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Gready, Paul and Jackson, Emma (2025) Universities unbound: Universities as sites of human rights activism and protection in an era of democratic crisis. Journal of Human Rights, 24 (1). pp. 57-73.

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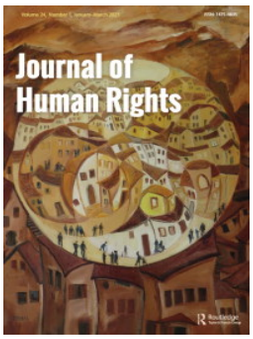

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Journal of Human Rights

ISSN: 1475-4835 (Print) 1475-4843 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjhr20

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To cite this article: Paul Gready & Emma Jackson (2025) Universities unbound: Universities as sites of human rights activism and protection in an era of democratic crisis, Journal of Human Rights, 24:1, 57-73, DOI: 10.1080/14754835.2024.2439262

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2024.2439262

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JOURNAL OF HUMAN RIGHTS
2025, VOL. 24, NO. 1, 57–73
https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2024.2439262

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Universities unbound: Universities as sites of human rights activism and protection in an era of democratic crisis

Paul Gready and Emma Jackson

University of York

ABSTRACT

This article champions the potential for universities to play an enhanced role supporting human rights activism and protection in the context of democratic crisis. The challenges such an agenda faces are significant. In addition to global trends such as democratic backsliding and shrinking civic and political space, universities themselves exhibit "two faces," as sites of violence and exclusion as well as of more progressive values, and are caught between the pincer movement of privatization and increasing state interference. However, universities often enjoy more autonomy than civil society groups. Drawing on core values such as academic freedom and social justice, and particular qualities—legitimacy, status, access to knowledge, resources, and local and global networks—universities have both the potential and the responsibility to act. The article identifies four roles universities can play in relation to activism and protection: instigators, incubators (of ideas, values, and organizations), collaborators, and protectors. Three forms of protection—of people, values, and knowledge—are interdependent, with activists more likely to feel protected if their values and knowledge are reflected within universities. Ultimately, if universities do not support others, who will be left to defend them when attacks intensify on universities themselves?

Introduction

Universities globally are facing acute challenges. These range from privatization to enhanced government scrutiny and "closing academic space" (International Center for Non-Profit Law, 2019). The wider political environment in which universities operate is characterized by a rise in populist politics, democratic backsliding, increased authoritarianism, and shrinking civic and political space. Against this backdrop, issues of risk and protection relating to activists and civil society and attacks on political and democratic space have garnered attention in the academy and from human rights practitioners (CIVICUS, 2022; Scholars at Risk (SAR), 2022). Universities are also facing more progressive challenges, to decolonize teaching and research and to be more inclusive and accessible. In this complex context, universities display "two faces" (Bush & 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 organizations and be subject to specific forms of state control and capture (Choudry & Vally, 2020a; International Center for Non-Profit Law, 2019). However, universities frequently have more political room for maneuver—or face less harsh repression—than activist counterparts.

The article starts by analyzing the values-base of universities. A commitment to academic freedom is widespread; a broader commitment to social justice is also prevalent. These values provide

CONTACT Paul Gready paul.gready@york.ac.uk Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York, York, UK.

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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 center of wider societal debates—for example, on when limits should be placed on freedom of expression. Other tensions strike at the core of what kinds of institutions universities should be—for example, 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 vocabulary 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* for potential partners.

The article moves on to look at the role of universities as sites of activism, exploring the role of universities as institutions, and of academics/staff and students. This discussion is particularly interested in the unique qualities universities can bring to bear in support of partners and in the service of progressive agendas (legitimacy, status, access to knowledge, resources, and local and global networks), which in turn help to explain the relative autonomy they enjoy in many parts of the world in comparison to civil society actors. From the literature and interviews the article 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 activists" (Lennox & Yıldız, 2020); (2) as incubators of ideas and values (such as citizenship and free speech) and organizations; (3) as collaborators and partners—for example, through legal aid clinics and other forms of applied pedagogy; and (4) as protectors of particular groups of people (activists, scholars, refugees), values, and diverse forms of knowledge (activist knowledge). This last function, protection, is then explored in more detail. A central argument of this article is that these three forms of protection—of people, values, and knowledge—are interdependent.

