

Experiences of academic-activists in Ireland: comfortable and uncomfortable activism in the current institutional environment

Jordan Kirwan, South East Technological University, Ireland

Author 2: Jennifer O Mahoney, South East Technological University, Ireland¹

Author 3: Lorraine Bowman-Grieve, South East Technological University, Ireland

Abstract

While there is a lack of academic-activist themed literature within the Irish context, it is evident that academic-activism is becoming an increasingly relevant topic given this period of undoubtable social change. The emergence of literature depicting academia as an unsupportive environment suggests that activism is not supported in a higher educational setting. This paper draws on the experiences of 33 Irish-based academic-activists and investigates the concepts of comfortable and uncomfortable academic-activism which were identified during the analysis. By exploring the experiences of academic-activists at varying career stages, this article argues that an academic's ability to exercise academic freedom is influenced by the type of activism, the sociopolitical identity of the individual and the institutional environment. Overall, this paper offers interesting comparisons between disadvantaged/marginalised academic-activists in comparison to those in more privileged positions.

Keywords

Academic-activism, class, gender, race, neoliberalism, academic freedom.

Introduction

Higher education's relevance depends on the ability of academics to express their academic freedom (Lyons, 2021). In Ireland, The Irish Universities Act of 1997 provides a clear definition and assurance of academic freedom. According to the act, academic staff members in universities have the right, while adhering to legal boundaries, to freely question and evaluate established knowledge, present innovative concepts, express contentious or unpopular views and engage in such activities within or outside the university. Importantly, the act explicitly states that exercising academic freedom should not result in any form of disadvantage or unfavourable treatment by the university (Reville, 2023). Through academic freedom², those

¹ Authors two and three are the research supervisors of the main author.

² While the intention here is to discuss threats to academic freedom in a broader context, I acknowledge that the term itself can be subject to different interpretations and may be utilised by diverse groups with varying beliefs and value systems to my own. Generally, I feel it can be agreed that academic-activism involves standing up against conservative or mainstream standpoints. It is hoped that this acknowledgment will help to ensure a more

within higher education can engage in the delivery of academic output that can encourage positive social change (i.e. academic-activism) (Baird, 2020), but the conditions under which academic freedom and academic-activism can thrive is complicated. The context of the broader economic, political, social and the institutional environment can create barriers to expressing academic freedom and potentially limit the individual's ability to engage in academic-activism (Altman, 2018). Academic-activism has taken a reserved position within the academy, thus curtailing the prominence of academic research that is intended for matters concerning social justice (Choudry, 2019; Sobande, 2018). As a result, academic research is more likely to be conducted to aid the reputation of the academy or to contribute to performance metrics (Altman, 2018; Pease, 2015). This has revealed a significant disparity between academics experiences of academic-activism based on the individual's identity, academic role and the type of activism while part of a conservative institution.

This paper is concerned with academic-activism as a demonstration of academic freedom and how this is dependent on the individual's role within academia. Specifically, this will focus on the overarching theme of uncomfortable and comfortable academic-activism which has been identified through 33 interviews with academic-activists in Ireland. The findings will be contextualised through an overview of academic-activist themed literature. The concluding remarks will offer insight into my own personal motivations and how my own identity as a white, working-class, male lends itself to the research.

The Academic Landscape

Recently, the term 'academic freedom' has been used more frequently in mainstream media given an apparent threat to academic freedom on a global scale (Humphreys, 2021; Power, 2021; Reville, 2020). As a broad example of this, political interference and institutional censorship in countries such as Turkey and Hungary have meant that academic-activism (or expressions of academic freedom) have become a much contested practice (Acar & Coskan, 2019; Donmez & Duman, 2021). Central to this research is an exploration as to whether academics are able to exercise their academic freedom in the form of academic-activism, or if they are restricted by the demands of their institutions and the broader environment (e.g. political). Social activism can be defined as a means for actively promoting social change (McConochie & Leung, 2010). Therefore academic-activism, within this research, is defined as actively promoting social change through writing, research, teaching, as well as more traditional activism-based activities such as rallying, marching and protesting.

