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UNIVERSITIES AS SITES OF ACTIVISM AND PROTECTION

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The UNESCO Chair in Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space Working Paper Series

This Working Paper Series aims to make research on the role of universities in the protection of HRDs and the expansion of political space freely accessible and to promote further discussion and research. The papers seek to provide a wide audience with insights into key issues in the context of university practices in support of activism and protection, of people, values, and knowledge.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not imply endorsement by UNESCO or the University of York. Comments on each paper are welcomed and should be directed to the author(s).

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About the Centre for Applied Human Rights and the UNESCO Chair in Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space

The Centre for Applied Human Rights (CAHR) is an interdisciplinary research and teaching centre based at the University of York. CAHR's co-director, Professor Paul Gready, was awarded the UNESCO Chair, Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space in 2023 to promote an integrated system of research, teaching and training, as well as community engagement and communication. As Chair, CAHR facilitates collaboration between high-level, internationally recognised researchers and teaching staff of the University of York and other institutions in the country, as well as elsewhere in the region and in other regions of the world.

For further information about CAHR and the UNESCO Chair, visit *www.york.ac.uk/cahr* or email *cahr-admin@york.ac.uk*

Executive summary

Universities are currently experiencing both opportunities and challenges as sites of activism and protection. With regard to opportunities, they often have more resources, status, and leverage than civil society groups, and frequently have more political room for manoeuvre - or face less harsh repression - than activist counterparts. Challenges include privatisation, budget cuts, and enhanced government scrutiny and 'closing academic space' (ICNL, 2019). 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).

This Working Paper seeks to identify and support good university practices in support of activism and protection, of people, ideas/values, and different kinds of knowledge. It starts by analysing the values-base of universities. A commitment to academic freedom is widespread; a broader commitment to social justice is also prevalent. These values provide institutional entry points to collaborations with NGOs, social movements and community groups. That said, universities are large and complex institutions, articulating multiple and sometimes clashing values, which can make the implementation of value commitments partial and messy. Some of these value tensions place universities at the centre of wider societal debates e.g. whether universities should provide 'safe spaces' for marginalised identities and experiences, or an open space where ideas, including offensive ideas, are tested through debate. Other tensions strike at the core of what kinds of institutions universities should be: businesses, run for profit and to benefit the economy, or public institutions committed to the wider public good and values such as justice and equality.

The language or vocabularies in which universities and civil society actors frame values also frequently differs - this research indicates that neither 'human rights' nor 'protection' are widely used or understood within university settings. As such, there is a need for both academics and activists to make their values and priorities legible in the language and for the activities of potential partners.

The Working Paper moves on to consider universities as sites of activism, looking at the role of universities as institutions, academics/staff, and students. This discussion is particularly interested in the unique qualities that universities can bring to bear in support of partners and in the service of progressive agendas (legitimacy, status, access to knowledge, resources, local and global networks), which in turn help to explain the relative autonomy universities enjoy in many parts of the world in comparison to civil society actors. From the literature and interviews, the paper highlights four specific areas where universities can add value: 1) As instigators of protest, for example where students act as 'unruly subjects' (Boren, 2001) or through the work of 'scholar activist' (Lennox and Yildiz, 2020). 2) As incubators of ideas and values (such as citizenship and free speech), and organisations. 3) As collaborators and partners, for example through legal aid clinics and other forms of applied pedagogy. 4) As protectors of particular groups of people (activists, scholars, refugees), values, and diverse forms of knowledge (activist knowledge and indigenous knowledge).

This last function, protection, is then explored in more detail. A central argument of this paper is that these three forms of protection – of people, values, and knowledge - are interdependent. People who are marginalised or oppressed are more likely to feel protected if their experiences and world-views are reflected in, and help to shape, the values and knowledge 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. If universities can deliver on this agenda, they will make an important, even defining, contribution to the protection of political and democratic space.

The Working Paper continues by documenting three further examples of innovative practice: the unique roles that academic centres (as opposed to departments) can play as 'NGOs within the university'; the potential for universities to adopt a human rights policy to define and monitor their own human rights responsibilities (using the example of Ghent University); and the possibilities for UNESCO Chairs and Networks, with their focus on collaboration, capacity building and networks, to complement engagement with the UN human rights machinery.

A more detailed consideration follows of the very real challenges to pursuing activist and protection agendas within and with universities. These range from the bureaucratic slowness and conservatism of universities, to gaps between values and implementation, the tendency to water down commitments as they are institutionalised or to step back from commitments when facing difficult issues, and increasing state restrictions through 'closing academic space' and state capture of core university functions and decision-making.

Given the challenges universities are currently facing, it may seem ambitious to call for an enhanced role for universities in activism and protection. In doing so, various shortcomings of universities, and this Working Paper, should be noted. Universities are elite institutions, which raises questions about who has access to higher education, what kinds of activism is supported, and what an umbrella of protection includes and excludes? Interviews were mainly conducted with academics working on human rights, or in associated disciplines, leaving unaddressed the question the roles other disciplines (the sciences, computer studies and IT) could play in support of or opposition to activist and protection agendas, and underplaying the role of other staff at universities (administrators, librarians and archivists). Many of the people interviewed for this study work at prestigious, metropolitan universities, meaning there is work to be done to understand complex local higher education landscapes (public / private, urban / rural, research / teaching oriented, religious / secular, etc.), and what different locations and orientations enable or constrain in terms of support for activism and protection – for example, what role do rural agricultural colleges play in supporting land rights and environmental activist? Further, while the paper is largely written in a universal tone, and attempts to chart important global trends, it is also true that attention to context is vital – the room for manoeuvre of any given university is largely defined by its local, national and regional setting. Many of the examples showcased and actions recommended require that a degree of political space exists, and a future-oriented action agenda will be easiest to pursue in similar settings. In countries where the concepts of the autonomous university and academic freedom are being dismantled, or are already non-existent, those based in higher education may find little in what follows that resonates with their daily realities. Although seeking to support those attempting to undertake progressive work in such settings is if anything more important. All of this is to say that this Working Paper is the start of a conversation, not an endpoint; it is an invitation to conduct further research, teaching and knowledge exchange to fill the gaps and correct the biases in what follows.

Despite these shortcomings, this Working Paper advocates an enhanced role for universities in activism and protection for the following reasons. First, universities occupy a position of relative privilege and autonomy in comparison to NGOs and other civil society actors. They have the capacity, resources and legitimacy to act in ways which others do not. Second, 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. Third, the size of universities means that there are multiple ways in which universities can intervene, and diverse actors who can take the lead or support off-stage and in other secondary ways. Universities themselves may take a stand on certain issues, but academics, other staff, and students frequently act independently of formal university positions and policies to advocate for and collaborate with activists. Finally, this initial scoping research indicates the huge range of innovative activities which are already taking place in the fields of activism and protection.

The Working Paper concludes with a set of action points, drawn from the paper and wider research. These action points are not a set of guidelines (setting out how universities should behave, or standards they should uphold), nor do they follow a traditional pattern in human rights of targeting the state e.g. focusing on the actions of the state, and developing a workable framework for monitoring repressive state practices against higher education institutions by stakeholders (ICNL, 2019). Rather, they represent a provisional attempt to set out a research, teaching and knowledge exchange agenda through which universities and civil society can forge thicker collaborations and support activism, protection and ultimately a vibrant democracy. The action points represent a point of departure for a new UNESCO Chair, in the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space, based at the Centre for Applied Human Rights (CAHR), University of York, and held by one of the authors of this paper (Paul Gready), and for associated partners and networks. Such actions could include:

- 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 in a similar way 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 or resist 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[1], 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 and support a move from a reactive 'protection from' to the more proactive and enabling 'protection to'.

- 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.

- Championing, documenting and sharing innovation and good practice in university support for activism and protection, for example further exploring the potential of academic centres, human rights policies, and UNESCO Chairs and Networks.

- Better understanding the challenges and constraints for universities, their staff and students as initiators of, and partners in, activist and protection agendas.

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1   Appe and Barragàn (2017: 482, 484) note that in Ecuador private universities are more likely to collaborate and have formal agreements with the development NGOs they interviewed.

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Introduction

This Working Paper is motivated by two developments. The first is that universities globally are facing a set of challenges. Challenges range from privatisation to diversification (public / private universities, religious / secular universities, etc.), enhanced government scrutiny and 'closing academic space' (ICNL, 2019), and budget cuts. 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. 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).

The second motivation is a more parochial set of developments at the host institution where the authors of the paper are based – the Centre for Applied Human Rights (CAHR), University of York. Protection, and associated activism, have been at the heart of CAHR's activities for over a decade. The Centre has hosted almost 100 human rights defenders (HRDs) since 2008 on a Protective Fellowship Scheme for HRDs at risk. Alongside this scheme, CAHR's HRD Hub developed a research profile on risk and security for activists, and on shrinking political space. At an institutional level, the University of York has recently become a University of Sanctuary, and in its University Strategy 2030 embraced being a university for the public good.[2] Mobilising these internal developments, and against the backdrop of the external environment set out above, CAHR co-created with partners an applied research agenda on universities as sites of activism and protection. The research and practice agenda is an attempt to reflect on and enhance CAHR's own work, to learn from innovative initiatives at other universities, and to support multi-directional knowledge exchange and sharing between universities and civil society on relevant themes. From 2023, these activities will be supported by a new UNESCO Chair, hosted at CAHR and held by one of the authors of this report (Paul Gready), on the theme of Protection of Human rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space.[3] This report represents an invitation to continue discussions about the activities to be supported by the UNESCO Chair and partners.

The goal of this paper is to analyse and support the diverse roles that universities can play in championing and protecting activism and activists. It draws on 22 interviews with academics and practitioners to begin to map existing practices and innovations, and to draw up action points to strengthen the role universities play in these fields (see Appendix 1 for a full list of interviewees). Interviewees were selected by a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling, drawing on the networks of the authors and CAHR for the initial group approached. As such, the sampling privileges those who are predisposed to be interested in university activism and protection. Some interviewees chose to remain anonymous, while others asked to be named in the research. The interviews were analysed for core themes, which were in turn aligned with themes from the literature review to structure the Working Paper.

