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Developing a minifesta for effective academic-activist collaboration in the context of the climate emergency

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Justice-oriented climate activism is proliferating. Many scholars aspire to deliver research that supports activism. However, measures of impact for research evaluation and funding purposes place little weight on the use of research by activists. Here we consider how academics and academia might effectively support and enable climate activism. We report outcomes from a series of online deliberative workshops involving both activists and academics from several European countries. The workshops were facilitated to create space for discussion, sharing of experiences and the development of proposals for the future. The outcomes take the form of a set of principles (a “minifesta”) for academic-activist engagement generated by the group. In discussing the process and outputs, we argue that a focus on inclusion can support politically transformative change of the scale and urgency required. We suggest that this also demands a shift in attitudes toward the role of activism and activists in collaborative processes. We further discuss the inevitable incompleteness of this process, arguing that incompleteness is, itself, a feature of inclusive engagement. We conclude that scholars working on climate issues in any discipline could benefit from increasing mutually supportive collaboration with activists; and that such collaboration and inclusion could help liberate democracy from authoritarian tendencies and market influences. Collaborative engagements generate legitimate, rich, and impactful outcomes even with the limitations posed by COVID19. We, therefore, commend both the model of engagement and the principles it generated for our colleagues and peers.

KEYWORDS

climate justice, climate activism, minifesta, academic responsibilities, deliberative engagement, academic-activist collaboration, democracy

Introduction

“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor” (Desmond Tutu).

Recent years have been marked by a multiplication of justice-oriented climate activism across much of the world. Fridays for the Future and school strikes have spread widely amongst youth. Green New Deals have provided a focus for action in several countries. And Extinction Rebellion (XR) and other activist groups have brought direct action to the fore, with multiple high-profile (and often contentious) interventions, in many European countries. Their demands for immediate action have, as typified by XR, been matched with a concern for scientific honesty, a call for truth-telling about the scale and nature of the challenge. Yet this activism has been met with continued political resistance, and in several countries, by moves to suppress and criminalize it.¹ Dunja Mijatović, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, has called for elevated social dialog to turn back this repressive tide (Mijatović, 2023).

The sense that political leaders have failed to “tell the truth” about climate change and thus delayed and prevaricated on real action toward climate justice is shared by many academics, even those who may not sympathize with the tactics of climate activists (Hagedorn et al., 2019). Climate justice activism, however, poses challenges for scholars who, beyond engaging with truth-telling, may take a more patient approach to climate action.

Some academics have been themselves wrestling with the challenge of what constitutes an adequate response to the climate breakdown and what kind of activism is needed and justifiable. How can academics and academia effectively support and enable climate activism? Rather than turning to academic studies of activism (de Moor et al., 2021; Fisher and Nasrin, 2021; Pohlmann et al., 2021) we sought to engage with activists to deliberately explore how academia could best work with climate activism, drawing on lessons of deliberative participation (Fiorino, 1990; Stirling, 2008; Chilvers and Kearnes, 2019; Willis et al., 2022).

Our hypothesis – following these scholars of participation and deliberation – was that by making space for deliberation in a mixed group of activists and academics, new knowledge could be created which might facilitate future productive collaboration, helping overcome some of the barriers and obstacles currently preventing it. We convened a series of deliberative workshops involving both activists and academics from several European countries (mainly the

United Kingdom and France)² to create space for discussion, sharing of experiences and the development of proposals for the future. This short paper revisits the experience and the context for our work, then reports the process used and the set of principles for academic-activist engagement that the group generated. Subsequently, it reports some of the activities undertaken by participants to further effective activist-academic collaboration, and reflects on some of the issues raised in these principles, and the discussions around them.

Context

In addition to the context set by the demands of contemporary activists, it is important to outline several contextual factors which motivated this intervention. First, the convenors shared a sense that there is significant tension regarding academic-activist relations, a lack of communication, and even widespread distrust on both parts. In preliminary discussions with activists and academics, the lead author heard repeatedly that, for example, activists “do not respect academic objectivity”, while “academics just use activists for their research” in exploitative and extractive ways.

Although many academics express aspirations to deliver research that benefits activism, academic incentives do not necessarily support such outputs. The academy has long privileged an abstract rationalist pursuit of knowledge over active engagement with publics to promote action on global problems (Maxwell, 2021). In most countries and academic institutions the dominant orientation of incentives is to focus on academic impact through frequent and well-cited publications, and in addition to undertake research that leads to commercial applications in industry, or serves the directly expressed interests of policymakers. Measures of impact for research funding purposes place little weight on the use of research by activists, and while interest or involvement by non-governmental organizations can be helpful in soliciting funding, it is relatively rare for the needs of environmental activists or campaigners to lead research choices. This is in stark contrast to the growing involvement of publics in *conducting citizen science projects* on environmental matters (see, e.g., Shirk et al., 2012), and the established norm of patient involvement in setting goals for *health research* (Price et al., 2018; Greenhalgh et al., 2019).