The academic literature examining higher educational institutes third-level institutes³ suggests that white, middle/upper-class men are afforded a range of advantages to exercise academic freedom while women in academia, working-class academics and ethnically diverse academics experience greater levels of precarity, a lack of support and restricted access to avail of grants and research funding (Bhopal & Henderson, 2019; Clarke et al., 2015; Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015; Crew, 2020; McGuire, 2020; Pease, 2015; Warnock, 2016). However, the emergence of literature pertaining to the experiences of women academics, working-class academics and ethnically diverse academics rarely merges with academic-activism and instead focuses on narratives regarding negative work experiences within academia.

nuanced understanding of academic-activism within this article while considering the potential interpretations and associations that may arise within different disciplinary and political contexts.

³ In Ireland, a third-level institute typically refers to an institution of higher education beyond secondary school level. These institutes offer tertiary education and include universities, technological universities, and institutes of technology.

At present, O’Flynn and Panayiotopoulos’s (2015) academic-activism study remains the sole empirical examination of academic-activism in the Irish context. O’Flynn and Panayiotopoulos (2015), as precarious academics, found that activism could thrive within the academy, but it was reliant on a continued dialogue between left-leaning groups such as trade unionists, academics, independent researchers, activists, and the general population (O’Flynn & Panayiotopoulos, 2015). A dialogue of this kind has been tough to establish while the structural conditions of academia promote an element of insecurity within academics (Courtois & O’Keefe, 2015). Although research relating to the experiences of precarious or marginalised academics seldom references academic-activism explicitly, other research summarises recommendations for permanent staff struggling to overcome the barriers to engage in academic-activism (Flood et al., 2013). These studies generally omit the experiences of precarious workers and marginalised academics who are otherwise prohibited from engaging in academic-activism.

While there is a lack of academic-activist themed literature that conveys the experiences of marginalised academics, particularly within the Irish context, it is evident that academic-activism is becoming an increasingly significant topic in academia. Alakauvklar (2020) argues that the academy must reimagine itself as a community-led space. Within this re-imagined academy, an emphasis on competition and individualism are replaced by a focus on addressing the structural inequalities that exist within society (Alakauvklar, 2020). Through the inclusion of academics at varying career stages and diverse sociopolitical identities, this paper provides a relevant insight into the experiences of academic-activists who are facing challenges within academia relevant to their identity and type of activism.

Academic-Activism within Altering Societal Contexts

Through the course of my PhD, the academic landscape within Ireland has changed rapidly. Since 2020, there has been an increased awareness of the level of casualised, precarious work in academia which has caused concern for academics whose uncertain futures have limited their output capabilities, restricted their opportunities to mobilise their career and lead to a rise in instances of mental health issues amongst those in non-permanent roles (Simpson, 2023). Arguably, this increased awareness has been accelerated by University and College Union (UCU) strikes in the UK (more notably in Northern Ireland) which has resulted in heightened media coverage of the current issues facing academics on the island of Ireland as a whole (Casey, 2022; Donohoe, 2022; Meredith, 2023; Shearing, 2023). This form of activism appears to have had a knock-on effect with the rise in the mobilisation of postgraduate workers movements and the forming of postgraduate workers unions which has resulted in Simon Harris (the Irish Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science) launching a review into the supports offered to PhD Researchers (Gilbert, 2022; McGuire, 2022; O’Brien, 2022; Postgraduate Workers Organisation, 2023). While academic-activist themed literature is limited within the Irish context, it is apparent there has been a spike in specific forms of activism (mainly academic worker’s rights) given the current social climate (e.g. cost of living crisis; housing crisis, etc.) in line with pre-existing issues with academia. Additionally, the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased immigration within Ireland has brought about recent forms of activism (e.g. demonstrations, protests, marches in response to far-right groups) given an increased understanding of the challenges facing those who are most marginalised and disadvantaged within Irish society (Wilson & Gallagher, 2023).