The literature review and analysis of empirical data follow the same structure: an exploration of the values-base of universities and the language in which values are framed; universities as sites of activism; and universities as sites of protection. The concluding sections of the paper document case studies of innovation and good practice, the main challenges universities face in pursuing this

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2   University of York 'Vision for York – Mission and Strategies: the University Plan' Available at: *https://www.york.ac.uk/about/mission-strategies/vision-for-york/* (accessed 09/08/2022).

3   A further shortcoming of the paper to those noted in the Executive Summary is that it is informed by these experiences, and written from perspectives informed by this particular institutional context and history.

agenda, and some action points for academics, other university staff and students who are interested in better understanding and supporting activism and protection.

Literature Review

Values and Language

This section of the paper identifies values as central to the purpose and work of universities. It sets out 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 identifies some of the languages in which core values are framed.

Universities are values-based institutions. Winter and O'Donohue (2012: 565) argue that 'values underpin all aspects of academic and university life'. The challenge is that the values-base of universities is contested, and universities often articulate multiple, sometimes contradictory, values simultaneously. For example, any suggestion that universities are sites of protection, or more generally can advocate for social justice, must contend with the fact that they are facing a myriad of challenges and pressures, spanning privatisation, new managerialism,[4] diversification, enhanced or continued government interference, and budget cuts. Alongside external pressures for change, internal campaigns also have a values component, such as student protests and calls to address inequalities, enhance access and decolonise educational practices. Student protests are not always progressive, and may advocate exclusion and discrimination, or reproduce divisions in exile (Chinese / Hong Kong students). As such, contestations are both externally and internally driven, and also simultaneously champion conservative and instrumental roles for universities, for example to serve the economy and produce graduates for business, while also seeking more political and broader societal engagement from universities. The latter include the important role of universities on issues like Black Lives Matter and decolonisation. While acknowledging this complexity, this research seeks to support the third mission of universities, going beyond teaching and research to address social, economic and cultural challenges in society (Gourley, 2012).

The core value of universities has traditionally been academic freedom.[5] 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. As such, academic freedom is a core component of democracy and a vibrant public sphere. Universities can be viewed as having a special or different status within societies, 'a special place, devoted to the pursuit and transmission of knowledge' (Altbach, 2001: 206). Understood in this way academic freedom includes the propagation of new ideas and controversial or unpopular views. Among the key value tensions here are the following: 1) Whether academic freedom is a negative attribute, implying the absence of restrictions, or a positive one requiring the construction of an enabling environment (especially for historically marginalised groups and viewpoints). 2) Whether universities should provide 'safe spaces' for marginalised identities and experiences, seeking to secure protection from certain kinds of views, or an open space where ideas are tested through debate, and the oxygen of democracy determines which ideas live and which perish. The particular positioning of universities means that issues like culture, religion and identity politics, including particularly contentious examples like transgender rights, are both divisive on campuses and place universities at the forefront of wider societal debates.

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4   New managerialism sees education as market-led rather than serving the public good. The 'purpose of education is increasingly limited to developing the neo-liberal citizen, the competitive economic actor and cosmopolitan worker built around a calculating, entrepreneurial and detached self' (Lynch, 2014: n.p.).

5   Other linked values include freedom of expression and of assembly and association.

A second value of relevance to this research which is prioritised by some universities is a commitment to social justice or social responsibility.[6] A commitment to social justice for universities represents an attempt to address the following question: 'how can we contribute to the creation of a more equitable, respectful, and just society for everyone?' (Zajda, Majhanovich, and Rust, 2006: 13). This role has evolved from Dewey's emphasis on 'engaged education' in the 1920s (Reason, 2013), which emphasised the role of universities in enhancing personal and social responsibility through promoting civic engagement. UNESCO has repeatedly championed a social role for education, for example in its guidebook for planning education in emergencies and reconstruction:

> *Faced with the complexity of current and future global challenges, higher education has the social responsibility to advance our understanding of multifaceted issues, which involve social, economic, scientific and cultural dimensions and our ability to respond to them. It should lead society in generating global knowledge to address global challenges (...) (UNESCO, 2010: 2).*

A commitment to social justice can take a variety of forms, spanning local to global levels, including citizenship education, community engagement, support for democracy and socio-environmental causes, and protection of people and organisations at risk (Eriksson, 2018; Gourley, 2012; Symaco and Tee, 2019). Two further points about social justice are pertinent. First, its definition is contested, and needs to be understood in context – for example, the work of Freire, Borda and others means both that the academy's relationship to social justice in Latin America is deep and particular, and that the region has been a source of global learning on approaches such as the pedagogy of the oppressed and participatory action research (Appe at al. 2017: 17-20). Second, social justice, like all progressive values, can be co-opted and depoliticised as they are adopted within universities. Writing about Thailand, Boontinand (2021) argues that both citizenship / civic education, and the broader notion of social justice, have been co-opted by universities to serve the agenda of the market and state – to mean good character, personal responsibilities and duties, and non-political participation and community service, rather than as championing critical inquiry or enabling students to engage with issues like human rights, justice and democracy.

The two core progressive values articulated by universities – academic freedom and social justice – can complement one another, with the latter building on and extending the former. However, it is also the case that the civil and political rights underpinning academic freedom can be advocated with little attention given to the socio-economic underpinnings of social justice, and that overlooking the indivisibility of the two values can be detrimental to an academic freedom that seeks to include previously marginalised groups and viewpoints.

Value commitments are typically registered in university strategy and policy documents, as well as vision and mission statements ('university for the public good' – University of York, or 'socially committed university' – Ghent University). Implementing values in a meaningful way is often challenging. For policy to bring about social change, 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. For example, many South African universities now champion values of equity and transformation, but continue to struggle to overcome architectures, monuments, languages and curricula associated with an apartheid and colonial past, and while operating within a competitive market logic (Oxlund, 2010). The #RhodesMustFall movement demonstrated that values had to be embedded in pedagogy, curriculum and infrastructure to be realised by the student population (Symaco and Tee, 2019). Value translation therefore has to address the multiple roles and institutional complexity of universities. The ability of universities to deliver on progressive values is on the one hand enhanced by their local and global influence, the legitimising potential of knowledge, their

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

human and financial resources, and their expected autonomy from government. On the other hand, this potential is curtailed where these preconditions are not met or where commitment to the values is superficial (Gourley, 2012; Sharma and Sharma, 2015; Steele and Rickards, 2021; Singh, 2011).

A final issue in this section relates to the language in which value commitments are framed. A core term adopted in this paper, protection, is seen as reactive, paternalistic and even patronising by some (Evans, 2008). The use of particular terms and frames can change the effectiveness of and response to universities' initiatives and activities. Language is highly contextual, in relation to place, political environment and issue. Writing about responses from universities to refugees in Poland and Austria, Kontowski and Leitsberger (2018) advocate the term 'hospitality', defined as an act of welcoming 'those who are strangers' (Sutherland, 2006), on the grounds that it allows refugees to be recognised as individual actors with particular skills and talents, and is more potent than a focus on abstract 'rights' to education. The term 'sanctuary' has also been widely used in relation to refugees, for example in the USA during the Trump administration and within the University of Sanctuary movement. In the USA, Tierney et al. (2017), suggest that concrete action to support refugees can be undermined by labels and designations which are either considered vague or produce a political backlash. Work on sexual violence usually employs terms that imply pro-active (rather than reactive) responses and agency, such as prevention (Young, 2003).

What this section indicates is that a set of values and language framings exist which allow universities to talk about and 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 and activists. As such, an action agenda on these issues is likely to include supporting better alignment, translation and redefinitions to enhance mutual legibility, comprehension and collaboration.

Universities as Sites of Activism

This section moves on from values and language to explore the various activist roles universities, academics/staff, and students can perform. It 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 considers how this position can be used to benefit social change and engage with communities and civil society organisations, identifying four specific roles for universities: instigator, incubator, collaborator, and protector. Finally, the section concludes by identifying the barriers facing protest and activism for both students and staff.

It is important to note at the outset that in many parts of the world a component of closing civic and political space is a 'closing of academic space'. The International Center for Non-Profit Law (2019) highlights four kinds of restriction on universities:

- **Restrictions on universities as institutions**, including legislative measures, interference in governance structures and leadership, financial cuts, and the control of staff hiring, security of tenure and promotion.

- **Restrictions on academic freedom and activity**, which range from curtailing freedom of expression (notably to criticise the government or on particular topics), interfering in teaching content and programmes, and travel restrictions, to the chilling effects of self-censorship.

- **Restrictions on students**, extending from eroding autonomy in relation to admissions, to politicising student-related decisions (admission, grading, funding) and a disproportionately harsh response to student activism.

- **Undermining university legitimacy**, by criminalising academics, applying 'foreign agent' or anti-terrorism laws, and through the securitisaton and militarisation of campuses, negative public discourse by governments and the misuse of emergency laws.

The cumulative intent of these measures is to label universities as 'dangerous' to public morals and national security. These attacks are increasingly taking place within the context of a wider populist politics that denigrates evidence-based arguments, experts and elites and seeks to both undermine the autonomy of universities and stigmatise them as oppositional actors (see Box 1). Many of these restrictions are similar to those used to target NGOs.

Box 1: The 'closing of academic space' in Turkey

A core challenge of the current political moment is governments seeking to reshape universities in their own image, using a form of 'state capture' to create 'one dimensional' universities – homogenous, hierarchical, conservative, and bureaucratic (Doğan, 2022). Using measures across the four categories of restriction outlined above, the neo-liberal authoritarian regime of President Erdogan and his AKP government has pursued this objective. Attacks on academics in Turkey became more extensive after the 2016 coup attempt and the 'Academics for Peace' declaration (advocating for a renewed Kurdish peace process), with 15 private universities closed, and over 7,000 academics 'cleansed' from universities. Amendments to the Higher Education Law during the Covid-19 pandemic introduced further restrictions. This attempt at 'pacification' is the antithesis of the vision of universities championed in this paper (Doğan, 2022; Özcan, 2020).