These form part of wider moves toward public engagement in both politics and academia, reflecting all the motivations identified by Fiorino (1990): that public engagement is normatively the right thing to do, that it can substantively improve outputs and can lend greater legitimacy to the process. Many academics engage in public

¹ See recent news reports on human rights concerns, for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/oct/12/human-rights-experts-warn-against-european-crackdown-on-climate-protesters>

² Academics understood as professional researchers and educators in higher educational institutions; activists as typically voluntary (but including workers at non-profit organizations) campaigning and mobilizing for political or social change.

engagement and communication efforts, some even exhausting themselves in already busy schedules by moving beyond their comfort zones. A prominent example of public engagement drawing on academic inputs in climate politics has been the convening of climate assemblies in countries such as the United Kingdom and France that have enabled diverse publics to discuss climate science and policy (Smith, 2022; Willis et al., 2022; Smith, 2023). Public participation and deliberative engagement have become key research tools in many spaces, including climate and energy topics (Whitmarsh et al., 2013; Pidgeon et al., 2014; Pallett et al., 2019). These trends have also generated process innovation and reflexive questioning about the extractive tendencies of scientific practice (Chilvers and Kearnes, 2019; Willis et al., 2022), and the development of good practice guides (National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 2020; OECD, 2021). The “EDGE” tool (National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 2020), for example, focuses on the institutional level and how institutions might support more and better public communication and engagement.

This body of research, however, has paid little attention to the voices of citizen activists in exploring the relationship between academia and activism. Since knowledge production involves power differentials, a balanced evaluation of the relationship between academia and activism requires redressing those differentials by directly challenging the epistemic privilege held by academics. At the same time, we believe citizen activists could benefit from a broad recognition of the multiple roles that academics can play in activism. Their role is too often reduced to “providing guidance” yet many academics have a nuanced perspective on the deployment of scientific knowledge that challenges simplistic assumptions of objectivity, neutrality and a linear relationship between science and policy (Bluwstein et al., 2021). This paper articulates some of the terms of such a nuanced perspective on the dynamic relationship between academia and activism.

Methods and process

In May 2021 we convened three half-day deliberative virtual sessions for activists and academics working on climate concerns, largely based in the United Kingdom and France, as part of a networking project funded by the French National Scientific Research Centre (CNRS). Participants were recruited through a snowball technique beginning with contacts of the organizers, and through advertisement of the sessions on social media. Those interested in participating were requested to hold the dates, commit to attending all of the sessions if possible, and to put forward suggestions regarding experiences of collaboration they would be prepared to present. Twenty-four people attended one or more sessions. Outside of the convenors, ten participants were primarily academics, and nine primarily activists, although several of the latter also held, or had previously held academic positions. The activists involved experienced more practical difficulties in participating fully. As a result the outcomes of the process were directed primarily at academics, and this paper – led by academic writers – focuses on academic responsibilities and possibilities. During the sessions we heard and discussed nine short presentations about experience with collaboration. With the support of a paid professional facilitator, the convenors formulated the detailed agenda for each session in a reflexive and iterative process

using feedback and input from the participants. The opening session was dedicated to surfacing and exploring presuppositions held by participants, or more broadly attributed to the groups involved. The second session focused on identifying principles for good practice in collaborative working, rooted in dialogic consideration of arguments that might be posed against such activities. An aspiration to produce a declarative document was introduced by the convenors as a desirable output from the sessions, and endorsed by the group, with the description and orientation of the product as a “minifesta” (Padan et al., 2020) being a direct product of the discussion. The third session focused on the drafting of the minifesta, as a reflection of the group learning and an expression of the principles for effective collaboration revealed in examination of the experiences presented by participants.

An outline account of the deliberative methods used in the workshop sessions is provided in Box 1.