At present, both nationally and globally, there is a heightened awareness of the current academic environment in a time where there is arguably a radical change occurring within society (e.g. rise of political activism, union-based activism, environmental activism, civil rights campaigns, etc.). This has resulted in calls from academic-activists to go beyond what is expected of academics with regards to traditional academic output (e.g. publishing a paper) and to do something meaningful and impactful within society (Rynor, 2023). In this sense, there seems to be an increasing need for academics to express themselves in a way that is accessible to those external to academia (Rynor, 2023). However, this call for greater expressions of academic freedom is restricted within the current institutional climate (e.g. lack of tenured positions; inconsistent support for academic-activism; lack of collegiality amongst staff) which is perhaps further restricted by specific equality, diversity and inclusion aims that are typically agenda-driven (e.g. focusing on one specific marginalised or disadvantaged group) (Sullivan & Suissa, 2022).

Sullivan and Suissa (2022, para 3) claim that a recent ‘overreach’ by higher education institutes to ‘reshape the university in line with a narrow ideological agenda’ related to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) having previously ‘contained activists’ is concerning. So, while there are broader claims to increase academic-activist work related to EDI (e.g. activist lobby groups; research on gender inequality, etc.) and increase diversity within academia, Suissa and Sullivan (2022) find that this ideological imposition is often misplaced and does not result in widened participation or equality within academia. So, while there is an increase in the call for greater participation and representation within academia, Sullivan and Suissa (2021) believe this is set against current structures that have consistently suppressed activist research and resulted in blacklisting, harassment and smear campaigns on academic-activists.

At a recent Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) conference⁴, a motion was carried unanimously following growing concerns that particular EDI initiatives (such as Athena Swan) have deviated away from its stated goal and fails to consider the impact of inequality on a wider scale. In addition, various charters have been unable to explain instances of inequality (e.g. precarious work from a gendered perspective) given their one-dimensional design and implementation (Sullivan & Suissa, 2022). Given these current issues with the promotion of EDI, higher education institutes (namely EDI staff and networks) need to reimagine the way in which they promote genuine equality, diversity, and inclusion to allow for meaningful reform which can encourage greater promotion of academic freedom overall (Sullivan & Suissa, 2022).

This research offers a much-needed exploration of such environments and movements from the diverse experiences of academic-activists in the Irish context.

Methods

Recruitment and Sample

This article draws on the semi-structured interviews conducted with 33 academic-activists based in Ireland. In a previous study as part of this PhD project, participants were invited to take part in an online survey through purposive snowballing sampling techniques. On the final page of the survey, participants were given the opportunity to indicate their interest via email. 34 survey participants emailed indicating their interest in taking part in an interview. Following

⁴ See tweet here: <https://twitter.com/ifut/status/1654857888278388739>.

seven dropouts, purposive recruitment was carried out based on the researcher and supervisory team's knowledge of a potential participant's suitability. This ensured that participants had relevant experience and were suitable to the main purpose of the research (Dusek et al., 2014). Participants in this study included: Professor (n=1), Associate Professor (n=4), Head of Department and Senior Lecturer (n=1), Senior Lecturer (n=4), Structured Lecturer (n=1), Lecturer (n=10), Researcher (n=1) Postdoctoral Researchers (n=1), and PhD Researchers (n=10). Of this participant group, 18 identified as cisgender female, 14 identified as cisgender male and 1 identified as gender nonbinary. 83% of participants were from White Irish backgrounds with the remaining participants identifying with Black, Asian, white European, white British, white North American and white Latin American backgrounds. There was a near even split between class groups with 52% identifying with middle-class backgrounds and 48% identifying with working-class backgrounds.

77% of participants were from Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) with 23% of participants coming from Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) backgrounds. Participants were engaged in varied types of activism such as: political, trade union, teaching/research, feminist, community-based (e.g. class, religion, LGBTQI+, adult education, etc.), postgraduate union, work-based (e.g. social care work), human rights, criminology-based, environmental, reproductive rights, and medical/health science.