Depending on the context, however, 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. At times, universities act institutionally and explicitly as oppositional actors, opposing governments and their policies which infringe on human rights. One example is the already-mentioned 'sanctuary' status adopted by some universities in the USA in order to protect students threatened with deportation by the Trump administration (Tierney et al., 2017). Universities can also provide a space for their constituent actors, such as students and staff, to protest and engage in activism. A final factor of note is that the autonomy and status of universities can add to the political cost of government oppression, making universities a valuable ally as well as a potential source of protection.

It is useful to categorise the roles that universities can play in activism as follows: instigator, incubator, collaborator, and protector (the latter role is addressed in the next section). Universities have a long history of instigating activism, disrupting societies and agenda-setting through critical debate, highlighting injustices and inequalities and being at the heart of protest and social movements. Historical examples include the 1960 Greensboro sit-in in the USA, the anti-apartheid student protests of the 1970s and 1980s in South Africa, and the Tiananmen protests in China and the role of students in the Velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia, both in 1989 (Hall, et al., 2013; also see Choudry and Vally eds, 2020). Students as 'unruly subjects' have often led such protests (Boren, 2001). While recent student movements in places such as Iran, Chile, Hong Kong and South Africa initially arose in part from issues internal to universities, they also spoke to wider societal challenges and in so doing gained traction from supporters outside of the academy. The #RhodesMustFall and subsequent #FeesMustFall movements in South Africa were fuelled by the manner in which universities were dealing with access and inequalities, prompting wider calls for institutional as well as societal change (Daniel, 2021).[7] Such student activism has particular qualities based on the short-term tenure of students at universities (see Box 2).

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7   Labour and student unions have also been important in activism addressing internal, university concerns such as pay and pay inequalities (gender, race), precarious contracts, casualisation of labour, and related issues (Woodcock, 2020).

Box 2: The nature of student activism

The short tenure of students at universities makes student activism 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: 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 – and a laboratory for alternative futures. Students occupy diverse positions within wider national protests, for example sometimes being in the vanguard initially and subsumed in wider protest dynamics over time. The global movement of students enables extraterritorial or diaspora activism that can focus on the home country and/or issues of global concern (Zeilig and Ansell, 2008). Again, it is important to note that not all student activism is progressive.

'Scholar activism' involves working towards social change through academic activities, including teaching and research. Situating scholar activism at the heart of the complex value base of neo-liberal universities, Richter at al. (2020) use the term 'tempered radicals' (see Meyerson and Scully, 1995) for those of us 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 and activism, the academia and civil society, internal and external concerns, individual achievement and a collaborative ethos, doing work that is often invisible in terms of decisions around appointments and promotion. Other scholarship associates scholar activism with creating new forms of knowledge production, prioritising the knowledge of 'lived' and marginalised experience (Lennox and Yildiz, 2020); seeks to make more visible the role of scholar activists from the South (Freire, Borda) as pioneers in community based research (Gutberlet et al., 2014); and highlights the importance of 'symbolic capital' (peer and public recognition) and 'cultural capital' (having skills that are in short supply, and greater financial and other forms of autonomy) to surviving as scholar activists in authoritarian settings (Geer, 2013).[8] The academic activity of scholar activists varies enormously, ranging from 'resourcing activism' (Derickson and Routledge, 2015), for example by using time, technology, space and expertise to advance the agendas of external collaborators, to creating organisations and delivering activist outputs. During the conflict in Sri Lanka, for example, the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) [UTHR(J)] was formed to document human rights abuses by all sides – '[s]oon half the university staff in Jaffna became members… The idea was to use the University to build something that would offer hope to the wider community' (Hoole, 2009: 125).

Finally, it is worth noting that when universities are researched as sites of activism, the focus is almost always on students or academic staff. This ignores a large group of other staff who can and do support activist causes: librarians and archivists holding or hiding particular collections; administrative staff supporting activist or refugee students, or turning a blind eye to certain kinds of activity; and the solidarity provided by staff running specialist units on equalities and inclusion or sexual violence (Lawless, 2017).

Second, universities can serve as an incubator of ideas and movements. In conflict settings, for example, universities can both reproduce and even accentuate the divides within the society, or model and in a sense prefigure a more inclusive future. In the former category, Russell (2002) describes how conflict forged the University of Jaffna in Sri Lanka into a mono-ethnic space, with wartime practices and structures persisting after the conflict ended. In contrast, universities can play an important role in documenting human rights violations, post-conflict peace-building, conflict resolution and transitional justice (Milton and Barakat, 2016; Millican ed., 2017; also see Hoole above).

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8   Geer (2013) notes that the March 9 Group for University Autonomy in Egypt was not dominated by social scientists or academics from the humanities, but rather had medics and mathematicians at the fore.

Similarly, universities were crucial drivers for independence movements, and in the training of postcolonial political leaders as well as a cadre of new civil servants. In such settings, universities move beyond incubating ideas and movements, to become incubators of a new state. The example below (Box 3), of Queens University Belfast, provides an example and framing of a university as an incubator across these three settings.

> **Box 3: Queens University Belfast as a 'zone of civility'**
>
> While acknowledging its complex current value base and past history, Brewer (2017) argues that Queens University evolved to become a zone of civility (Kaldor, 1999) in the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process. By this he means that the university was a space apart (turning the traditional aloofness of universities into a positive), a political as well as a physical space. Zones of civility provide counter logics to war by establishing settings where the rule of law and political consent trump violence as a way of organising social relations, and in which security, safety and protection can be provided. Specifically, the university played this role by:
>
> • 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.
>
> • Incubated the Catholic middle class and hence the local civil rights movement.
>
> • Modelling a new inclusive society through its own structures and policies, notably an equality agenda including gender equality (Brewer, 2017).

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. 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. The 'citizenship function', for example, is not limited to the curriculum and cannot be exhausted in citizenship education alone; rather it relates to the full range of university purposes and functions. As Crick (2000: 145) notes: 'Universities are part of society and, ..., a critical part which should be playing a major role in the wide objectives of creating a citizenship culture'.

A third activist role for universities is that of collaborator. To make collaborations with external activist groups meaningful requires going beyond asking external participants to take part in predetermined research or teaching, to rather base such work on the priorities and questions of external stakeholders, co-produce responses and challenge barriers to participation and activism (Derickson and Routledge, 2015). There also needs to be mutual benefit, such as access to people/communities and real-world challenges and impact for the university, alongside access to status, credibility and resources for communities and external partners. A study of development related university-NGO collaborations in Ecuador in the context of shrinking political space and sustainability challenges, found that the gains for the NGOs of student internships, short term projects and programming, and capacity building interventions included enhanced legitimacy, reaching new audiences, strengthened networks, and increased space for dialogue and advocacy – but such collaborations did not meet the funding challenges faced by NGOs (Appe and Barragán, 2017).

In short, the terms of engagement and distribution of benefits in social justice work will inform whether collaboration is impactful and sustainable. In terms of research collaborations, extensive scholarship exists on how to make collaborations fair and equitable (Leach et al., 2016; Rethinking Research Collaborative, 2018; Stevens et al., 2013), and on the forms such collaborations should take e.g. communities of practice (Wenger, 2015). 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). At a macro-level, collaborations can help universities navigate the complex environments within which they are located (for example, in relation to different cultures, values and religions). This is illustrated by the University of KwaZulu Natal in South Africa, which formed links with a range of grassroots NGOs during apartheid, thereby helping the university inform and co-create policy and values in a challenging political environment (Gourley, 2012).

The roles identified above that universities can play in activism and societal change – instigator, incubator, collaborator – can be undermined by both societal and institutional barriers. Several barriers have already been mentioned, including attacks on university autonomy and the individualistic nature of much academic endeavour, which can undermine cohesion within the academy and devalue community engagement as a priority. Further barriers to external engagement arise when there are cultural and political differences between and within academic and external communities, a lack of incentive structures e.g. policies around promotion and recruitment, and a paucity of resources for faculty and staff to engage in initiatives (Kezar and Rhoads, 2001; Sylvester, et al., 2017). Value clashes can also hinder activism. For example, the clash between economic priorities and a social justice agenda, and the tension between universities as open spaces and safe spaces, which can fuel activism and protest but also lead to friction on campuses between diverging viewpoints. Finally, universities may go so far as to collaborate in cracking down on protests and activism, sometimes in alliance with the state, thereby becoming complicit in human rights abuses.

While there are internal and external barriers to university engagement with activist causes, their relative autonomy in comparison to civil society, 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 role that universities have played in 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 paper analyses universities as sites of protection, and specifically addresses the protection of people at risk (activists, human rights defenders and refugees) and the protection of diverse forms of knowledge (activist knowledge and indigenous knowledge).[9] A central argument of this paper is that these forms of protection are interdependent, with the protection of values, people and different forms of knowledge being inextricably linked, and integral to the protection of political and democratic space.

Recent years have seen an increase and formalisation in the protection of one category of activist, the human rights defender (HRD). The OHCHRs 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 a myriad of 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 initiatives to big international NGOs, such as Front Line Defenders – but increasingly include universities as partners or lead hosts (Eriksson, 2018). Although universities are not newcomers to supporting at-risk individuals, their protection work has traditionally supported academics at risk in conjunction with partners such as Scholars at Risk (SAR), and the Council for At Risk Academics (CARA) (Eriksson, 2018). This section will explore the possible advantages of universities engaging further with other at-risk groups, such as HRDs and refugees.

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9   The protection of values, the third field of protection, is addressed above.

Writing as the (then) long-standing coordinator of a Protective Fellowship Scheme for HRDs at risk at the University of York (UK), Eriksson (2018) identified the advantages of universities as protection providers. The list below draws on Eriksson's article and the personal experience of the Working Paper authors while working at CAHR:

• Providing a more neutral, safe space for the activist, under the radar of their home government, due to the 'special status' of a university (autonomy, legitimacy).

• Offering a structure (the calendar of the academic year) and access to academic classes and training on subjects such as international human rights law, digital security, presentation skills, advocacy and fundraising. Activists may have had their studies interrupted, and many lack formal training in human rights (or related fields) having picked up knowledge through lived experience, activism and ad hoc training.

• Assisting with practical issues – activists can enter the country on a research visa, for example. This status as a researcher not only makes travelling more straight-forward, but the change in status from refugee or political opponent to scholar can also be an important form of recognition for the individual.