A minifesta is a collective statement from a group that recognizes its incompleteness, and that actively seeks to represent diversity and provisionality – as a temporary and situated stage in a larger process of recognition and change (Padan et al., 2020). A “minifesta” provides an alternative to a grand manifesto statement in two ways: first, by being “mini-” instead of “mani-” a minifesta recognizes that theorization is useful for activism, but the kind of minor theorizing that, instead of universal generalizations provides grounded observations for the world around us (Katz, 1996). If a manifesto in its linguistic origins strives to bring to the fore *the obvious*, a minifesta reflects on the lack of clarity about the realities of action. Moreover a minifesta is provocatively feminine, because it is constructed from a feminist engagement with the situated and plural nature of knowledge (Haraway, 1988).

The text shared below (Outcomes and Results) was generated in draft form in the workshops in both small group and plenary sessions, and subsequently collectively further refined as a living document.

Rather than striving for representativeness of a complex heterogeneous academic world, our discussions aimed to focus on the importance of particular experience as a means to redefine academic practice. Our outreach and recruitment targeted academics and activists with experience of working together. The discussion raised, however, concerning insights about presumptions, incentives and structures prevalent in academia that place obstacles in the way of effective collaboration. In the next section we report the “principles” produced by the group for effective collaboration that might overcome such obstacles.

Outcomes and results

The text in this section consists of a set of 11 principles with a short preamble and afterword, generated in the workshop process and subsequent collective editing. This was the agreed, co-produced outcome of the deliberative process, reflecting an emerging consensus amongst the group about critical steps to support effective collaboration. As participants, we discovered a shared consciousness that current ways of engaging and modes of expression on each side face limits. While some of those limits can be overcome through more collaboration, others may be inherent to the operation of separate realms of action. In suggesting this text as a product of consensus we do not intend to indicate that every participant had experienced all the issues covered, rather that these represent the collective

Box 1: Deliberating on academic-activist collaboration.

Each of the three sessions was scheduled for approximately 4 h, and took place in three consecutive weeks. Each session was followed by a debrief meeting between the convenors and the facilitator, to consider participant feedback, and finalize the brief for the following session.

Session 1 began with an ice-breaker exercise, surfacing motivations and expectations, compiled into an online profile wall (using online whiteboard software). The convenors then presented a summary of a short online survey completed by participants, which reviewed experience with and motivations for engagement activities. The session continued with mapping of engagement experiences and discussion of three examples presented by participants. Initial views on good practice, poor practice, barriers and spaces for improvement regarding engagement activities were compiled on the shared whiteboard. We then broke into smaller groups to “trade places” between activists and academics and try to surface barriers to engagement and collaboration. Before closing the session, participants were invited to share initial learning and identify aspirations for future session content.

The whiteboard, and recordings of the experience presentations remained accessible to participants between sessions, enabling reflection, annotation and feedback on content, and process.

Session 2 continued with the mapping of engagement experiences, with four further 10 min presentations from participants. These were followed by group discussion. The group then divided into pairs to identify and seek to rebut, arguments against engaged research; these arguments and rebuttals were compiled on the whiteboard. After feedback and reflection on the previous exercise, we broke into groups of four to compile proposed principles for successful collaborative working. In the following plenary discussion the proposed “output” – some kind of group opinion paper – solidified into the idea of a minifesta.

Between sessions 2 and 3 participants were encouraged to access the whiteboard, to comment on the text, and rank the principles involved.

Session 3 began with two final sharing experience presentations, followed by small group discussion focused on common themes emerging from the experiences, and obstacles to effective engagement that had not already been surfaced. Following a prioritization exercise on the draft principles, the group subdivided again to work on detailed drafting. Here participants drew on the previously compiled learnings and best practices, alongside the record of arguments and rebuttals as well as the initial text of principles. Text was collectively drafted and edited directly on the shared whiteboard, allowing the group to elucidate a series of principles defining and advocating productive engagement and the conditions, learning and support it requires. Before closing, participants were given a further opportunity to reflect on the process, their hopes for its development, and what they would take away from it.

A further round of editing and text revision was undertaken using the whiteboard, coordinated through email, to produce the agreed final draft presented here as “outcomes”.

End box

experience of participants, and that there was agreement on the desirability of addressing them in a public-facing document. Guided by the activist participants, the co-produced outcome emphasizes action in ways that transform current understandings of “the academic.”