Interview Procedure and Ethics

Following institutional ethical approval, the participants were provided with details and instructions regarding the online interview (via email). This information consisted of a project information sheet and a consent form, which participants were asked to virtually sign. Interviewees were provided with an interview schedule prior to the meeting. Before starting the interview (Zoom), participants were assigned a pseudonym which is in the form of a unique number (e.g. 'Participant 30').

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using an reflexive thematic analysis approach in line with Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phased guideline. In addition, the reflexive thematic analysis was conducted within a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodological framework. This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of themes while actively engaging participants in the research process; promoting collaboration and transformative action throughout (Pecorelli 2015). PAR is conducted with a main objective of enacting social change with specific actions (MacDonald 2012). Generally, researchers use PAR to learn and work with marginalised or activist groups in order to produce research that offers solutions for their needs (MacDonald 2012). Braun and Clarke (2012) state that thematic analysis aligns well with PAR as it requires researcher reflexivity and encourages the input of collaborators which is useful when reviewing, reflecting and defining codes and themes.

The interview recordings were transcribed on a Word document where initial themes and codes were assigned before forwarding to participants for review. Following the return of each reviewed transcript, original suggestions and further inputs from participants were reviewed and reflected upon. After the initial coding and categorising process, it was clear there was some overlap with themes. This called for further review and reflection before collapsing and defining a set of themes that were coherent with the experiences of participants.

Analysis & Discussion

Findings from semi-structured interviews with 33 Irish-based academic-activists have uncovered a specific tension between academic work and activist commitments: comfortable and uncomfortable academic-activism. The terms comfortable and uncomfortable were noted by participants during the interview stage when discussing their experiences as academic-activists in the current climate. Below, uncomfortable and comfortable academic-activism will be defined before outlining the experiences of academic-activists within these themes.

What is Uncomfortable Academic-Activism?

This section will begin by exploring the concept of uncomfortable academic-activism. Briefly, uncomfortable academic-activism is activism that may potentially cause controversy (in wider society and/or academia) and is often separate to your contractual obligations as an academic. Findings have shown that uncomfortable activism has seen academic-activists blacklisted, isolated and overlooked for promotion in some instances. Those engaged in uncomfortable academic-activism were often from marginalised backgrounds or openly aligned with left-leaning political ideologies which clashed with the neoliberal attitude of the academy. The discussion on uncomfortable academic-activism will be done so in relation to (1) the fear of being penalised; (2) impeded mobility and stifled creativity; and (3) isolation and loneliness.

The Fear of Being Penalised

Academia is an environment whereby only those with tenure/permanent contracts are granted the ability to engage in academic-activism (Nkomo 2009). This is representative of each of the twelve early-career academics who felt academic-activism at their career stage is 'risky'. Although each of the twenty more senior academics in this study issued a word of caution to those at the early career stage (e.g. Participant 11: 'don't stick your head above the parapet'), early-career academics still engaged in academic-activism, which signaled to the importance of activism that was evident amongst early career academics. However, whether the activism informed academic work or vice versa, those at the beginning of their careers were subject to the fear of being penalised for their engagement in activism, and how they may be perceived in the academic environment as their careers progress.

Participant 05 (white, working-class male, political/trade-union activist) declared that, 'my card is marked'. While he has been given a certain degree of latitude by his supervisor and department to engage in left-wing political campaigns, he worries that as he approaches the end of his PhD his 'activist commitments' will impact how he is 'perceived'. In an environment where the future of academic staff is uncertain (Grey, 2013), Participant 05 states that those at early-career level are conscious of 'rocking the boat' through public facing scholarship which is rarely valued above meeting performance metrics, i.e. publish or perish (Altman, 2018). As Participant 27 (white, middle-class woman, reproductive rights/feminist activist) states: 'There's no way that anybody could possibly be creative and inquisitive and challenging in those contexts.' This indicates that the ability to exercise academic freedom can be hindered based on your type of activism, as well as your individual identity and academic role.