• Facilitating networking opportunities due to the unique positioning and influence of universities. For example, Fellows at the University of York are supported to hold meetings with local groups and supporters, NGOs and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, which aids in building their capacity and enhancing security.

• Providing 'holistic' support by using the size and diverse resources of the university to offer HRDs counselling to deal with trauma, language training, and access to the local community and a 'Friends' scheme to provide social support.

A second category of people protected by universities is refugees. This was demonstrated in the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis. About half of those who would normally be studying in universities in Syria moved to Europe during the crisis (Streitwieser et al., 2017; Kontowski and Leitsberger, 2018). This led to universities across Europe developing initiatives to support the integration of refugees (European University Association, 2015; Kontowski and Leitsberger, 2018). In Austria, for example, there was a dramatic increase in asylum applications in 2015 and while the government did not commit any extra resources to higher education, public universities took it upon themselves to start an initiative, MORE, to support refugees. MORE included help for refugees to prepare for degrees and to access German language courses (Kontowski and Leitsberger, 2018). Recent large scale refugee movements, and the associated flight of academics, have led to some innovative support and protection initiatives. These include the Austrian National Scientific Council (FWF) programme allocating 1 million euros to incorporate Ukrainian researchers into existing funded projects;[10] and the Department of Education and British Council 'Warm Welcome' scholarships for undergraduate and postgraduate Afghan students in the UK.[11]

Some universities make a formal declaration in relation to their role in the protection of refugees, thereby linking their protection of values and people. Examples include the Sanctuary Campus movement in the USA, and University of Sanctuary status. The goal of the Sanctuary Campus designation during the Trump administration was to protect undocumented immigrants and

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10 FWF Der Wissenschaftsfonds (2022) 'Crisis Support for Researchers from Ukraine' Available at: *https://www.fwf.ac.at/en/news-and-media-relations/news/detail/nid/20220314* (accessed 29/07/2022).

11 British Council (2022) 'Warm Welcome Scholarship Scheme – information for UK higher education providers' Available at: *https://www.britishcouncil.org/study-work-abroad/in-uk/warm-welcome-scholarships/higher-education-providers#:~:text=The%20Warm%20Welcome%20Scheme%20aims,providing%20access%20to%20higher%20education* (accessed 29/07/2022). There are also interesting student-led initiatives. For example, Student Action for Refugees (STAR) in the UK encourages universities to create scholarships for asylum seekers. Available at: *http://www.star-network.org.uk/index.php*

international students so that they could learn, and to promote solidarity (Tierney et al., 2017). Securing the University of Sanctuary status in the UK can send a strong moral and rhetorical message, and comes with specific access-related measures, notably for refugees.[12]

In addition to human right defenders and refugees, universities can go beyond protecting individuals to also protect organisations, as demonstrated in Box 4 below:

Box 4: The University of KwaZulu Natal protecting organisations under 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)

The protection of different forms of knowledge is a further field where universities can, and should, play an important role. This section will conclude by discussing the role universities can play in diversifying and decolonising knowledge in relation to two specific forms of knowledge traditionally devalued by universities: activist knowledge and indigenous 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 is counterposed to 'official' sources of knowledge stemming from academic, private sector or governmental research organisations. While activist knowledge is based on lived experience, 'official' knowledge draws on expert research and insights (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993). These different forms of knowledge align with academic debates about insider versus outsider knowledge, and politically engaged knowledge versus objective, value-free knowledge. Activist knowledge, like the Activist Scholar, is better established in certain disciplines (e.g. gender studies, social movement studies, development), than others, where the value assigned to a continual cycle of learning in action occurring during long-term campaigns, short-term mobilisations and daily struggles is more accepted (Choudry, 2020(b)). While it is important not to romanticise activist knowledge (Kelley, 2002), and to understand the opportunities for learning as going in both directions (Sears, 2014), activist knowledge can contain ideas, insights, theories, and visions produced by people collectively working for social and political change; showcase unexplored perspectives, archives, and other historical material; and produce insights that challenge dominant approaches, histories and narratives (Vally and Treat, 2013; Choudry, 2020).

A second kind of knowledge that can be recognised, and protected, within universities is indigenous knowledge. Again, historically universities have been a core part of the problem, prioritising a Westernised education system and content that has been responsible for shifting the culture in former colonies away from indigenous knowledge (Steinberg and Kincheloe, 2008; Prakash and Esteva, 1998; Marker, 2019). There is increasing support for the decolonisation of education, and recognition that this involves the inclusion of indigenous knowledge (Coates et al, 2021; Heleta, 2016). Indigenous knowledge is usually an integrated system of knowledge spanning human knowledge, beliefs and behaviours,

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12 On Universities of Sanctuary, see *https://universities.cityofsanctuary.org/* (accessed 14/02/2023). The role of universities in the Global South in providing protection for refugees is under-represented in this Working Paper, and in published research more generally.

and encompassing experiential knowledge and a holistic worldview that includes spirituality, socio-cultural context, culture, life skills and more (Triyanto and Handayani, 2018). As with activist knowledge, a tension exists between Western knowledge which is seen as systematic, objective and rational, while indigenous knowledge has been viewed as closed, parochial and irrational (Beckford, Jacobs, Williams and Nahdee, 2010). Decolonising knowledge and universities means many different things. For academics, particularly Western academics, it means de-centring themselves and striving to work in a deeply collaborative way (Briggs and Sharp, 2004). For students, it opens up the possibility of understanding the experience of others, on their own terms, and of being exposed to other ways of knowing (Rose, 2004; Waterman and Harrison, 2017).

The challenges facing the protection of activist and indigenous 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). There is the related danger that university engagement with different forms of knowledge will only be heard or acknowledged if they are translated into mainstream forms of knowledge, or that fluid and dynamic knowledge forms will be institutionalised and ossified by universities (Spivak and Riach, 2020; Briggs and Sharp, 2004). Crucially, activist and indigenous knowledges need to be understood by universities as sources of internal reflection, contextual recalibration, and transformative change. While there are inevitably barriers to this outcome, including bureaucratic inertia and conservatism, as well as external threats ranging from funding cuts to direct oppression, if knowledge is understood in this way 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.

Delivering this holistic vision of protection – people, values, knowledges – is a significant challenge to universities, but also carries the potential to move beyond 'protection from' to 'protection to'. This means a shift beyond forms of protection that are reactive, predicated on managing risk and security, and largely based on physical protection for individuals, to a form of protection that is proactive, agenda-setting and more holistic, linking protection and activism, and placing organisations, communities and wider systemic change centre-stage in pursuit of the protection of political and democratic space.

Empirical data

The discussion of empirical data which follows mirrors the structure of the literature review, focusing on values and language, universities as sites of activism, and universities as sites of protection.

Values and Language

The majority of interviewees identified academic freedom as the core value of universities, but academic excellence was the main priority (Anon (b) and (c); Brems / Ghent; Chamberlain / Wits; Vaddhanaphuti / Chiang Mai). It is important to note that academic freedom and excellence can align as a single value, but can also pull in different directions, for example if the latter constrains the diversity of research undertaken and knowledge recognised under the guise of narrow performance metrics. 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 in such a way that it aligned with the defence of academic freedom (Dyvik / ICORN; Wordsworth / CARA).

Social justice as a core value is interpreted differently depending on a range of variables (public / private university, political context, etc.). Framings for social justice include assertions that

universities are 'socially committed' (Brems / Ghent), 'a private university in the public interest' (Anon (d)); free to access for students (Sigal / Buenos Aires); and so on. In particular political contexts, such as transitions to democracy, universities and university programmes can be set up to reflect and shape this context, as incubators of ideas, values and states:

> *The Central European University (CEU) ... was established to support the intellectual academic and policy work to build capacity for newly opening societies of the post-communist region of central Europe... It was supposed to train the new generation of political agents to help reform the governments... opening up to develop new understandings for justice and protection of rights... Not to transfer the knowledge from the wise West to the backward East, but to actually generate ideas, and to learn and to focus on generating new knowledge. (Shtokvych / CEU)*

There was also widespread acknowledgement that the values of universities are multiple and sometimes contradictory or unclear (Chamberlain / Wits). Sigal referred to the values base as 'plural' (Buenos Aires), while Mills used the term 'variable' (Dundee). At times values can clash, such as when neo-liberal pressures and priorities co-exist with progressive commitments (Mills / Dundee) or with democratic accountability structures within universities (Sigal / Buenos Aires). Values can also be performative, 'trotted out' at certain times and for particular audiences but lacking clarity and substance (Mills / Dundee). Finally, the size and internal dynamics of universities makes consistency difficult and feeds values clashes. The 'accent' can shift on the basis of changing leadership (Castillejo, Los Andes), diverse staff composition and views (Anon (e)), and differences between institutional conservatism and pockets of progressive activity (Castillejo / Los Andes; Anon (d)).

Values also change over time, informed by wider societal and political change. Universities often have complex histories, in which they have played different roles in society over time. In the quote below Anon (b) discusses the evolving interface between Makerere University and Uganda:

> *[T]he university used to be that place, very vocal about issues, especially of democracy and human rights and actually for the longest time it was practically unheard of for a pro government student leadership to take effect. The university was always seen as that place that was different, non-conformist... very strong political candidates for democracy emerged from Makerere University and it had been like this for the longest time. Then somehow it became easier for the State to put in their own candidates. It seems as if the State had somehow infiltrated the student body. In the last two years... the energy and the power has returned because of the Bobi Wine[13] energy with the youth... But you can see that somehow it is no longer predictable that the university is going to be that centre of struggle and energy... there is so much towing of the line you feel that is trickling down from the top leadership of university, through to the faculty and also the student body.*

The language in which values are presented and framed is also significant. Human rights as a term and discourse is not well understood in universities. Exceptions include where a human rights policy has been developed for the university (Brems / Ghent), or when planning and strategy documents explicitly reference human rights e.g. an Institutional Development Plan based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Anon (e)). The term 'human rights defender' is also poorly understood, with some interviewees preferring the term 'activist' (Chamberlain / Wits). Among the critiques of the term human rights defender are that it is a 'foreign framing', and that it is passive and lacking agency (Brems / Ghent; Chamberlain / Wits).[14]

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13 Bobi Wine is a singer and politician. He stood for President in 2021, but lost an election that was widely seen as flawed. Wine has a considerable following, particularly among young people in Uganda.