“During May 2021, motivated by a deep sense of urgency of action to address climate change; emphasizing the critical importance of collective responses that challenge and transform economic and political structures; in a spirit of honest and open reflection, and holding a common belief that inclusive collaboration could help better define and articulate the problem as well as delivering more inclusive and rapid responses ... several academics and activists came together virtually to explore the opportunities for and obstacles to effective inclusive collaboration on climate change concerns. Our discussions generated commitment to collaborate to find new ways to understand, communicate and act upon climate change concerns so as to reflect care, responsibility and justice, embodied in the following principles directed at ourselves, and our colleagues and peers in academia:

1. Commit to honesty and transparency

We commit to communicate honestly, both publicly and privately, regarding not only the state of the climate, but also our expectations, opinions, emotional responses, and understanding of the power, politics and interests (including our own) involved in diverging claims

about climate change and potential responses. This is essential if we are to engage with the root causes of climate problems, help prepare for the turbulence ahead and support the skills and knowledge needed for our communities to flourish in the future. By contrast simplistic ideas of academic neutrality or impartiality leave academics complicit with the powerful elites that have failed to take adequate climate action. In collaborative activities honesty must be matched with transparency about expectations, procedures, concerns and constraints on all parts and purposes, funding and other interests involved.

2. Recognize and embody the urgency

Action to tackle climate change and support climate justice is urgent, and morally demanded from those with the capacity to act. As academics we must act swiftly to deliver good quality research that is responsive to the opportunities that activism can open up. In the face of the collective trauma of climate change, visible, urgent and proportionate responses help us to better communicate the reality of the situation and empower others to join in. Whilst climate change cannot be addressed purely through voluntary, individual change, we support academics adopting and demonstrating personal behaviors that are coherent with the necessary structural, political change, as well as undertaking research and other collaboration to expose the political and commercial interests that resist collective action and promote delay.

3. Promote collaboration and engagement

We believe that collaboration and participation between academics and activists is not only ethically desirable but also offers practical benefits. Effective collaboration takes time, preparation and thoughtful communication, but brings in diverse perspectives, different approaches and new knowledge, and engages and mobilizes new actors. It thereby generates substantively better outputs that are more productive in delivering transformation. For academics, collaboration with activists also helps us work more effectively in contested and confrontational spaces. Collaboration between academics and activists should be promoted, but also defended, by a code of conduct to ensure that research is done with communities (and activists), and not on them.

4. Create safe spaces for collaboration

To facilitate collaboration safe spaces are needed where both activists and academics can express themselves freely without fear of physical, cultural or emotional violence, come together to share and learn about each others' experiences, mindsets, challenges and constraints, and provide mutual support in the face of abuse, populist climate denial and political oppression. For junior and precarious academics, such spaces also offer freedom from the expectations and constraints of academic institutions that can otherwise limit effective collaboration. Safe space is also needed to explore forms of knowledge that are devalued in the contemporary world (see point 10), express emotion (see point 9), to support experimentation with unconventional practices, and to enable mentoring of those with less experience in collaboration by those with more.

5. Support for activism supports healthy democracy

For both practical and ethical reasons, transformative change must be democratic. Activists are passionate and mobilized members of the public, and provide a key gateway to broad public engagement, helping communicate new understandings to their fellow citizens. Yet collaboration with activists is not widely recognized as legitimate academic activity, unlike routes to public engagement via policy and business. Academic engagement and collaboration with activists can reinforce participation and support critical and active citizenship. Such collaboration also helps counter the power of disinformation, and can reduce people's vulnerability to manipulation.

6. Stand up for activism

In many countries activism and rights to protest are under threat. Academics wishing to support climate activism must also support and endorse collective action to resist trends such as the criminalization of protest, and the listing of social and environmental activists as extremists under anti-terror initiatives. We should aim to make academia open and welcoming to climate activism in teaching, research and management. As collaborators we should provide mutual support against other threats (such as abuse and victimization) that arise when activists challenge the status quo.

7. Support multiplicity and inclusion

We recognize and see as equally valid diverse forms of academic-activist engagement including (but not limited to) collaborative projects, joint campaigns, public dialogue and communication, personal behavior change and student activism. We also assert the multiplicity of our identities as activists, academics, humans of diverse

genders, ethnicities, sexualities etc. and resist pigeon-holing and stereotyping. Effective collaboration involves discussing, agreeing and defining a common purpose and inclusive process across this diversity. Academics must respect what different people can bring to collaboration, and the limitations they face, such as restricted time and resources, and develop collaborative engagement processes that are inclusive and fair to all those prepared to commit to equal inclusion and recognition. We recognize, nonetheless, that there are significant structural inequalities in power and resources between and amongst academics and activists. Collaborative engagement processes need to challenge discrimination and structural exclusion and instead lift up voices that are not usually heard or able to be heard.