Impeded Mobility and Stifled Creativity

This fear of hindered career progression and restricted creativity was a reality for more experienced academic-activists, particularly for those who engaged in activism that related to

their own sociopolitical identity. This often resulted in delayed career mobility as a result of their expression of academic freedom and activist thought. Where this was not experienced explicitly, participants suggested that they would be naïve to think their activist work did not delay their mobility within academia, namely those from trade union backgrounds. Other interviewees felt their progression was delayed in a more direct manner as a result of being engaged in political and community-based activism. When overlooked for promotion, academic-activists cite informal and formal feedback from interview panels such as: ‘we fully support the work you have done and eventually you will be recognised for it’ or ‘you’re just not our type of person’ (Participant 10, white, working-class woman, community-based activist). In a telling quote from a participant, the perception of potential damage to their career is clearly expressed:

I know that being an activist has damaged my academic career and has damaged my academic prospects, but I'm going to continue to do it and eventually maybe the conservative institute I work with will catch up with my activism (Participant 19, working-class male, LGBTQI+ activist).

At present, academic-activists are depicted as ‘modern day cranks’ (Rhodes et al., 2017, p. 6) for resisting the discourses presented by the economic and industrial motivated academy. While activist work is not completely excluded or restricted from receiving external funding or having outside impact (e.g. climate change academic-activism), there is a need for academies and activism to coexist beyond neoliberal values and expectations present in third-level institutes. This means evaluating research on its potential for external influence and impact on society as opposed to its ‘market-based justification’ for economic gain (Rhodes et al., 2017, p.7). The existing structural conditions and industry-based strategies of higher education in Ireland present a challenge to the creativity academic-activists as:

True activism is activism that goes against the mainstream and questions what dominant institutions do. So it questions, what universities do, it questions, what the state does. And therefore it is inherently uncomfortable, particularly in small islands like Ireland (Participant 26, multi-racial, working-class woman, criminology/human rights activist).

Those who challenge the mainstream narrative from within academia are facing the negative repercussions of their activism both personally and professionally. In this regard, engaging in academic-activism becomes a complicated task given the treatment academic-activists receive within their department, as well as wider academic circles.

Isolation and Loneliness

More broadly, it has been shown that uncomfortable activism can lead to delayed career progression and stunted career mobility, but on a more individual level academic-activists have found their activism to ‘be quite lonely and isolating’ (Participant 15, white, working-class male, trade union/political activist). Participant 26 felt that generally, those from marginalised backgrounds must ‘fight really hard to belong to university or to this third level culture’ and must compete with those ‘from middle class or upper middle class, very white Irish backgrounds’ whose activism is ‘very mainstream’ and ‘comes from a very privileged position.’ Clarke et al. (2015) state that engaging in research outside of institutional norms/strategies can damage work relationships with both colleagues and institutional hierarchy. This resonates with Participant 21 (white, middle-class woman, feminist/left-wing political activist), who mentioned that her activism: ‘makes me unpopular in my department’.

The literature suggests that academic-activists should only engage in activism outside of working hours if they wish to progress within academia (Cancian, 1993; Flood et al., 2013; Pereira, 2016). This appears to contradict the mission of marginalised academic-activists who want to use their position of privilege within the academy to bring their research ‘back to the people they grew up with’ and give back to people experiencing ‘social inequality’, ‘repression’ and ‘disempowerment’ (Participant 01, 02, 11, 13, 14 and 20) (see also: Brook & Michell, 2012). According to Participant 19, this mission appears to be shackled within academia at present, as uncomfortable academic-activists feel progress is slowed by ‘an ambivalent majority who just want to get on with things’, leading to a lack of ‘appetite for change’. This suggests that marginalised academics, who wish to use their academic role to promote positive social change, must navigate an unsupportive environment that discourages socially motivated academic output.