The research draws on 22 online interviews conducted with academics and practitioners in 2021 and 2022, from countries in the Global North and Global South. Interviewees were selected by a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling, drawing on the networks of the authors and the Center for Applied Human Rights, University of York.[1] As such, the sampling privileges those who are predisposed to be interested in university activism and protection. Some interviewees chose to remain anonymous; others asked to be named in the research. The interviews were semi-structured and analyzed for core themes, which were in turn aligned with themes from the literature review to structure the article.

Various shortcomings of universities, and this article, should be noted at the outset. Interviews were mainly conducted with academics working on human rights, development studies, or associated disciplines, leaving unaddressed the question of the roles other disciplines (the sciences, computer studies, and IT) could play in support of 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 and public universities, meaning there is work to be done to understand complex local higher education landscapes (public/private,[2] 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 activism? Furthermore, although the article 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 to maneuver of any given university is also defined by its local, national, and regional setting. All of this is to say that this article is the start of a conversation, not an endpoint; there remain gaps to fill and biases to correct.

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. Despite the deep and diverse challenges universities currently face, they have the potential, and the responsibility, to play a distinctive role in supporting activism and civil society and protecting democracy.

Scholarship on universities, values, activism, and protection

Values and language

This section 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, p. 565), argued that "values underpin all aspects of academic and university life." The challenge is that the values-base of universities is contested—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, ranging from privatization, new managerialism,[3] diversification, enhanced or continued government interference, to budget cuts. Alongside external pressures for change, internal campaigns have a values component; values can also be progressive or reactionary and restrictive.

The core value of universities has traditionally been academic freedom. This implies the freedom of academics to teach and research without risk of official interference or professional disadvantage, and for students to learn in a similarly open environment. As such, academic freedom is a core component of democracy and a vibrant public sphere, and includes the propagation of new ideas and controversial or unpopular views. 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.

A second value of relevance to this research that is prioritized by some universities is a commitment to social justice or social responsibility.[4] 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 et al., 2006, 13). A commitment to social justice or social responsibility 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 organizations at risk (Eriksson, 2018; Gourley, 2012; Tibbits & Keet, 2024). 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 et al., 2017, pp. 17–20). Second, like all progressive values, it can be reshaped and depoliticized as it is adopted within universities. Writing about Thailand, Boontinand (2023), for example, argued 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 nonpolitical participation and community service, rather than as championing critical inquiry or enabling students to engage with issues like human rights, justice, and democracy.

Value commitments are typically registered in university strategy and policy documents as well as in vision and mission statements (e.g., University of York's "university for the public good" or Ghent University's (2017) "socially committed 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. The #RhodesMustFall movement demonstrated that values have to be embedded in pedagogy, curriculum, and infrastructure to be realized by the student population (Oxlund, 2010). Value translation has to address the multiple roles and institutional complexity of universities (Gourley, 2012; Sharma & Sharma, 2015).

A final issue in this section relates to the language in which value commitments are framed. One human rights-related term adopted in this article, "protection," is seen as reactive, paternalistic, and even patronizing by some. The use of particular terms and frames can change the effectiveness of and response to university initiatives and activities. The term "sanctuary" has been widely used in relation to refugees, for example, in the United States during the Trump administration (Tierney et al., 2017) and within the University of Sanctuary movement.[5] In the United States, Tierney et al. (2017), suggested that concrete action to support refugees can be undermined by labels and designations that are either considered vague or produce a political backlash. Work on sexual violence usually employs terms that imply proactive (rather than reactive) responses and agency, such as prevention (Young & Maguire, 2003).