8. Value emotion

Effective action and transformation demands emotional as well as intellectual engagement. In the face of the threats and trauma climate change poses to our fellow humans and other species, working together offers real personal and emotional benefits. Collaboration should explore and enable participants to be open about their emotions and the emotional implications for others, and offer mutual support. As academics we must recognize the validity and power of emotional knowledge. By openly engaging with emotional trauma and fear we can help combat the temptations of everyday forms of climate denial in which we acknowledge climate change but fail to act; or in which we take only those actions that match our own interests, rather than also considering the needs of the most vulnerable and other species.

9. Combine diverse knowledges and ways of knowing

Narrowly focused disciplinary specialization in academia is a part of the problem we face in addressing climate change. As academics we must accept, encourage and value multiple ways of understanding and talking about climate change and its impacts (within and beyond academic disciplines). This is not about sharing academic knowledge with activists, it means learning from activists, indigenous, affected and vulnerable communities. Science cannot be divorced from politics, nor intellect from emotion. Moral intuition and ethical judgment are valid and useful forms of knowledge. Broad systemic thinking using multiple perspectives helps us get to the root cause of the problems we face and acknowledge where we face uncertainties or ignorance. Combining knowledges also requires active listening and effective communication between collaborators with different ways of conveying information, expertise, passions and concerns to each other and to publics.

10. Work to remove institutional obstacles

We must help enable academic institutions (including universities, funders, publishers and learned societies) to more broadly and consistently recognize the value and importance of timely collaboration with activism. We – and in particular, more senior academics with more influence and capacity to act – must work to remove institutional obstacles and establish positive incentives and supportive practices. The expectations and metrics used by institutions in decisions on employment, promotion, tenure, funding, curriculums and evaluation should include public engagement and measures of “impact” that do not rely on commercial uptake or direct policy influence. Practical steps toward a supportive environment should include measures such as targeted funding programs for collaboration, rejecting fossil industry funding,

divesting endowments of fossil fuel investments, greening the campus, and increasing security of employment.

11. Follow-through to support participants and outcomes

Good quality collaboration involves follow-through by the convenors, to sustain impact, and to support participants to explore personal implications. Care for participants, especially with potentially traumatic topics like climate change, should extend throughout and beyond the formal engagement. Good follow-through involves building networks and mechanisms for mutual support amongst participants. Effective follow-up tools and resources can help provide confidence to both academics and activists to get involved or to initiate new collaborations. They also make it more likely that the outcomes of collaboration spread and endure, thus justifying the initial investments of time and energy.

In this minifesta we have sought to learn from our colleagues in activism. But the focus here is placed on ourselves and our responsibility as academics. With knowledge of planetary crisis, comes responsibility to take part in effecting a just transition, not just writing about it. From our privileged position as academics we must stand up, speak out and act accordingly. We challenge our peers and colleagues across academia to join us. We share with Alice Walker the belief that “*activism is our rent for living on the planet.*”³

Discussion and reflections

In this section we reflect briefly on three issues raised by the process and the text it generated, which have implications for the effectiveness of the process as a facilitator of productive collaboration. We also present (in [Box 2](#)) some of the subsequent activities and experiences participants have reported. First, we consider the focus on inclusion and the extent to which it might lead to transformative change. Second we turn from the broad principles of engagement and collaboration to examine some specific implications regarding the role of activism and activists in collaborative processes. And finally we acknowledge the inevitable incompleteness of this process and indicate some of the strengths and limitations of this work.

Collaboration and inclusion

First, we suggest that the outcomes of this process cast new light on demands for inclusion. The minifesta text reinforces existing arguments for broader inclusion in collaborative and participatory action, notably in the preamble and in Principle 7. But the emphasis here goes beyond the inclusion of activists to promote multiplicity in processes, participants, forms of knowledge and ways of knowing (Principles 4, 7 and 9). These do more than suggest an extension of participatory research to collaboration with activists, and when read in combination with other demands in the text they pose a serious challenge to established practices and structures in academia, exposing shortcomings in institutions, funding, methods, and knowledge politics.