Summary of Uncomfortable Academic-Activism:

Having outlined the challenges facing uncomfortable academic-activists, it is apparent that the ability to exercise academic freedom is reliant on a number of factors. Concerns about how you may be perceived at the early career stage are realised as you build your career in academia. Initial concerns in the early career stage become reality as those seeking to engage in non-mainstream activism are repressed in terms of their expression of academic freedom. This has been shown through the commonplace immobilisation of an individual academic career; whether this be through explicit actions or more discrete measures. As a result, academics (especially marginalised academics) who challenge the status quo within academia are at risk of becoming ostracised in the current institutional environment. A lack of support and the noticeable isolation experienced by marginalised academics restricts the potential of the academic output to have a more considerable impact in wider society.

What is Comfortable Academic-Activism?

This section will focus on comfortable activism. In short, comfortable refers to academic-activism that is institutionally approved or appropriated for the benefit of the institution’s public reputation. Generally, it is academic-activism which contributes to promotion/performance metrics or is carried out through traditional academic outputs (i.e. journal publications, conference presentations, etc.). Comfortable academic-activism is often done within the confines of your contractual obligations and is therefore unlikely to cause friction between colleagues, managers and institutional hierarchy. Comfortable activism will be discussed in the context of (1) career progression; (2) tokenism and symbolic actions; and (3) finding your university.

Career Progression

While activism can be used to progress and enhance your own reputation, it is reliant on certain conditions as eluded to by Participant 27 previously, such as the type of activism, the reputation of institution and the identity of the individual academic-activist (Flood et al., 2013; Lund & Nabavi, 2008). Participant 19 viewed academia as being ‘straight, middle-class, white male centric’; an identity which brings certain advantages when navigating the academic space for the purposes of activist research (Pease 2015). This was evident in Participant 02’s (white, middle-class male, health science activism) interview. Although Participant 02 shared a similar fear of being penalised much like his colleagues at the early career stage, he was honest about the privileges he possesses in comparison to marginalised colleagues. When discussing more

uncomfortable forms of activism, Participant 02 mentioned that a ‘security blanket’, as a result of his class background, allows him to engage in activism:

I used to think: why doesn't everyone do what I do in terms of working in an area that involves bringing about social change? But if anything goes really badly for me, I have parents who have a nice home that I can stay in. They've money they can support me with, they can help me access mental health services for example.

In addition, Participant 02 considers his activism to be ‘comfortable’ and will potentially benefit a career in STEM:

I will hopefully be able to build a very satisfying career on where I can have a positive impact in an area I'm passionate about. So my benefits definitely outweigh the negatives, but it's very comfortable activism in which I don't upset any of my senior employees or anything like that.

Similarly, Participant 07 (white, middle-class woman, community-based activism) pondered as to whether her activism was just her ‘middle-class folly’ and wonders: ‘would I be doing this?’ if she was from a lower-class background; a privilege she is ‘very aware’ of. Activism's place in the academy is often debated with regards to its suitability in higher education (Phakathi, 2014; Rojas, 2013). It can be argued that this may be primarily due to a lack of traditionally published academic-activist material from marginalised academics when compared to those from white, middle-class backgrounds who are vastly represented in academia (Lynch et al., 2012; Pease, 2015 Phakathi, 2014). In this regard, there is a lack of literature that highlights the benefits of living in your area of interest as an academic, i.e. positioning yourself within the research and identifying/empathising with your research sample. A lack of literature perhaps reflects the wider institutional attitude towards certain types of academic-activism (e.g. left-wing political activism). However, it is possible for an institution to alter their stance on academic-activism following changes in societal attitudes and opinions.