What this section indicates is that a set of values and language framings exist that allows universities to engage in activism and protection activities. However, these values and framings are not shared by all universities, face internal competition and critique, and do not always align with the values and framings of civil society partners and activists. As such, action 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 challenges universities are facing in advancing activist agendas, the unique identity universities have in terms of activism, and the autonomy or relative autonomy that universities can enjoy as an activist space. The discussion then moves on to consider four specific roles universities can play, as instigator, incubator, collaborator, and protector (the latter role is addressed in the next section).

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: (1) restrictions on universities as institutions, including legislative measures, interference in governance structures and leadership, financial cuts, and the control of staff hiring; (2) restrictions on academic freedom and activity, which span from curtailing freedom of expression (notably to criticize the government or on particular topics) and interference in teaching content and programs to the chilling effect a range of measures have on self-censorship; (3) restrictions on students, which include politicizing student-related decisions (admission, grading, funding) and a disproportionately harsh response to student activism; and (4) undermining university legitimacy by criminalizing academics, applying "foreign agent" or antiterrorism laws, and the securitization and militarization of campuses. 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. Many of these restrictions are similar to those used to target NGOs.

Turkey is an illustrative example. 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 neoliberal 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 more than 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 article (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 organizations, 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. University autonomy is usually applied both externally and internally, meaning universities can act in a variety of ways—as institutions, through departments or centers, driven by academics individually or in groups, via student mobilizations, and so on. These forms of autonomy can be used to increase the political cost of government oppression, making universities a valuable ally as well as a potential source of protection.

It is useful to categorize the roles universities can play in activism as follows: instigator, incubator, collaborator, and protector. Universities have a long history of instigating activism, highlighting injustices and inequalities, and being at the heart of protest and social movements. Historical examples include the 1960 Greensboro sit-in in the United States, the anti-apartheid student protests of the 1970s and 1980s in South Africa, and the Tiananmen Square protests in China and the role of students in the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, both in 1989 (Hall et al., 2013; also Choudry & Vally, 2020a). Students as "unruly subjects" have often led such protests (Boren, 2001). Although recent student movements in places such as Iran, Chile, Hong Kong, and South Africa were sparked by issues internal to universities, they also spoke to wider societal challenges and gained traction outside of the academy.[6]

Such student activism has particular qualities based on the short-term tenure of students at universities. The short tenure of students at universities makes student activism ephemeral and fleeting—a conveyor belt that any succeeding cohort can step off of, making "usable histories" of activism and intergenerational learning difficult to gather (Choudry & Vally, 2020b, p. 2). But it also renders such activism generative, uniquely unbound by established codes and structures of activism—for example, 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. Global movements of students enable extraterritorial or diaspora activism that can focus on the home country and/or issues of global concern (Zeilig & Ansell, 2008). It is also important to note that not all student activism is progressive.

"Scholar activism" involves working toward social change through academic activities, including teaching and research. Situating scholar activism at the heart of the complex value base of neoliberal universities, Richter et al. (2020) used the term "tempered radicals" (see Meyerson & 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-activism, the academia-civil society, internal-external concerns, and individual achievement—a collaborative ethos. Other scholarship associates scholar activism with creating new forms of knowledge production, prioritizing the knowledge of lived and marginalized experience (Lennox & Yıldız, 2020), and seeking

to make more visible the role of scholar activists from the South (Freire, Borda) as pioneers in community based research (Gutberlet et al., 2014). The academic activity of scholar activists varies enormously, ranging from "resourcing activism" (Derickson & Routledge, 2015)—for example, by using time, technology, space, and expertise to advance the agendas of external collaborators—to creating organizations and delivering activist outputs, such as human rights reports (Hoole, 2009, p. 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 incubators of ideas and movements. In conflict settings, for example, universities can both reproduce and even accentuate the divides within the society, or they can model and, in a sense, prefigure a more inclusive future. In the former category, Russell (2022) described 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 postconflict peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and transitional justice (Millican, 2017; Milton & Barakat, 2016). Similarly, universities were crucial drivers for independence movements in many parts of the world, 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.