This is not so much to suggest that academics must somehow all *become* activists (*cf The role of activism and activists*, below), as it is to promote changes in the practices of academia so research (and teaching) can genuinely support activism. In particular, it seems essential to overturn the common assumption that activists are ill-informed about technical issues, and that the principal task for academics is to close that knowledge deficit. Nor is it merely about extending the knowledge-deficit model to the question of how change can be achieved, adding academic analysis of power and politics to technical scientific knowledge about climate change ([Pohlmann et al., 2021](#)). However unintended by well-meaning academics, the idea of collaboration as a sharing of academic learning is in effect itself a power play, setting the terms on which collaboration happens. Even if the academy were to pivot from the pursuit of rationalist knowledge to public-oriented practical wisdom ([Maxwell, 2021](#)) such power relations would remain largely untouched. This minifesta suggests instead that both power-awareness, as highlighted in David Tyfield’s work on phronesis ([Tyfield, 2020](#)) and commitment to agonistic struggle are necessary. In turn this requires acknowledgement that both academics and activists can contribute not only in terms of knowledge or information, but in the forms and ways of knowing, thus also collectively establishing the grounds for engagement. In this challenge we see echoes with decolonization movements in academia and beyond where the emphasis has shifted from procedural mechanisms to increase diversity and inclusion to the knowledge politics of black, indigenous, and often also queer theorists and scholars ([Chalmers, 2017](#); [Omarjee, 2018](#); [Begum and Saini, 2019](#)). We also see echoes of – and potential exceedances of – the relatively limited ways in which activism has helped make lay patient knowledge visible and legitimate in healthcare (e.g., [Epstein, 1995](#)).

In the text the principles addressing collaborative *process* reinforce in several respects (inclusion, transparency), those promoted for public engagement in the [National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement \(2020\)](#) EDGE tool, and for deliberative democratic processes by the [OECD \(2020\)](#). Many of these practices are already recognized as crucial for the democratization of knowledge and, with respect to decision of public authorities, enshrined in conventions such as the Århus Convention.⁴ However, they have been less widely acknowledged in academic institutions, and climate change debates with a growing sense of urgency, and demands to “listen to the science” have revived simplistic assumptions about the relationship of science and activism. The emphasis placed here on working with activists (for normative goals such as climate justice) and on the inclusion of different knowledges and epistemologies from outside the academy hint strongly at a more transgressive shift in practices (a Rancièran view of politics in which the inclusion of unheard voices leads – through novel contestation – toward transformation of political processes and institutions; [Rancièrè, 2004](#)). This takes us well beyond reformist approaches that sustain conventional liberal democratic institutions while broadening participation within them.

The recommendations of the minifesta indicate obstacles in academic institutions (common across the different national contexts involved here) that must be removed, as well as more targeted encouragement and incentives that should be provided, if effective collaboration is to result, in

³ From *Alice Walker: Beauty in Truth*, a documentary film directed by Pratibha Parmar, released in 2013.

⁴ The Århus convention provisions can be found here: <https://unece.org/environment-policy/public-participation/aarhus-convention/text>

BOX 2: Inspirations and Reflections.

One activist notes: “I’m excited to recall how much we all cared to find ways forward... Subsequently I was invited to Norway to make the point to a group of academics, that their work needs to be not only on behalf of funders but for the benefit of society; I think of academics as the sharers-of-knowledge and yet they are often tied down with limitations and secrecy because funding dictates it (as we found in the case of fracking). Some academics argued that they needed to remain neutral – I countered that perhaps now is not the time for that as time is running out and we need the full picture in order to hold any chance of success.”

Academics have also reported continued experience of some of the challenges highlighted, particularly balancing truth telling with organizational objectivity as well as general lack of awareness around the climate crisis in leadership. One participant anecdotally reported being told to “not be seen to be too political” when developing a climate related project partnership, with a simplistic notion of impartiality seemingly taking precedence over the project-relevant qualities of the perceived “controversial” potential partner. The same participant also reported observing a “less than enthusiastic attitude” amongst institutional leaders “treating sustainability investments and improvements as a trend or a box to be ticked” and exhibiting “a tendency to combine every environmental consideration together into – as one leader put it – “green stuff”, with little to demonstrate them taking any of these issues seriously.”

Our facilitator commented: “Gratifyingly, Public and Citizens Assemblies are being used quite a lot now in the environmental arena. However, unless questions are carefully constructed, and the people asking questions and holding the pen really know what they are about, sessions can fall flat. Both experts and publics are so used to formalized processes of “market research” or Council meetings – where publics are not richly participating, that sometimes these sessions can end up feeling like a wasted opportunity, with no follow up or action, when, if handled well, relationships and joint activities could bloom after such events.”

Several participants have been involved in practical next steps in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Belgium. One is “launching a new collective action project at Faculty for a Future, partially inspired by our conversations, and embodying the principles outlined in the minifesta. We’re supporting groups at local universities to bring staff, students, and local communities and activists together in action-focused people’s assemblies as a first step in democratically redistributing power at their institutions, to galvanize collaborative action for climate and social justice.”