Tokenism and Symbolic Actions

As well as the sociopolitical identity of an individual, the reputation of the institute can determine whether an academic is encouraged to pursue activism-based research, or if they will be confined to what is deemed acceptable in a particular academy (Flood et al., 2013; Grollman, 2015). Within academia, activist causes (e.g. gender and racial equality) can be appropriated to enhance the reputation of an institute. In this manner, activist causes can then evolve into a form of comfortable activism from an institutional standpoint. This form of activism is considered to be insincere by academic-activists as it primarily serves to improve the public perception of the academy. Participant 09 (white, working-class, woman, housing/postgraduate union activist) states that institutes are less likely to ‘blacklist’ you if they realise that your activism brings ‘goodwill and clout to your department’. When speaking about her own activism, Participant 09 claims that: ‘they weren't going to give up the benefits of having my name associated with the department just for the sake that I was sort of agitating.’ In essence, Participant 09 believes that if activist causes become part of ‘the national consciousness’, academies are likely to engage in ‘reputation saving’ and appropriate the activist cause for their own benefit.

Nevertheless, the academies recently established backing of activist causes appears to be reserved for more privileged academics who are able to maintain ‘neutrality’ when engaging in institutionally adopted activism, according to Participant 25 (Asian, middle-class, gender non-binary)⁵. To illustrate this point, Equality, Diversion and Inclusion (EDI) committees and Athena Swan charters, which are ‘appreciated’ by marginalised academics, are deemed to be ‘totally tokenistic’ and ‘symbolic’ as ‘the main benefactors are white, middle-class people’ (Participant 25; Participant 26). Current measures (i.e. committees and charters) may have a positive impact on inequality or social justice issues in higher education, but they do not focus on broader institutional practices/arrangements that have caused and maintained such inequalities over time (Runyan, 2018). Paradoxically, Participant 25 mentions that those from marginalised backgrounds are accused of ‘having an axe to grind’ when speaking out on issues that are now part of the agenda for EDI and Athena Swan committees. For example, highlighting how many ethnic minority staff are on precarious contracts in comparison to white colleagues or highlighting the lack of diverse representation at institutional management level. Given this, Participant 25 states that in the current academic environment: ‘an academic-activist is not something that would be seen in a positive way, especially as an ethnic minority’.

Finding Your University

Interestingly, academic-activists from a ‘sanctuary university’ (Participant 23, white, middle-class woman, political activist) that housed a ‘prestigious national/international research centres’ (Participant 17, Asian, middle-class woman, human rights activist) were encouraged to pursue academic-activism. As this was generally part of the institute’s ethos, this type of public engagement was ‘mandatory’ and was included within the academics contractual obligations, according to Participant 20 (white, middle-class woman, community-based activist). It should be noted that academics in this position had secure contracts and mostly referred to their activism as being ‘small’ or identified as a ‘quiet activist’. In keeping with the previous comments from Participant 13 and Participant 21, it would appear that academic-activism that is mandatory or contractually obliged offers less to communities and those outside of academia.

Given the prominence of ‘academic capitalism’, Participant 13 (white, working-class, environmental/political activist) believes that this may provide opportunities for ‘vampire’ academics who ‘suck out data’ for the purposes of a peer reviewed journal with ‘nothing ever left for the community’. In this respect, paying ‘lip service to public engagement’ is a comfortable arrangement for academic-activists who want to ‘carve careers out of theorising about social movements but not actually being in them’, as per Participant 21. Engaging in more comfortable forms of activism that mainly aim to satisfy performance metrics encourages this narrative of academia as a self-perpetuating system rather than an arena for critical thought and activist measures (Fleming, 2021).

Summary of Comfortable Academic-Activism:

Comfortable activism can aid the career progression of an academic-activist and have a positive influence within wider society. The possibility of career progression as an academic-activist is encouraging following the previous discussion on uncomfortable academic-activism. However, advancing in academia appears to be reliant on certain conditions. Findings have

⁵ Participant 25’s type of activism is not listed as they did not explicitly identify as an academic-activist due to the negative connotations associated with doing so as an ethnic minority academic in a predominately white institution.

shown that those from privileged backgrounds can take risks with their activism, stating that they could rely on their family's financial support in the event of unemployment. In keeping with the advantages afforded to privileged academics, activism which may have previously been considered risky can undergo a process of social sanitisation. In this event, it was shown that institutes can embrace such activism in order to boost its public reputation. Marginalised academics appear to be perplexed by this supposed shift in attitude as they have received backlash for supporting similar causes in which they relate to on a personal level. Although some academics have encouraged the pursuit of activist research, academic-activists are concerned that the obligation to engage in activism will diminish the potential impact of activism in wider communities.