Queens University Belfast provides an example and framing of a university as an incubator across these three settings. While acknowledging its complex current value base and past history, Brewer (2017) argued that Queens University evolved to become a zone of civility (Kaldor, 1999) in the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process. By this he meant 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 counterlogics to war by establishing settings in which the rule of law and political consent trump violence as a way of organizing 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 to expand their horizons to a world beyond the conflict; conducting research on the conflict that generated local and comparative knowledge as well as "soft skills" for students on collaboration and inclusion; incubating the Catholic middle class and hence the local civil rights movement; and modeling a new inclusive society through its own structures and policies, notably gender equality (Brewer, 2017).

Both within and beyond conflict settings, where sufficient autonomy exists, universities can serve as incubators for organizations 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, p. 145) noted, "Universities are part of society … 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 research collaborations with external activist groups meaningful requires that they incorporate the priorities and questions of external stakeholders, coproducing responses and challenging barriers to participation in research and activism (Derickson & 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. Extensive scholarship exists on how to make research collaborations fair and equitable (Leach et al., 2016; Rethinking Research Collaborative, 2018; Stevens et al., 2013), and on the forms such collaborations should take—for example, 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 & Bohlin, 2005, p. 2). At a macro-level, collaborations can help universities navigate the complex environments within which they are located—for example, in relation to different political environments, cultures, values, and religions (Gourley, 2012).

Although 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, or 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 article analyzes universities as sites of protection, and specifically addresses the protection of people at risk (activists, human rights defenders, etc.) and the protection of diverse forms of knowledge—with a focus on activist knowledge. The protection of values, the third field of protection, is addressed above. A central argument of this article 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 formalization 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, n.d.). Currently across the globe, HRDs face a myriad of challenges, including freezing of bank accounts, physical abuse, criminalization, 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 organizations ranging from grassroots organizations to international NGOs—but increasingly they 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 refugees and academics at risk in conjunction with partners such as Scholars at Risk (SAR), and the Council for At Risk Academics (CARA; see Eriksson, 2018).

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

> During the repressive years leading up to 1994 [in South Africa] … the [University of KwaZulu Natal] gave shelter to a whole range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) whose work in various social causes was frowned upon by the apartheid government. At one time 84 different NGOs had their headquarters on one or other of its campuses. (Gourley, 2012, p. 33)

The protection of different forms of knowledge is a further field in which universities can and should play an important role. This section will conclude by discussing the role universities can play in diversifying and decolonizing knowledge in relation to one specific form of knowledge traditionally devalued by universities: activist knowledge.

Activist knowledge refers to experience-based knowledge originating from activists, including community groups, NGOs, women's groups, trade unions, and grassroots associations (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993). Whereas activist knowledge is based on lived experience, "official" knowledge

draws on expert research and insights (Funtowicz & 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 and subject areas (e.g., gender studies, social movement studies, and development) than others, where the value assigned to a continual cycle of learning in action occurring during long-term campaigns, short-term mobilizations, and daily struggles is more accepted (Choudry & Vally, 2020b). Although it is important not to romanticize 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 (Choudry & Vally, 2020b; Vally et al., 2013).

The challenges facing the protection of activist knowledges to some extent mirror those facing university–civil society collaborations more generally. For example, academics may invite participation but resist the undoing of conventional research hierarchies (Marker, 2019). 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 institutionalized and ossified by universities (Briggs & Sharp, 2004). Activist knowledge needs to be understood by universities as a source of internal reflection, contextual recalibration, and transformative change. Although 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 marginalized or oppressed are more likely to feel protected if their experiences and worldviews are reflected in the values and knowledges provided by host universities. Similarly, support for academic freedom and decolonization agendas will be given substance by the incorporation of people who articulate different experiences and worldviews.

Empirical data on universities, values, activism, and protection

The main discussion of empirical data 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 they can also pull in different directions—for example, if the latter constrains the diversity of research undertaken and knowledge recognized 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 defense of academic freedom (Dyvik/ICORN; Wordsworth/CARA).