Another helped develop the Democracy Network, and collaborated in producing a guide to Collaboration for democratic change for practitioners and academics (<https://democracynetwork.org.uk/resource/collaboration-for-democratic-change-a-guide-for-practitioners-and-academics/>). More than one has been involved in the development of the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA) (<https://knoca.eu/>), which aims to improve the commissioning, design, implementation and impact of climate assemblies, using evidence, knowledge exchange and dialog. In Belgium, one has since launched a “science shop” in their university, to support master theses and other short-term projects aiming to answer urgent questions raised by local associations and activists.

In Ireland, one of our participants helped convene the first “Popular Assembly” at the university, on what the institution should be doing in relation to the climate and ecological crisis in November. This prioritized a demand for a mandatory co-designed sustainability and climate module that all students should take regardless of degree program should take, and a staff-student “Climate Action Group” has been established to progress this. Our participant also co-organized an all-Ireland event on the same topic (<https://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/SECA/MediaOutputs/Outputs/What%20should%20Higher%20Education%20Institutions%20do%20about%20the%20Planetary%20Crisis%20Event%20Report.pdf>).

contrast to proposals such as EDGE which emphasize better institutional support for public engagement. For example, the provision of “safe spaces”, the removal of pressures on precarious and untenured staff, ways of valuing transdisciplinarity in practice (Principles 4 and 9), and – with respect to climate concerns – establishing coherence in other policy and practice (such as fossil divestment) (Principle 10) all go well beyond the procedural agenda of EDGE. In this respect we would particularly note the connotations of care, and the ethics of caring or taking care for participants (both academics and activists), highlighted in Principle 11. As suggested by one participant and supported in the workshop, we envisage that the audience for the minifesta consists of people who might see themselves as “caretakers”.

The process and its outcomes also highlight some limitations of existing research ethics procedures in terms of inclusion. For example, the expectations of many Ethics and Internal Review Boards that researchers define engagement procedures in advance and in detail conflicts with the ethical goal of fully involving participants in emergent procedures, and with the goal of them being able to play a full role in defining the desirability and direction of research. Different others might be included as a source of information, but in a process which excluded

them from any role in its design. In this context it is no wonder that academia can appear extractive in nature, rather than inclusive.

The role of activism and activists

The minifesta calls on academics to acknowledge the urgency and ethics that drive activism, and moreover to stand up for, and act to support activism. Behind these calls, however, the discussions surfaced numerous commonplace misunderstandings of activism, and offered insights that might help overcome them. First, in some respects, the dualism of activist and academic is a false one.⁵ It would be incorrect to presume that a role as an academic precludes activism, and vice versa. Many of our participants quite reasonably rejected being

⁵ This has long been false: Eunice Foote, now credited with first measuring carbon dioxide increases in the atmosphere was also a women’s rights activist (Bell, 2021).

labelled as only one or the other, but the framings identified as “presuppositions” echo our previous experiences of significant and sustained rejections of the validity of activist beliefs (and epistemologies) by academics, and vice versa. Whilst it is likely that those least willing to entertain collaborating with the other would be those least prepared to join our sessions, and our results therefore reflect less polarized views, we believe they show ways forward in mutual respect for other forms of action and ways of knowing. However, there are important dimensions of variation revealed by surfacing the power relations involved. While some academics appear to believe that activists have too much political influence, in practice it is academics who are much more likely to be embedded in relations of privilege and influence within the power structures of business and politics. However, as our text highlights, there are also power imbalances within academia, and junior, untenured and precarious scholars enjoy only limited power and influence in the absence of established models for scholarship outside of state-supported, philanthropic and research (council) funded work. Acting to expose and rebalance power relations can therefore facilitate productive and inclusive collaboration.

Secondly, while a rebalancing of power relations might imply targeting change in the academic institutions involved, within this group there was amongst a small minority, some reticence about the extent to which academic institutions should be understood or treated as a legitimate target for activism, rather than as a potential ally. Most however recognized that regardless of the views of individuals, the structures of such institutions make them unlikely to change willingly. For many academic activists themselves, changing their own institutions is an important career or life goal. Once again this issue reflects something of a false dualism: institutions can be both targets, and potential allies, indeed at one and the same time activists outside the institution may target it, whilst those within the institution seek to reform it. Active collaboration between such groups of activists can be especially productive. The minifesta suggests multiple ways in which such collaboration can be facilitated.