14 A further reason that human rights is poorly understood may be that the role and responsibilities of universities in implementing human rights is not well defined (Zwaan / Justice and Peace).

Finally, few universities use the term protection as part of their everyday discourse.[15] Oomen (Roosevelt) stated that 'the word protection does not surface that much', Castillejo (Los Andes) that protection is not part of our 'daily' or 'institutional conversation', while Anon (d) noted that protection is 'a very human rights term, I would not use it in academic settings'. The term may be difficult to translate, or its meaning may be changed through translation. For example, Castillejo (Los Andes) stated that in Spanish the word protection would only translate to physical protection, and would be seen as a militarised term. Protection was criticised for implying vulnerability, weakness, inability, and the need for support from higher powers (Brems / Ghent; Shtokvych / CEU). Others were wary of the term on the grounds that it was too political, 'potentially a quagmire', as it necessitates political action and protecting people from foreign governments (Fildes and Mills / Dundee). Where the term protection is used in university settings it tends to relate to the physical protection of particular groups, such as scholars at risk (Wordsworth / CARA) or in certain circumstances, such as protection of students on campus or during protests (Baubeng-Baidoo / Pretoria). In a very few cases, protection work resonates with government policy and priorities e.g. in Scotland and the Netherlands protection programmes for human rights defenders involving universities are funded by the government (Fildes and Mills / Dundee; Zwaan / Justice and Peace).

Research participants argued that attempts to engage universities in human rights-related work need to be framed in languages with which they are familiar and comfortable – in short, activist agendas need to be 'legible' in, or 'plug in' to, university agendas (Mills / Dundee – see Box 5 below). This can be done in two ways. First, progressive work can be pursued through alignment with academic priorities and terms that push for external engagement. These include in-vogue buzzwords like academic excellence, knowledge exchange, impact, and internationalisation (Castillejo / Los Andes; Gad / Hildesheim; Vaddhanaphuti / Chiang Mai). Anon (d)) talked about how teaching and learning for students can be enriched by applied human rights work, providing transferable skills, improving the teaching of lawyers, and enhancing prestige – in short, as 'activist, but also excellent'.

Second, an entry-point for human rights is provided by social justice-related terms that are powerful at the interface between universities and the societies in which they operate. These include agendas linked to sustainability (climate change, environment); access and inclusion (diversity, respect); supporting refugees and sanctuary (Anon (d); Wordsworth / CARA); safeguarding (safety, security, wellbeing: Anon(c); Shtokvych / CEU); and decolonisation e.g. at University College Roosevelt in The Netherlands a decolonisation summer school has become a platform for activist causes such as Black Lives Matter (Oomen / Roosevelt). A significant number of universities are now committed to the Sustainable Development Goals, which although often interpreted through a largely environmental lens, do provide some opportunities for work on human rights and protection.

Box 5: How NGOs can align their work with university priorities:

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

Dyvik / ICORN

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15 Anon (c); Brems / Ghent; Chamberlain / Wits; Castillejo / Los Andes; Mills / Dundee; Oomen / Roosevelt; Shtokvyth / CEU; Sigal / Buenos Aires; Vaddhanaphuti / Chiang Mai.

One important conclusion from this analysis is that careful consideration of language, values, ethics and politics is multi-directional. Universities and their staff must consider such issues in external engagements, but civil society actors also need to take these concerns into account if they want to collaborate with universities.

Universities as Sites of Activism

This section revisits the characteristics that make universities valuable initiators of, and allies in, human rights and social justice activism. These include institutional qualities such as autonomy, legitimacy and status, which feed into capacities to perform four specific activist-related roles: instigator, incubator, collaborator and protector (the latter role is addressed in the next section). As well as opportunities, the section also explores barriers to university support for activism.

Interviewees confirmed that universities, although themselves often under threat, usually enjoy greater autonomy than civil society organisations in oppressive contexts to hold open activist space. Anon (b), for example, painted a complex picture in which universities retained the capacity to 'go around' repressive measures:

> *Right now, in Uganda... with the NGO Act that has all these requirements for annual application for licences, declaration of funds, declaration of areas of operation, with the Public Order Management Act, requir[ing] authorisation before public meetings can be held... we are seeing this growing range of legislation that is reducing the space for people to speak, act and act out. The university is still a good place to go around these things... and talk about different issues... But there is also physical protection, Makerere is still a place where there is safety, you are still okay to move around, so there is that physical protection where you will be given space to work, to sit, to think. There are still those safe spaces for researchers, which you don't find a lot in other places.*

The reasons given for the privileged autonomy and space of universities included that universities have 'leverage' (Sigal / Buenos Aires) and 'weight' (Baubeng-Baidoo / Pretoria): 'They come with clout, I think the power that universities wield in terms of how seriously they are taken is one of the most important things to harness and to tap into' (Chamberlain / Wits). Interviewees confirmed that these qualities arise from a range of factors, including legitimacy, status, access to knowledge, resources, and local as well as global networks. However, universities can also be affected by restrictions that hit societies generally, with threats ranging from being 'observed' and monitored (Gad / Hildesheim), infiltrated and harassed (Anon (a)), to being closed down (Shtokvych / CEU). In short, having leverage, weight and power is a double-edged sword, creating unique opportunities and challenges for universities.

The two quotes below provide examples of 'autonomy in action' for universities. The first describes the capacity of universities to legitimise causes and organisations, reducing the 'temperature', 'buying time', and providing 'space' for activism to continue to breathe:

> *Placing the human rights discussion in an academic context helps to bring the temperature down, helps make it feel a bit less of a threat... if you have an academic workshop that has a lot of civil society leaders and representatives on the university grounds, that is not the same as a demonstration. I am simplifying this but I think the universities should take responsibility and embrace this idea that just by lending their name and the mandate... kind of reformulating or shaping it as an academic endeavour as a quest for knowledge and understanding rather than a human rights campaign... it buys time, gives additional space and intellectual resources. But it also raises the level and profile of the human rights defenders that otherwise would not have the same legitimacy. Being associated with higher education does contribute to the longevity and ability of human rights defenders to do more. (Shtokvych, CEU)*

The second quote underlines the complementary roles that universities and civil society organisations

can play, with each separately having important strengths and weaknesses, but collaboratively having the potential to create a 'third space' for activism:

> They operate at different levels with different rationales and different agendas. When I worked for the NGO, I had a lot of flexibility to do whatever I wanted to do. I could just go to a community and start working on a case, file a case, defend a case, and go to the press... The university has all these restrictions. But on the other hand, when I talk in the name of the university, I have all the status in my favour... [it] makes people think I am saying something that is correct. When I talk from the NGO it was the other way around, I was like someone shouting who really needed to prove the point... On the one hand the Law School has a lot of power in terms of its word being heavier and more powerful, but the NGO has a lot of flexibility and can fight on any front it wants and can come and go and make alliances with fewer limitations... I think that the trick is to adjust to where you are talking from. If I behave the same way as in the NGO I would be fired, and if I behave in the NGO as I behave now I would also be fired! ... The agendas and challenges are different, and the leverage is different. (Sigal / Buenos Aires)

As this discussion already begins to suggest, interviewees confirmed the relevance of instigator, incubator and collaborator roles for universities.

Universities as instigators: University, student and staff activism

In many parts of the world universities are at the centre of national protest, with politics very much 'within the university' (Sigal / Buenos Aires). Universities perform this role in a number of ways, for example nurturing dissent and challenging the state (Anon (a)) and defending academic freedom and institutional autonomy as an act of resistance (Anon (d); Dyvik / ICORN). Often it is students who provide the 'energy' to drive human rights and political agendas, on and off campus, and 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. So, nobody goes out and nobody comes because the moment you have a student body, that energy is there... (Anon (b))

Interviewees also gave examples of navigating and negotiating forms of activism and protest through universities as complex institutions. Among the fault lines of complexity is the fact that universities often are simultaneously where protest originates and (at least in part) the target of the protests, and the challenge of adopting an advocacy position for large and plural institutions.[16]

> Since about 2014 there have been successive waves of what has become known as #FeesMustFall in South Africa, which is a student social movement, and Wits [University of the Witwatersrand] has been at the epicentre of that... This has put a unit like CALS [Centre for Applied Legal Studies] in a very tricky position... and what that meant is that we couldn't represent Wits student protesters, because of the conflict of interest issues. But we... formed a coalition of organisations providing support to student activists. And so we just made deals that all of Wits' cases would be referred to colleagues, but that in return we would take on the representation of students from other universities. And that often meant we were representing half the students in a protest in which part of that protest was directed at Wits. And the university allowed that, and in fact sometimes even supported it... (Chamberlain / Wits).

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16 There are clearly other fault lines – for example, the human rights challenges that come with internationalisation and the different spatial sites of universities e.g. NYU has global sites in Abu Dhabi and several in China (Anon (d)).

