three partner organisations working with marginalised communities in Toronto. The ‘Community Leaders as Educators’ programme provides such leaders with a university affiliation (which can be useful for grant applications), respite and space to reflect on their practice, opportunities to talk about their work, research support from students, and small pots of money (von Lieres / University of Toronto Scarborough). Activist residence or protection programmes serve a similar function, often for international activists.

While there are internal and external barriers to university engagement with activist causes, their relative autonomy, the diverse actors who can be activists (academics, other staff, students), and the distinctive roles that universities can play – instigator, incubator, collaborator, protector – explain the centrality of universities to protest in the past and suggest their potential to elevate activism as a priority in the future.

## Universities as Sites of Protection

In this section the Policy Brief analyses universities as sites of protection, and specifically addresses the protection of people at risk (activists, human rights defenders, etc.) and the protection of diverse forms of knowledge, specifically activist knowledge.<sup>3</sup> However, it is also important to note that the two keywords of this Policy Brief may clash, with activism and protest leading to campuses feeling like unsafe spaces for some people, ideas, organisations and forms of knowledge.

Universities hold open democratic space in a number of ways.

- First, by enhancing free speech, debate, and critical thinking. This takes various forms: protecting ‘the capacity to say what you think’ and space for debate (Castellejo / Los Andes); providing an environment where conversations can be had about difficult issues (Baubeng-Baidoo / Pretoria); and ‘organising encounters’ between people and ideas that would not ordinarily happen (Oomen / Roosevelt).
- Second, by teaching and training the next generation ‘so that people graduate with a sense of what that world looks like’ and are sensitised to their ‘political, economic and social context’ (Chamberlain / Wits).
- Third, by adding intellectual credibility and legitimacy to activist arguments and causes through the multifaceted support that can be provided through research (Brems / Ghent).

Labelling something ‘research’ provides a form of protection for ideas and viewpoints (Anon (b)); ‘valorises’ people and causes (Brems / Ghent); enhances seriousness and evidence-based reasoning in public debate (Romero / Venezuela); and develops research skills and empowers non-academics to themselves become researchers (Fildes / Dundee).

- Finally, by influencing policy and regulatory frameworks, by ‘taking the microphone’ and giving legitimacy to certain advocacy and policy agendas (Chamberlain / Wits; Sigal / Buenos Aires).

Recent years have seen an increase and formalisation in the protection of one category of activist, the human rights defender (HRD). The OHCHR defines HRDs as ‘people who, individually or with others, act to promote or protect human rights in a peaceful manner’ (Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, no date). Currently across the globe, HRDs face multiple threats including freezing of bank accounts, physical abuse, criminalisation, and threats of violence and imprisonment (CIVICUS, 2022). These threats can lead HRDs to engage with protection mechanisms at international, regional and national levels, with temporary relocation often being a ‘last resort’ protection measure. Temporary relocation schemes are run by organisations ranging from grassroots organisations to big international NGOs – but increasingly include universities as partners or lead hosts (Eriksson, 2018).

Interviewees highlighted a number of particular strengths that universities bring to HRD protection. These include bureaucratic assistance with securing visas (Dyvik / ICORN – we ‘use’ universities to get people in), and providing housing (Romero / Venezuela); visibility and affiliation, by ‘appointing’ activists and assigning a title to the appointment e.g. activists as educators (von Lieres / Toronto, Scarborough); and building activist capacities through training in research, legal advocacy, languages, and networking (Anon (e); Fildes / Dundee; van Zwaan / Justice and Peace). Another element of support relates to individual

<sup>3</sup> The discussion of values, the third field of protection, is addressed above.

activists whose identity can be shifted, for example from refugee to scholar or colleague, in a way that can be important for self-esteem and protection (Dyvik / ICORN).

In addition to protecting HRDs and activists, universities can go beyond protecting individuals to also protect organisations. One example of universities extending an umbrella of protection is the University of KwaZulu Natal during apartheid:

*During the repressive years leading up to 1994 [in South Africa]... the [University of KwaZulu Natal] gave shelter to a whole range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) whose work in various social causes was frowned upon by the apartheid government. At one time 84 different NGOs had their headquarters on one or other of its campuses.*

**(Gourley 2012: 33)**

This section concludes by discussing the role universities can play in protecting, diversifying and decolonising knowledge in relation to one specific form of knowledge traditionally devalued by universities: activist knowledge. Activist knowledge refers to experience-based knowledge originating from activists, including community groups, NGOs, women's groups, trade unions and grassroots associations (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993). Activist knowledge can contain ideas, theories, and visions produced by people collectively working for social and political change, and produce insights that challenge dominant approaches, histories and narratives (Vally and Treat, 2013; Choudry and Vally(a), 2020). The challenges facing the protection of activist knowledges to some extent mirror those facing university-civil society collaborations more generally. For example, academics may invite participation, but resist the undoing of conventional research hierarchies (Marker, 2019).

However, if universities embody diverse forms of knowledge, the three forms of protection – values, people, knowledge – can be mutually reinforcing. People who are marginalised or oppressed are more likely to feel protected if their experiences and world-views are reflected

in the values and knowledges provided by host universities. Similarly, support for academic freedom and decolonisation agendas will be given substance by the incorporation of people who articulate such experiences and world-views.

## Conclusion

As noted in the introduction, these are challenging times for universities. Despite the significant hurdles they face, this Policy Brief champions an enhanced role for universities as sites of activism and protection in the current era of crisis for several reasons.

- First, universities occupy a position of relative privilege and autonomy in comparison to NGOs and social movements. They have the capacity, resources and legitimacy to act in ways which others do not.
- Second, the size of universities means that there are multiple ways in which universities can intervene, and diverse actors who can take the lead. Universities themselves may take a stand on certain issues, but academics, other staff, and students frequently act independently, and even under the radar, of formal university positions and policies to advocate for and collaborate with activists.
- Third, this research indicates the huge range of innovative activities which are already taking place in the fields of activism and protection.
- Finally, the attacks on democracy and political space that are taking place all around the world are negatively affecting, and will inevitably continue to affect, universities. There is an instrumental as well as a principled, or values-based, rationale for universities taking action. Ultimately, if universities do not support others, who will be left to defend universities when attacks intensify on them.

## Recommendations

The Policy Brief concludes with a set of action points designed to enhance the role of universities in supporting activism and protection:

- Better understanding the potential of working with and through often multiple university values and where they complement one another, where they generate friction, and how they can be mobilised to support activism and protection activities.
- Assessing the language in which such activities are framed, by universities and partners in civil society, with a view to making communication legible for all parties and facilitating collaboration.
- Developing and supporting the four-fold categorisation of the roles that universities can play in activism: instigator, incubator, collaborator, and protector.
- Analysing the potential of and challenges facing student activists and scholar activists.
- Understanding the potential of and challenges facing or posed by academic disciplines that are not represented in this Working Paper (the sciences, computer studies and IT), and other university staff who can support activism and protection work (librarians and archivists, administrative staff, etc.).
- Identifying the roles that different kinds of universities can play in supporting activism and protection (public / private, metropolitan / provincial / rural, religious / secular, etc.).
- Mapping the different ways in which universities are providing protection to local and global activists (affiliation, fellowships, organisational registration, collaboration through teaching and research, training, acting as financial hubs or agents, etc.), and assessing the added value they bring to such protection work.
- Researching the importance of, and links between, the various forms of protection discussed in this paper – values, people, knowledge – and the contention that they can be mutually reinforcing.
- Supporting universities seeking to diversify the forms of knowledge they showcase in teaching and research, whether under the umbrella of decolonisation or in other ways, with a particular focus on activist knowledge.



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