Conclusion

Initially, I understood academic-activism as a straightforward premise: if you are a permanent academic, you are given the opportunity to exercise academic freedom. If you are a precariously employed academic, you are less likely to partake in academic-activism given the fear of being penalised at the early-career stage (Merga & Mason, 2020). While existing literature and the study's analysis reinforced this early hypothesis, I have since understood academic-activism as a much more complex activity within the context of the broader political, social and economic environment, as well as the institutional environment and the identity of the individual.

Further exploring the complexity of engaging in academic-activism indicated that your experience as an academic-activist varies dependent on your gender, class and ethnic background in the current institutional environment, which piqued my personal interest in the topic as a white, working-class, male, PhD researcher. In a previous article (see: Kirwan, 2023), I reflect on my experience as a PhD researcher in the area of academic-activism in line with my own identity. In light of learning about instances of isolation and limited career opportunities, I have had to carefully consider my identity as an academic-activist as someone who previously considered their academic and activist work as separate entities. At this stage in my career, I find that it is best to do what is comfortable based on my current academic role and overall positionality within the context of the current political, social, economic and institutional environment to both aid the development of my career and to ensure that I have some semblance of personal and economic security.

At present, the current literature is lacking in a relevant exploration of academic-activism whereby individual issues (e.g. precarity) are analysed in line with sociopolitical identities relevant to a particular context (i.e. wider society; academia). This, along with my own sociopolitical identity allowed me to use my own experience as an academic to my advantage when relating to a range of participants and bringing my own identity to the project. Furthermore, this research has granted me the opportunity to network and build support systems with others who self-identify as academic-activists who are encountering similar barriers and restrictions in their academic work.

The findings from this paper have shown that academic-activism is impacted by a number of factors. These factors relate to what is considered to be uncomfortable activism and comfortable activism. Uncomfortable activism is that which is often separate to your role as an academic and is typically conducted with wider societies needs at the forefront (Huerta, 2018). Uncomfortable activism (e.g. trade union activism, LGBTQI+ activism, etc.) was engaged in by academics who identified with the individuals and communities they seek to

represent/support. The ‘doing’ of uncomfortable activism meant that academics had to sacrifice their career progression and risk potentially damaging their own personal and professional reputation amongst colleagues and institutional hierarchy. Comfortable activism, or activism that is conducted in-line with institutional approval and done within the contractual obligations of an academic, was argued to be a reserved arena. Although comfortable activism can have wider societal impact, those engaged in uncomfortable activism felt it was too mainstream and better served performance metrics than it did disadvantaged individuals and communities.

The findings in this paper are a result of the notion of uncomfortable and comfortable academic-activism being a core theme from the initial analysis. Furthermore, the final analysis of the interviews (as well as the analysis of the online survey) as part of the wider study will contribute to a framework from which to understand the benefits and costs of academic-activism and to develop recommendations for best practice for academics engaging in activism. Having explored the lived experiences of activism by participants, in particular the implications of involvement in social activism from a professional perspective, this paper provides valuable insight about Irish-based academic-activists from a sociopolitical perspective given a lack of literature in the Irish context.

Author Bio

Jordan Kirwan is a working-class, PhD researcher and Assistant Lecturer and Tutor at South East Technological University. Previously, his research interests focused on the lived experiences of immigrants in Ireland and how immigrant communities accumulate social capital. Recently, his research has focused on understanding academic-activism from an intersectional perspective. This particular research explores the influence of the current neoliberal climate and academic environment on academic-activism. Prior to lecturing and before returning to do my PhD, he worked in the Youth and Community sector both in Ireland and Australia for 5 years. **ORCID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5859-8541>

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