Social justice as a core value was interpreted differently depending on a range of variables (public/private university, political context, etc.). Framings for social justice included assertions that universities are "socially committed" (Brems/Ghent), free to access for students (Sigal/Buenos Aires), and so on. In particular political contexts, such as transitions to democracy, universities

and university programs 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 acknowledgment that the values of universities are multiple and sometimes contradictory or unclear (Chamberlain/Wits). Sigal referred to the values base as "plural" (Buenos Aires), whereas Mills used the term "variable" (Dundee). At times values can clash, such as when neoliberal pressures and priorities coexist 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 make consistency difficult and feed 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 (Anon (d); Castillejo/Los Andes).

Values also change over time, informed by wider societal and political change. Universities often have complex histories. Note how Anon (b) discussed the evolving interface between Makerere University and Uganda: "The university was always seen as that place that was different, non-conformist … very strong political candidates for democracy emerged from Makerere University," whereas now "somehow it is no longer predictable that the university is going to be that center of struggle and energy … there is so much towing of the line."

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, Brems et al., 2019), or when planning and strategy documents explicitly reference human rights—for example, an institutional development plan based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Anon (e)).[7] 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). Finally, few universities use the term "protection" as part of their everyday discourse.[8] Castillejo (Los Andes) stated that protection is not part of our "daily" or "institutional conversation," whereas 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. Protection was criticized 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 certain circumstances, such as protection of students on campus or during protests (Baubeng-Baidoo/Pretoria).

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). Progressive work can be pursued through alignment with academic priorities and terms that push for internal change or external engagement. These include buzzwords like knowledge exchange, impact,

internationalization, sustainability, access and inclusion, safeguarding (safety, security, well-being), and decolonization (Anon (c); Gad/Hildesheim; Oomen/Roosevelt; Shtokvych/CEU; Vaddhanaphuti/Chiang Mai). A significant number of universities are now committed to the Sustainable Development Goals, which, although often interpreted through an environmental lens, do provide some opportunities for work on human rights and protection. For example, SDG 4 on quality education and SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions.

Dyvik (ICORN) provided an excellent check list for NGOs seeking to align their work with university priorities: (1) Find a person/center/department who is interested; (2) be prepared to work with the university, don't try to change it; (3) learn what the university needs from other partners in order to engage; (4) understand and follow their academic lead, priorities, and standards; (5) don't think they are an NGO; and (6) burden share, if collaborators are afraid of the risks (financial, reputational). For those working within universities, such activities also need to be made "legible." 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."

One important conclusion from this analysis is that careful consideration of language, values, and ethics is multidirectional. 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 in turn feed into university capacities to perform the four activist-related roles: instigator, incubator, collaborator, and protector (the latter role is addressed in the next section).

Interviewees confirmed that universities, although themselves often under threat, usually enjoy greater autonomy than civil society organizations in oppressive contexts to hold open activist space. Anon (b), for example, painted a complex picture in which her university, although subject to increasing "state capture" and interference, retained the capacity to "go around" repressive measures, providing a place where it is still possible to "talk about different issues … where you will be given space to work, to sit, to think."

Another interviewee described the potential for universities to legitimize causes and organizations, reducing the "temperature," "buying time," and providing "space" for activism to continue to breathe (Shtokvych/CEU). A third interviewee underlined the complementary roles universities and civil society organizations can play, with each separately having important strengths and weaknesses, but collaboratively having the potential to create a "third space" for activism: "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" (Sigal/Buenos Aires).

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 as well as targeted measures, 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. 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 center 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 as "unruly subjects" 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. (Anon (b))

Academics also gave examples of navigating and negotiating forms of activism and protest that acknowledged universities as complex institutions, and their roles as "tempered radicals" (Richter et al., 2020). Among the fault lines of complexity are the fact that universities often are simultaneously where protest originates and (at least in part) the target of the protests—for example, in South Africa during the #FeesMustFall protests (Chamberlain/Wits)—and the challenge of adopting an advocacy position for large and plural institutions.