Thirdly, the process bears on broader perceptions of the legitimate role of activism in democratic society. In contemporary liberal democracies, activism is normally understood as a legitimate expression of discontent, if often dismissed as parochial rather than enlightened (Sebastien et al., 2019). However, activism is also increasingly perceived as a threat to societal security, and thus something that should be limited in scope, and subject to fairly strict regulation. The current trend in the countries represented here, and more broadly across the world seems to be toward stricter constraints on civic space (Anderson et al., 2021; Civicus, 2021), and more powers for police to counter activism and protests. The minifesta presents instead support for a normative position that sees citizen activism as a desirable check or additional form of accountability for political or corporate power, and one where the ethical basis for activism would override concerns about social disruption or even legality. Such a conclusion is perhaps unsurprising given the participants, yet still important given the wider social legitimacy provided for academics. The text drafted in the sessions explicitly suggests ways in which academics might better assist activists in playing such a normative role.

Incompleteness

A process like this, with limited time and participation inevitably leaves much still unresolved. For example the preparation of the minifesta generated debate over whether it would be most effective to challenge unhelpful academic practices or to model better behavior. Even this limited question would have taken more capacity than we had to draw a conclusion. Critical strategic and tactical questions regarding the “correct” or “most appropriate” responses to climate challenges, or the best tactics to motivate and mobilize action remained largely untouched. There is, however, good reason to question whether such matters can ever be resolved: these involve situational ethical judgments, not sweeping universal rules.

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the limitations arising in this process. While we often noted similarities between experiences in the countries involved (all of them European), on reflection, the French co-convenors suggested that differences in circumstances between France and the United Kingdom had not been adequately surfaced. Similarly, on reflection, the inputs from academics and activists were substantially asymmetric, and while this text takes account of that by directing its recommendations at ourselves as academics, and our fellow scholars, a more complete engagement with activists might well generate distinctive outcomes.

Having acknowledged this incompleteness, the approach of offering a minifesta is important, because in this model, incompleteness is explicit and valued as a generative opportunity (Padan et al., 2020). In contrast to much previous scholarship on the role of academia, here knowledge is understood as necessarily partial, embodied and situated (as well as inherently entangled with power), and thus we argue that academics should go beyond merely acknowledging multiple perspectives to prioritize the points of view of the vulnerable, overlooked and ignored. Moreover, once again we see here a likely benefit of enhanced collaboration between academics and activists, such that the tendencies of academia (especially in the sciences) toward seeking universal laws and explanations or of activists to assume that ethical standards are universal in nature, are challenged by putting both into a setting where their positionality is exposed and the incompleteness both of their knowledge and of the process are made explicit.

Experiences and activities

In preparing this paper for submission, participants were encouraged to share subsequent experiences, activities and reflections. Those summarized here (Box 2) are inevitably an incomplete sub-set of all relevant activities. They suggest an inspiring proliferation of efforts to improve collaborations, but also highlight continuing obstacles. These responses also further emphasize the incompleteness, and the desirability of more consistent follow-up than was possible within the resources available. Further opportunities, collectively, and bi-laterally, to discuss and reflect upon the draft principles, to interrogate how they relate to the experiences we heard about, and to consider their implications for us, as academics and activists, would clearly have been desirable.

Conclusion

In this article, we have summarized the outputs and implications of a novel participative deliberation regarding climate activism and academia, and also reported some of participants' subsequent activities inspired or strengthened by it.

The richness and breadth of the principles elaborated by this group, and the activities supported, suggest that scholars working on climate issues in any discipline could benefit from increasing collaboration with activists. In the light of the discussion of inclusion, and (mis)perceptions of activism, the principles offered here offer constructive ways in which such relationships could become genuinely mutually supportive, rather than extractive and exploitative, and their outcomes better oriented toward climate justice.

This work also offers some useful insights on the role of participation, and participation involving activists in advancing democracy, in an era when it otherwise seems more consistently under threat from authoritarian tendencies and market influences.

Finally, and reflexively, looking at the process we convened, by engaging collaboratively, we believe we generated more legitimate, richer, and more impactful outcomes than if we had simply (as a handful of academics) written a paper offering our analysis and opinions on activist collaboration. We therefore commend both the model of engagement and the principles it generated to our colleagues and peers.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the data collected took the form of recordings and transcripts collected under conditions of anonymity. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to mclaren@law.ucla.edu.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Lancaster University Research Ethics Review Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

DM: Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. CA: Writing – review & editing. JB: Writing – review & editing. VC: Writing – review & editing. SC: Writing – review & editing. JC: Writing – review &

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

DM, GrW, JB, NO and J-MH declared that they were an editorial board member of *Frontiers*, at the time of submission. This had no impact on the peer review process and the final decision.

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