I would say that in terms of public events the university usually has a voice supporting the good causes, but not always. The university is plural, so it is very hard to have one unified voice for the university going outwards. I can tell you about my work in the Law School... So, if I go out and speak in favour of whatever cause, and I am not very clear I am talking only for the Human Rights Centre and not the Law School then we will have a very big decision as professors will have a different view, which in many cases is very conservative, as lawyers are conservative as a class. So, in many cases you need to be very, very careful, and this leads the Law School to be less actively involved than it should be in my view. Sometimes it gets involved, for example with the law for abortion, a bit late, but it came... At some specific moments in time the Law School took the microphone. (Sigal / Buenos Aires)

Universities as incubators: The 'birthing' of ideas and organisations

As noted in the literature, universities can serve as incubators of ideas and organisations or movements. The role of universities in incubating ideas takes the form of a constant need to champion critical thinking, academic freedom and social justice in diverse settings, and is reflected throughout this paper. Some departments and centres articulate these values through support for specific organisations. A complex set of relationships exist between the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS) at the University of Witwatersrand and civil society groups. While CALS continues to host certain initiatives and networks e.g. the Right2Protest collaborative project, it has served as an incubator of organisations which are now independent entities. The Refugee Law Project has also been incubated (and protected) by being legally registered at the Department of Law, Makerere University. Finally, the work of the Regional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), at Chiang Mai University, has been hugely important as a springboard for NGO and community activism in Thailand and beyond. These university-NGO dynamics are highlighted in the quotes below:

The Law School... was responsible for the birth of a number of incredibly important social justice organisations, because there were progressive academics who were setting up entities that would enable them to practise, to represent and defend primarily initially the Trade Union movement in South Africa. Those entities morphed into various NGOs that still exist today... In the 1970s a bunch of academics were at the forefront of that, establishing what has become Cheadle, Thompson and Haysom, which is a progressive leftist law firm that still specialises in labour and representing employees and unions. And then they also founded CALS... and out of CALS then grew at least 2 other NGOs.[17] (Chamberlain / Wits)

I think one way in which there is progress is through non-mainstream academic institutions... The Refugee Law Project for example is a project that was born of the [Makerere University] and it grew, it focuses on issues of advocacy for refugees and IDPs but also they have taken on issues of LGBTI [rights] and because of the LGBTI component the Refugee Law Project was closed for over a year. It took a lot for the Department of Law... to negotiate with the government... the capacity to work with an academic institution probably saved them. (Anon (b))

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, and help them to evaluate their activities, and provide a space for NGOs to discuss and to share their experience with students and with lecturers at our university. So that was about 15 – 20 years ago... our Centre is trying to bridge the gap between

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17 The Aids Law Project became Section 27 (health rights and education), and the Litigation and Housing Unit of CALS broke away and formed the Socio and Economic Rights Institute (SERI).

> *university and civil society so that both can get to know each other and work together in helping the local people, reducing the inequalities problem, and reducing conflict in resource management... That was at the beginning, but now NGOs are much stronger than 15-20 years ago, they can do their own work without the dependence upon academics. They can speak about the problems they have in culture, or they can represent the villages and local people's problems and they can talk to the government. They can negotiate with the policy maker much more than academics like myself. At the beginning, yes, they depend upon us, but now NGOs can do their own job without depending upon the university. Except on some occasions, like in my case, I still serve as a chairman of several NGOs. (Vaddhanaphuti / Chiang Mai)*

Universities can offer important support for organisations (human and financial resources, legal advice, and for public universities the protection of being under the umbrella of a state institution). They can also provide an environment that organisations outgrow. The 'drivers of departure' which lead organisations to leave their academic host range from personal disagreements to practical challenges e.g. linked to what you can and cannot do within a university and the difficulty of effectively trying to run an NGO out of a university bureaucracy (Chamberlain / Wits).

Universities as collaborators: Legal aid, teaching / student research, networks

In this section the paper examines three forms of collaboration. These all attempt to develop relationships between universities and other human rights and social justice actors that seek to harness their complementary strengths (see Sigal, above).

First, the provision of legal aid and pro bono legal services by staff and students draw on various forms of collaboration. These services provide support for particular groups (students, activists and human rights defenders, refugees); draw on external partnerships with other universities and legal providers, NGOs and social movements (Chamberlain / Wits; Oomen / Roosevelt); and serve specific functions – for example, 'remedial protection' for defenders of human rights who have suffered attacks, 'making students and the legal community aware of things that may be happening in the dark' (Sigal / Buenos Aires), or 'attended the courts when students are detained to defend them, pro bono' (Trujillo Ariza / Venezuela). In such work, law schools and human rights centres explicitly act in partnership with others to support activism, and may be able to do work that is too dangerous for others to undertake.

A second form of collaboration is the incorporation of activism and activists into teaching and student research. Universities run courses that seek to integrate local and/or international activists. An example of the former is the Community Knowledge Learning Hub, University of Toronto Scarborough, which 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, small pots of money, and so on (von Lieres / University of Toronto Scarborough). Activist residence or protection programmes serve a similar function, often for international activists. As Anon (b) notes, involving students can provide not just invaluable support but also a layer of protection for sensitive work:

> *A good way of operating that we also do at ... [Makerere University] is to engage students, I think that is a good practice, it is one way of saying 'hey, this is teaching ground'. Yes, we are doing this work, yes, we are compiling a compendium of conflicts in Uganda. This is very sensitive information, it involves actions by the State, by individual generals... You do it by working in collation with others and also you engage with your students. So that is a good example of how we are trying to manoeuvre to protect our researchers and activists and trying to get the work done as an academic institute. (Anon (b))*

Courses incorporating activists and activism now take many forms. Law clinics (see above) can also provide a learning ground for students. As with law clinics, many other teaching and research opportunities engage students in problem solving for human rights causes. A further example of innovation is provided in Box 6 below:

Box 6: Human Rights Advocacy Internship, University of Dundee

The module Human Rights Advocacy Internship at the University of Dundee is a credit-bearing internship, run in collaboration with Scholars at Risk (SAR), an NGO advocating for academics and students at risk of or being targeted by their governments. SAR staff and the academic lead train the students to design and run an advocacy campaign and contribute to SAR's Scholars in Prison project. This training maps onto the module's academic content covering the political psychology of persuasion and political sociology of advocacy and transnational networks. The module was introduced as an undergraduate offering in Politics and International Relations, and in 2021-22 was offered as a joint programme to taught postgraduate students as well. An average of three student campaigns each year for a total of 12 individual at-risk scholars have been organised since the module was introduced.

Tangible campaign outputs have included two Early Day Motions submitted by a Dundee MP in the House of Commons in 2021 and 2022; the offer of scholarships by the University of Dundee to students at risk of being targeted by the Belarussian government for their human rights advocacy; and letters sent to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary calling for government action on cases being campaigned for.

Students benefit by gaining practical experience of running an advocacy campaign as well as developing skills in evaluation and critical reflection, and secure the practical and employability skills needed to work in teams and develop a professional code of conduct, write reports, engage with stakeholders, peers, and audiences, and deliver time-bound outputs. Students are assessed on their ability to critically reflect on their experience of running the campaign using the academic literature that they have been introduced to on the module. The module also helps engender a community of people in the university that are supportive of human rights.

SAR benefits from having additional voices amplifying their advocacy calls and sustaining a network of academics and students who add their ideas and creativity to the advocacy work being undertaken.

Edzia Carvalho, module convenor

Teaching initiatives serve to both take students out of the classroom as well as bring the outside world into the classroom – they blur the divide between these two worlds. Where activist programmes are challenged by or within universities, the strongest grounds for supporting them are innovation and student benefits, such as the acquisition of real-world experience and skills. Furthermore, by complementing academic knowledge with practical, real-world insights, they serve to pluralise and diversify knowledge and develop a critical pedagogy. Finally, it is worth noting that these ambitious collaborations come with challenges, which range from asking too much of activists, to 'unease' at the magnitude of the issues addressed, waning student commitment depending on the academic calendar, and the lack of student local and contextual knowledge (Oomen / Roosevelt).

A third and final example of collaboration is the role universities play in networks, and the potential and scale of university networks. In comparison to most NGOs, 'the network of universities is of course incredible... [they] are much bigger and have many more connections and possibilities and capacity' (Zwaan / Justice and Peace). Interviewees raised two main issues, the different kinds of networks to which universities belonged (university networks / networks with diverse members, informal / formal networks, and local / international networks), and the ways in which such networks add value to activist agendas (divisions of labour, pooling resources, responding collectively to events or individual cases, enhanced legitimacy). From the university perspective, there was a clear acknowledgement that 'universities cannot work in isolation... we need to link up and have strategic relationships with both local and international networks and mainstream NGOs, they need support and we (universities) need support' (Anon (b)) – in short, collaboration 'strengthens the work that we are doing' (Romero / Venezuela). Thus, the value of networks can derive from the diversity of their membership and the complementary activities conducted:

> *(In South Africa) there is also something which we call the Public Interest Law gathering, which is an annual gathering of everyone in the country involved in public interest law, so that is NGOs, it is social movements, community activists, legal practitioners and private practitioners, academics, students and so it is an annual thing that happens which is based in the university and organised primarily out of the university. (Chamberlain / Wits)*

> *(In Uganda) I will give you the example of X, was arrested, and the kind of support that we got from the international community and local civil society – [local civil society] issued a daily brief about what was transpiring and local partners monitored the situation... The international partners were important in mobilising funds quickly and getting the message out quickly... and highlighting the issue on different platforms. (Anon (b))*

Collaboration is important across universities as well. Formal networks of universities, such as the Open Society University Network, can work together to promote open societies, support scholars at risk, and build solidarity and resilience among smaller institutions in inhospitable political environments (Shtokvych /CEU).[18] Networks of departments and centres, such as coalitions of human rights centres in South Africa and Venezuela, undertake joint academic and advocacy activities, strategise collectively, and 'show solidarity to moan collectively' (Chamberlain / Wits, Romero / Venezuela).

Universities as Sites of Protection

This section covers the capacity of universities to protect political and democratic space (including the protection of ideas); people and organisations; and diverse forms of knowledge. The role of universities in protecting values such as academic freedom and social justice underpins these protective functions, and is discussed above. This paper argues that these protective functions are interlinked and interdependent, and that universities will have the strongest protection potential in human rights terms if they are active in all the spheres outlined below.

First, universities play an important role protecting political and democratic space. Universities can embed a commitment to these goals in their values and mission, for example foregrounding academic freedom and/or social justice, and implement the commitment through more concrete activities:

> *The Central European University is probably the only university in the world that has an Open Society mission written in its mission statement. (Shtokvych / CEU)*

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18 Other important networks include the Network of Arab Universities, Talloires Network, University for Peace in Costa Rica, and the Peace Research Institute in Oslo.

> *I do feel that our direct environment has become a little bit more open just because of our presence here as a university… We have been very closely involved in stimulating the municipality of Middelburg (in The Netherlands) to become a Human Rights City, and new policies are developed through human rights cities concerning refugees or persons with disabilities, this has had a tangible impact on the environment, obviously modestly so. (Oisman / Roosevelt)*

More specifically, universities can make particular and diverse contributions to holding open political space:

- Enhancing free speech, debate, and critical thinking. This takes various forms that can be placed under the umbrella of academic freedom: 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).