> The university is plural, so it is very hard to have one unified voice for the university going outwards. … So, if I go out and speak in favor 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. … [T]his 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)[9]

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

As noted in the literature review, universities can serve as incubators of ideas and organizations 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 article. Some departments and centers articulate these values through support for specific organizations. For example, a complex set of relationships exist between the Center for Applied Legal Studies (CALS) at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa and civil society groups. Although CALS continues to host certain initiatives and networks—for example, the Right2Protest collaborative project—it has served as an incubator of organizations that are now independent entities (Chamberlain/Wits).[10] The Refugee Law Project has also been incubated by being legally registered at the Department of Law, Makerere University, in Uganda, notably to support the organization's reopening after it was closed down for its work on LGBT rights (Anon (b)). Finally, the work of the Regional Center 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.

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

Universities can offer important support for organizations (e.g., human and financial resources, legal advice). They can also provide an environment that organizations outgrow. The "drivers of departure" that lead organizations to leave their academic host range from personal disagreements to practical challenges—for example, 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 and teaching-research

In this section, the article examines two forms of collaboration that attempt to develop relationships between universities and human rights and social justice actors, with the aim of harnessing 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, "making students and the legal community aware of things that may be happening in the dark" (Sigal/Buenos). In such work, law schools and human rights centers explicitly act in partnership with others to support activism, and may be able to do work that is too dangerous for civil society organizations to undertake.

A second example 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 at the University of Toronto Scarborough, which is a collaboration between Health Sciences, Development Studies, and three partner organizations working with marginalized communities in Toronto. The "Community Leaders as Educators" program 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 programs serve a similar function, often for international activists. As Anon (b) noted, 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.' … [W]e 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 collaboration … you engage with your students. So that is a good example of how we are trying to maneuver to protect our researchers and activists and trying to get the work done as an academic institute. (Anon (b))

Research and teaching incorporating activists and activism now take many forms. As with law clinics, many other examples engage students in problem-solving for human rights causes. These initiatives serve both to take students out of the classroom and to bring the outside world into the classroom—they blur the divide between these two worlds. 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).

Universities as sites of protection

This section covers the capacity of universities to protect political and democratic space (including the protection of ideas and values), people and organizations, and diverse forms of

knowledge. It is important to note at the outset that the two keywords of this article may clash, with activism and protest leading to campuses feeling like unsafe spaces for some people, ideas, organizations, and forms of knowledge.

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: "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).

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

- First, by enhancing free speech, debate, and critical thinking. This takes various forms: protecting "the capacity to say what you think" and space for debate (Castellejo/Los Andes); providing an environment in which conversations can be had about difficult issues (Baubeng-Baidoo/Pretoria); and "organizing encounters" between people and ideas that would not ordinarily happen (Oomen/Roosevelt).
- Second, by teaching and training the next generation "so that people graduate with a sense of what that world looks like" and are sensitized to their "political, economic, and social context" (Chamberlain/Wits, also Shtokvych/CEU).[11]
- Third, by adding intellectual credibility and legitimacy to activist arguments and causes through the multifaceted support that can be provided through research (Brems/Ghent). Labeling something "research" provides a form of protection for ideas and viewpoints (Anon (b)); "valorizes" 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).
- Finally, by influencing policy and regulatory frameworks, by "taking the microphone" and giving legitimacy to certain advocacy and policy agendas (Chamberlain/Wits; Sigal/Buenos Aires).

In addition to protecting political and democratic space, universities provide protection for people and organizations. As noted above, protection is mainly provided for specific groups—academics, refugees, activists—and sometimes commitment to this kind of work is institutionalized, for example, through accreditation as a University of Sanctuary. Echoing Eriksson's (2018) findings, universities both run and collaborate in protection programs—fellowships, residencies, and protection schemes—as well as bringing particular strengths to protection in general: bureaucratic assistance with securing visas (Dyvik/ICORN: "we 'use' universities to get people in") and providing housing (Romero/Venezuela); visibility and affiliation—for example, by "appointing" activists and assigning a title to the appointment (e.g., activists as educators; von Lieres/Scarborough, Toronto); and building activist capacities through training in research, legal advocacy, languages, and networking (Anon (e); Fildes/Dundee; van Zwaan/Justice and Peace), and also through working collaboratively with staff and students in teaching programs and research. Romero/Venezuela advocated a "protection with prevention approach," which includes psycho-social and well-being support, as well as attention to resilience and sustainability. An important element of reframing relates to individual activists whose identity can be shifted—for example, from HRD to educator or fellow, or 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 knowledges, universities can critically engage 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). Although many interviewees stressed the importance of diversifying knowledge, and that their university

had initiatives on decolonizing 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." In short, "One of our protections is to protect this local knowledge that has been overshadowed by scientific knowledge, by formal education" (Vaddhanaphuti).

Conclusion

As noted in the introduction, these are challenging times for universities. At the fore are the two main interlinked challenges that universities are facing globally—namely, privatization and the various performance and evaluative metrics that come with a market orientation, on the one hand (individualism, competition, economic relevance and efficiency, performance targets), and increased state interference—"state capture"—on the other, with governments increasingly wanting to erode academic freedom and autonomy by controlling decision making (Anon (a); Anon (b); Shtokvych, CEU).

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

Notes

1. The authors of this article are based at the Centre for Applied Human Rights (CAHR), University of York, which has hosted more than 100 Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) since 2008 on a Protective Fellowship Scheme for human rights defenders at risk. From 2023, this scheme and associated research and knowledge exchange have been supported by a UNESCO Chair, hosted at CAHR and held by one of the authors of this article (Paul Gready), on the theme of Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space. This article was researched and written to shape the agenda of the UNESCO Chair.
2. Private universities take different forms but are often less likely to be supportive of human rights due to their business orientation. Greater autonomy from the state, however, can also provide such universities with more "space" to engage in activism and protection activities. For example, universities in the Latin America Network of Jesuit Universities have recently hosted academics and students from Nicaragua and Venezuela, provided economic support and access to academic databases at discounted rates for universities in these countries, and campaigned to draw attention to violations of human rights and academic freedom.
3. 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.).
4. Appe et al. (2017) argued that the concept of social responsibility attempts to combine the strengths of the market and social justice.

5. On Universities of Sanctuary, see https://universities.cityofsanctuary.org/ (accessed on 14/02/2023).
6. Labor and student unions have also been important in activism addressing internal, university concerns such as pay and pay inequalities (gender, race), precarious contracts, casualization of labor, and related issues (Woodcock, 2020).
7. A further reason that human rights is poorly understood may be that the role and responsibilities of universities in implementing human rights are not well defined (Zwaan/Justice and Peace).
8. Anon (c); Brems/Ghent; Chamberlain/Wits; Castillejo/Los Andes; Mills/Dundee; Oomen/Roosevelt; Shtokvyth/CEU; Sigal/Buenos Aires; Vaddhanaphuti/Chiang Mai.
9. There are clearly other fault lines—for example, the human rights challenges that come with internationalization and the different spatial site of universities, for example, New York University (NYU) has global sites in Abu Dhabi and several in China (Anon (d)).
10. These include the law firm Cheadle, Thompson and Haysom, while 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).
11. See the discussion on collaborations (legal aid and teaching-research).

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Pippa Cooper for her help in conducting some of the interviews. Invaluable comments on an early draft were provided by Fiona Anciano, Jan Boontinand, Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar, Pippa Cooper, Tine Destrooper, Sanna Eriksson, Ruth Kelly, Masha Lisitsyna, and David Maughan Brown. This article was originally published as a longer Working Paper: P. Gready and E. Jackson, Universities as Sites of Activism and Protection, Working Paper 14, Human Rights Defender Hub, University of York, February 2023.

Funding

The article was supported by funding from the Open Society Foundations.

Notes on contributors

Paul Gready is professor of human rights and codirector of the Center for Applied Human Rights (CAHR) at the University of York. He is a coeditor of *Journal of Human Rights Practice* and currently holds the UNESCO Chair in the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space, based at CAHR.

Emma Jackson is a research associate at the Center for Applied Human Rights, University of York, whose work explores the role of higher education in protection. She is the student representative for the British Association for International Comparative Education (BAICE) and is an associate lecturer at the Open University, teaching international comparative education.

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