- Teaching and training the next generation 'so that people graduate with a sense of what the world looks like' and are sensitised to their 'political, economic and social context' (Chamberlain / Wits):

  > *Once they get here [students] are immersed in this atmosphere that puts expression, academic freedom at the top of the agenda, and that really encourages critical thinking, that brings together different cultures and disciplines into a conversation, often into a dialogue. I think that the Central European University has contributed to nurturing the new generation of people who are very acutely aware of the issues of inequality and justice and differences and conflict, who go on to contribute in various ways. (Shtokvych / CEU)[19]*

- 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 view-points (Anon (b)), 'valorises' people and causes (Brems / Ghent); enhances seriousness in public debate, providing evidence-based reasoning and linking the day to day with broader issues (Romero / Venezuela); and develops research skills and empowers people to themselves become researchers, thereby aiding activism and protection (Fildes / Dundee).

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

Second, universities provide protection for people and organisations. As noted above, protection is mainly provided for specific groups – academics, refugees, activists – and sometimes commitment to this kind of work is institutionalised, for example through accreditation as a University of Sanctuary. Echoing Eriksson's (2018) findings, the value-added by universities to such protection activities can be broken down as follows:

- Protection schemes: universities run fellowships, residencies and protection schemes for activists, as well as student access programmes for refugees. Universities act as both stand-alone hosts (CAHR) and partners in wider networks (ICORN, Shelter Cities).

- Protection through bureaucratic assistance: the large and powerful bureaucracies of universities can help address practical issues, for example securing visas (Dyvik / ICORN – we 'use' universities to get people in), and providing housing (Romero / Venezuela).

- Protection through visibility/affiliation: universities can offer visibility for activists, agendas and movements by creating a platform and amplifying their voices e.g. as public speakers at events

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19 See the discussion above on collaborations (legal aid and teaching).

or by publishing reports. Affiliation with a university can also provide a layer of protection, by 'appointing' activists and assigning a title to the appointment e.g. activists as educators (von Lieres / Scarborough, Toronto). Academics moving outside the university can also provide protection through visibility and affiliation, for example when academics are added to NGO Boards and Advisory Committees (Anon (b); Vaddhanaphuti / Chiang Mai). Recognition and legitimacy that comes with visibility and affiliation makes it harder to threaten activists and movements (Castellejo / Los Andes) – it increases the cost of attacks (Sigal / Buenos Aires).

- Protection by providing a protective space: universities can provide a multidimensional space that aids protection by being safer, more autonomous and independent, and 'broader', in the sense that it allows for critical distance and reflection. Respite and reflection are core components of the protection of people and organisations (Fildes / Dundee; Romero / Venezuela).

- Protection by building activist capacities: diverse activist capacities can be built within universities through training in research, legal advocacy, languages, etc. (Anon (e); Fildes / Dundee), and also through working collaboratively with staff and students in teaching programmes and research.

- Protection of organisations: Shtokvych highlighted the various hosting roles that a university can play when discussing the Central European University's activities during the recent crackdown on universities in Hungary:

  The Budapest University of Theatre and Film ... revolted as a whole institution, a large number of students and faculty did not accept the new Rector, and they set up the so-called Free University for Theatre and Film Association, they have no hope of getting it accredited in Hungary as a higher education institution so they registered as an association. But CEU [which had to move from Budapest to Vienna] ... provided all the resources for free, access to a state of the art library... classroom space, the students have free accommodation... We are providing free space to civil society organisations and host their events... [but] even providing free space and participating in anything that is educational is borderline for us to do... as the government is watching closely and may take further arbitrary punitive action against us. (also see Inotai, 2020)

- Protection through partnerships, collaboration and networks: as noted elsewhere in the Working Paper collaborations between universities and between universities and other actors can support activism, and provide protection, by connecting different protection providers, dividing tasks and responding collectively to events or individual cases. For example, in Shelter Cities, municipalities, CSOs and universities often host human rights defenders together (Oomen / Roosevelt; van Zwaan / Justice and Peace).

- Reframing protection: universities can support a move beyond a narrow reactive and physical approach to protection by helping to conceptualise and deliver something broader. Romero referred to a 'protection with prevention approach', which includes psycho-social and well-being support, as well as attention to resilience and sustainability. Another element of reframing relates to individual 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 relation to protecting local and diverse forms of knowledge, and in particular activist and indigenous knowledges, universities play two contradictory roles. First, universities contribute to legitimising certain forms of knowledge, and creating knowledge hierarchies. An elitism informs the view that 'we own the knowledge' while external communities 'have nothing to offer to us' (Anon (e)). In contrast, universities can play a second role, critically engaging with 'what forms of knowledge and what voices are given space and valued and how to shift that... who are the voices that the university promotes, when there are panel discussions, are there activists on them?' (Chamberlain / Wits). While many interviewees stressed the importance of diversifying knowledge, and that their university had

initiatives on decolonising the curricula and research, they also indicated that many of the initiatives felt tokenistic (Anon (e)) and constantly came up against competing values (student employability, attracting research funding) (Anon (c); Shtokvych / CEU). That said, there were also examples of good practice. Vaddhanaphuti (Chiang Mai) talked about the importance of promoting 'counter knowledge', and trying 'to open up the space for local people to speak up, to tell stories… so in that case it is part of the process of empowerment, it is a counter hegemony'. Support for local knowledge in Vaddhanaphuti's centre is integrated into teaching and research, and covers knowledge of the environment, and ethnic minorities and languages. In short: 'One of our protections is to protect this local knowledge that has been overshadowed by scientific knowledge, by formal education'.

Case Studies of Innovation and Good Practice

Three examples of innovation and good practice that are not addressed elsewhere in the Working Paper are discussed below: the role of academic centres, human rights policies for universities, and UNESCO Chairs and Networks.

Academic centres: Academic centres are different from departments. They are smaller, more nimble, less rule-bound and can to some extent operate 'off the radar' of university oversight and performance evaluation (Anon (c); Mills / Dundee). Many of those interviewed for this study who work in such centres, talked of centres as 'NGOs within the university', and an active meeting point or channel between the university and wider world. Activist centres often simultaneously seek invisibility and visibility. Centres may have a relatively low profile within their host university, but much higher visibility externally, with civil society, inter-governmental and other partners (Anon (c)). More political or activist work may be knowingly delegated to centres, as when 'silent agreements' exist between Human Rights Centres and Law Schools with each acknowledging the roles, potential and constraints of the other (Sigal / Buenos Aires), or when such centres serve as the 'activist arm' of a Law School, where action that requires some 'boldness' takes place (Anon (b)). Centre activist roles can be delegated or claimed. The Regional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai, is externally funded and as such can 'try to find some freedom' to do progressive work due to its 'relation of autonomy' from the university: 'We don't have to ask for permission… to do our activities'. But with this freedom comes vulnerability: 'So as long as we keep a low profile I think they may not do anything against us, by they I mean the university, but again, I do not know for sure. I have to be careful, the university will not protect me' (Vaddhanaphuti / Chiang Mai). Academic centres are likely to be the most receptive entry-points and partners for activist and protection initiatives, and the places where there is mutual recognition and shared priorities between civil society and universities (invisibility / visibility, boldness / vulnerability).

A human rights policy for universities: In 2017, Ghent University adopted a Human Rights Policy (Ghent University, 2017) that sought to set out its human rights responsibilities in relation to international activities, including both 'positive' responsibilities ('realising a positive impact on the enjoyment of human rights') and 'negative' responsibilities ('avoiding complicity in human rights violations').[20] The policy primarily focuses on negative responsibilities, namely that Ghent University avoids directly or indirectly contributing to or facilitating violations of human rights; does not benefit or profit from such violations; and denounces human rights violations encountered in its international activities. These commitments are institutionalised via human rights impact assessments (of activities and partners), and human rights clauses, which allow Ghent University to terminate cooperation

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20 As noted in footnote 14, the international legal responsibilities of universities are not clearly defined at present. As Ghent University is a public university, it is arguably part of the state and therefore bound by international human rights law. That said, as it stands the Ghent University policy is a voluntary document rather than one that is legally binding.

agreements if partners are found to be involved in serious violations of human rights. A Commission on Human Rights Policy was created to deliver on these positive and negative commitments. The policy has been extended to apply internally, within the university, as well as to international collaborations, and adopted by the umbrella organisation of Flemish universities (VLIR). Among the challenges facing the policy are ensuring awareness of it within the university and bridging the divide to implementation; gathering the relevant data; identifying when the university should cease a collaboration and for how long; and the risk that institutionalising human rights commitments neutralises or restricts their radicalism. It would be interesting to explore the potential of such policies to support positive actions relating to activism and protection, and to frame and monitor these as part of a university's human rights responsibility (Brems / Ghent; Brems, et al., 2019).

UNESCO Chairs and Networks: While many academics, centres and Law Schools work with the United Nations human rights machinery, such as the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, UNESCO Chairs and Networks (UNITWIN Networks) are also an important means of supporting activism and protection. UNESCO supports Chairs and Networks to enhance international inter-university cooperation and networking, and institutional capacities through knowledge sharing and collaborative work. Chairs and Networks focus on key priority areas related to UNESCO's fields of competence in education, culture and communication, and address pressing societal challenges. They often serve as bridgebuilders between academia, civil society, local communities, and policy-makers, and have proven useful in establishing partnerships and building capacities, shaping policy decisions and normative developments, establishing new teaching initiatives, and generating innovation through research. UNESCO does not fund Chairs and Networks, but provides networking and capacity building support. Of particular relevance to protection work are the UNESCO Chair in Media Freedom, Journalism Safety, and the Issue of Impunity at Sheffield (UK), which supports the implementation of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity,[21] and the UNESCO Chair in Cultural Policy for the Arts in Development, which supports the implementation of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (Gad, Hildesheim: Germany).[22]

Key Challenges to Activist and Protection Agendas

While this paper has focused mainly on the opportunities for universities to champion activism and protection, there are also challenges to delivering on such an agenda:

1. **Size, complexity and bureaucratic slowness:** While the scale and scope of university bureaucracies can support activist and protection work, they also create barriers. Different parts of universities can pull in different directions, operate in ignorance of one another, and push their own particular agendas. University bureaucracies are slow and risk averse (Chamberlain / Wits), creating a disincentive to do controversial or challenging work, while constraints on time and resources make 'living your values' difficult (Anon (c)).

2. **'Out-sourcing social justice work':** A number of interviewees suggested that activist agendas were championed by parts of any given university, rather than universities as a whole. They stated that progressive initiatives exist 'despite' the university not 'because of' the university (Chamberlain / Wits); talked of pursuing 'privatised concerns', having failed to secure wider institutional support (Oomen / Roosevelt); and referenced the challenge of human rights being seen as 'not necessarily

21 Draft UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity' Available at: *https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/un-plan-on-safety-journalists_en.pdf* (accessed 02/08/2022).

22 UNESCO (2005) 'Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions' Available at: *https://en.unesco.org/about-us/legal-affairs/convention-protection-and-promotion-diversity-cultural-expressions* (accessed 02/08/2022).

our core business' (Brems / Ghent). At its worst, commitments to social justice can feel like window dressing, where academics and projects are wheeled out for performances that universities stage for particular audiences and on specific occasions, but which are not backed by serious commitment and resources (Mills / Dundee).

3. **'Non-alignment' with academic priorities:** Activist and protection initiatives will be more sustainable and withstand questions about whether they are appropriately located within a university setting if they align with core academic priorities, especially research and teaching – such as when student learning is predicated on teaching from and research with activists. Activism and protection initiatives need to be presented and recognised as 'activist, but also excellent' (Anon (d)). However, there will always be a degree of non-alignment. For example, protective fellowship schemes require human and financial resources (Gad / Hildesheim; Anon (c)), and supportive 'scaffolding' that does not align with traditional academic roles or forms of expenditure (Anon (c); Fildes / Dundee).

4. **Gaps between values and implementation:** A further frequently encountered challenge is a gap between aspirations and reality:

   One of the big challenges that we have faced at Wits is a disconnect between the values espoused by the university, and the way those values don't manifest in its institutional culture, and so we have been grappling for many years with high levels of sexual harassment and racism, and that has been particularly difficult to navigate for black colleagues, women in particular, working at the university. (Chamberlain / Wits)

5. **Institutionalisation as dilution:** Progressive and political initiatives can be watered down, reduced to technical issues, through the process of institutionalisation, as often happens in processes of mainstreaming. While on the one hand university support is needed to scale up and standardise commitments, it can change the meaning of key terms and initiatives. For example, Vaddhanaphuti (Chiang Mai) talked about not using the term 'community engagement' because the university employed the term to mean 'university extension', staff and students solving problems in the community, not empowerment of or agency for the community (also see Boontinand, 2021).

6. **Universities as an open space vs. safe space:** The tension between the idea of the liberal university of ideas and the university as a safe space shapes the possibilities for activism, what counts as activism, and who and what requires protection.

   So, the willingness to always critically question one's assumptions, is also a key value...I do feel that a trend towards what once was political correctness and is now wokeness and the cancel culture, etc., does make it increasingly difficult to invite students to take the position of someone who is deeply religious and has difficulties with homosexuality or a white male who does not want foreigners in his street, etc. So, the combination of stimulating critical thinking, values pluralism and propagating human rights – I think they are all values, but they are values that often stand uneasily with each other. (Oomen / Roosevelt)

7. **Universities as a safe space vs. a space of protest:** Sometimes protection and activism can pull in different directions, with universities as the target and initiator of protests making them an unsafe and unprotected space for some. Providing safe spaces and protection is difficult where societal divisions are reproduced within universities (Castillejo / Los Andes; Anon (e)), and universities have to navigate complex and volatile contexts, such as a range of targeted restrictions, the criminalisation of protest and a complex humanitarian emergency in Venezuela (Romero / Venezuela).

8. **Avoiding controversy:** A further challenge is that universities step back from activism and protection when they are perceived to be too political and too adversarial in relation to the government, or clash with financial and other interests. For example, a Sri Lankan university set up a

legal aid unit in 2016 to help defend people who were in pre-trial detention, but it was closed by the faculty as it was seen as too political (Anon (a)). This is a particular problem for public universities which rely on the government for some level of financial support. Oomen (Roosevelt) also talked about universities backing off from activist agendas the moment it becomes difficult; while Vaddhanaphuti (Chiang Mai) stated that the university was not supportive of students and faculty members who protest against current government policy – 'they don't want the university to be the site of protest'.

9. **'State capture' of universities:** A number of interviewees discussed forms of 'state capture' or 'institutional capture', whereby university autonomy is eroded as the government assumes increasing control over internal decision-making within universities. Anon (b) cited various examples at Makerere University: students paying fees to the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA), with the university having to request funds from this Authority; membership of the Appointments Board being non-transparent, with over 50% of personnel coming from outside the university; attempts to control student leadership through the student Guild President and other leadership roles; and ethics approval for research going through a state-run institution. Shtokvych (CEU) described a similar dynamic in Hungary, where 'the entire education system is now being privatised… it is basically becoming corporatised by the ruling political party', which determines which programmes close, what kind of students are taught, and the role of conservative Christian values in their curricula. In Sri Lanka, the government has placed informants in the university at every level, and if academics speak out they face intimidation and harassment (Anon (a)).

At a macro level, the two main global challenges facing universities seeking to pursue a public facing, social justice-oriented agenda are from state interference with academic freedom and autonomy and market pressures, which prioritise individualism, competition, economic relevance and efficiency, performance targets, and privatisation as dominant values.

Conclusion and Action Points

As noted in the introduction, these are challenging times for universities. In this context, it may seem ambitious to call for an enhanced role for universities in activism and protection. There are four reasons why this Working Paper makes this call. 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 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. Third, 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 of formal university positions and policies to advocate for and collaborate with activists. Finally, this initial scoping research indicates the huge range of innovative activities which are already taking place in the fields of activism and protection. The research represents an initial attempt to document these innovations, and an invitation to share knowledge and disseminate good practices.

The Working Paper concludes with a set of action points, drawn from the paper and wider research. These action points are not a set of guidelines (setting out how universities should behave, or standards they should uphold), nor do they follow a traditional pattern in human rights of targeting the state e.g. focusing on the actions of the state, and developing a workable framework for monitoring repressive state practices against higher education institutions by stakeholders (ICNL, 2019). Rather, they represent a provisional attempt to set out a research, teaching and knowledge exchange agenda through which universities and civil society can forge thicker collaborations and support activism, protection and

ultimately a vibrant democracy. The action points represent a point of departure for a new UNESCO Chair, in the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space, based at the Centre for Applied Human Rights (CAHR), University of York, and held by one of the authors of this paper (Paul Gready), and for associated partners and networks. Such actions could include:

- 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 in a similar way 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 or resist 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,[23] 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 and support a move from a reactive 'protection from' to the more proactive and enabling 'protection to'.

- 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.

- Championing, documenting and sharing innovation and good practice in university support for activism and protection, for example further exploring the potential of academic centres, human rights policies, and UNESCO Chairs and Networks.

- Better understanding the challenges and constraints for universities, their staff and students as initiators of, and partners in, activist and protection agendas.

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23 Appe and Barragàn (2017: 482, 484) note that in Ecuador private universities are more likely to collaborate and have formal agreements with the development NGOs they interviewed.

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Appendix 1: Interviews

Anonymous academic (a). (2022), Interview with P. Cooper and E. Jackson on Zoom, 18th January, 2022.

Anonymous academic (b). (2021), Interview with P. Gready and P. Cooper on Zoom, 4th August 2021.

Anonymous academic (c). (2021), Interview with P. Gready and P. Cooper on Zoom, 5th August, 2021.

Anonymous academic (d). (2021), Interview with P. Gready and P. Cooper on Zoom, 2nd August, 2021.

Anonymous academic (e). (2021), Interview with E. Jackson and P. Cooper on Zoom, 16th August, 2021.

Binz, L. (2022), Scholars at Risk. Interview with P. Cooper and E. Jackson on Zoom, 27th January, 2022.

Brems, E. (2021), Ghent University, Interview with P. Gready and E. Jackson on Zoom, 29th July 2021.

Buabeng-Baidoo, J. (2021), University of Pretoria, Interview with P. Gready and P. Cooper on Zoom, 22nd November, 2021.

Castellejo, A. (2021), University of Los Andes. Interview with P. Cooper and P. Gready on Zoom, 15th September, 2021.

Chamberlain, L. (2021), University of Witwatersrand Johannesburg. Interview with P. Gready and E. Jackson on Zoom, 28th July, 2021.

Dyvik, E. (2021), ICORN. Interview with P. Gready and E. Jackson on Zoom, 8th November, 2021.

Gad, D. (2021), University of Hildesheim. Interview with Paul Gready and Pippa Cooper on Zoom, 17th September, 2021.

Mills, K. and Fildes, H. (2021), Dundee University. Interview with P. Gready and E. Jackson on Zoom, 5th August 2021.

Oomen, B. (2021), Utrecht University, University College Roosevelt. Interview with P. Gready and E. Jackson on Zoom, 28th July, 2021.

Romero, M. (2021), Centro para los Defensores y la Justicia. Interview with E. Jackson and P. Cooper on Zoom, 9th November, 2021.

Shtokvych, O. (2021), Central European University. Interview with E. Jackson and P. Cooper on Zoom, 18th October, 2021.

Sigal, M. (2021), University of Buenos Aires. Interviewed by Paul Gready and P. Cooper on Zoom, 5th October, 2021.

Trujillo Ariza, E. (2021), Universidad Católica Andrés Bello. Interview with E. Jackson and P. Cooper on Zoom, 8th November, 2021.

Vaddhanaphuti, C. (2021), Chiang Mai University. Interview with P. Greedy and P. Cooper on Zoom, 3rd August, 2021.

Van der Zwaan, S. (2021), Shelter City, Interview with P. Cooper and P. Gready on Zoom, 25th October, 2021.

Von Lieres, B. (2021), University of Toronto, Scarborough. Interview with Paul Gready on Zoom, 12th July, 2021.

Wordsworth, S. (2021), CARA. Interview with Paul Gready and Pippa Cooper on Zoom, 5th November, 2021.

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