


Review article

Activism and the academy: implementing and evaluating activist-in-residence programmes

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Abstract

Activist-in-residence programmes in universities represent a paradox: what space exists for activists in institutions which are often seen as re/creating and perpetuating hegemonic structures, and/or as the epistemic sources and reinforcers of the very ideas which activists aim to disrupt? In this article, we examine the motivations and theoretical considerations that drive the establishment of such programmes, and discuss the tensions and possibilities that arise from this inherent paradox. Based on an analysis of existing activist-in-residence programmes and current theoretical framings, we propose a reflexive process evaluation framework for their development and evaluation. We then deploy the framework to critically review a recent activist-in-residence programme hosted by Queer@King's, an interdisciplinary research centre specialising in gender and sexuality at King's College London, UK.

Keywords process evaluation; reflexivity; activist-in-residence; activism; engaged scholarship

Key messages

- At a time when higher education institutions are balancing neoliberal and decolonial forces, activist-in-residence programmes provide opportunities for transformational dialogic exchange oriented towards social justice. In conceiving such programmes, higher education institutions should articulate and mediate the benefits to activists of such programmes, but also the learnings and challenges back to the institution.
- Activist-in-residence programmes are intentional institutional spaces – structures – for activism to take place. Through their operation, these institutional spaces might be re/formed by activists, with new, democratic possibilities for academic practice arising.
- A reflexive process evaluation framework is a means to enhance the likelihood of activist-in-residence programmes becoming intentional spaces for mutually transformative and enriching encounters between academics and activists.

Introduction

Activist-in-residence (AiR) programmes form part of a long history of universities cooperating with those outside of academia. As a collaborative engagement approach, they provide a paradox: can activists inhabit, constructively, institutional spaces which may re/create hegemonic structures and prioritise epistemic sources and ideas that the activists aim to disrupt? In this article, we examine the motivations, tensions and theoretical considerations behind the establishment of AiR programmes through reviewing existing programmes. We then propose a reflexive process evaluation framework for their development and evaluation, illustrating its value through application to a case study of an AiR that ran at the Queer@King's research centre, King's College London, UK, between 2019 and 2021.

Before we continue, a quick note as to how we understand activism. [McKeever et al. \(2023\)](#) note that scholars have variably defined the term. The active challenging of oppressive power relations or ideologies appears key – an overtly political framing. But activist activities may stretch beyond the conventionally political 'to include broader social participation, civic engagement, and movements that arise from the general public' ([McKeever et al., 2023: 572](#)). Activism has also been defined as a 'process by which groups of people exert pressure on organizations or other institutions to change policies, practices or conditions the activists find problematic' ([Smith, 2005: 5](#)).

Drawing on the work of multiple scholars, [McKeever et al. \(2023\)](#) summarise the goal and activities of activism. They note that activism challenges ideas; activists work to influence systems, and to labour against powerful organisations and/or individuals. And activists focus on action, on the doing, to exert pressure for change.

With this understanding of activism, we now turn to how it may be conceived and operationalised within higher education settings.

Activism within higher education settings

[Barnett \(2021\)](#) contends that the work of an 'activist university' may be understood in terms of its positioning along two axes. The first scale is 'intentional activism', where, at one end, there is a 'strident, vocal and visible activism' that provides an *oppositional* force in society, while, at the other end, there is 'a more subtle, quieter form of activism, perhaps taking the longer view of *diplomatically* engaging with the main powerful institutions' ([Barnett, 2021: 516](#)).

The other scale is 'structural activism' wherein activities in universities 'take on forms of activism by virtue of their simply being part of the structural being of universities' ([Barnett, 2021: 516](#)). At one end, there are *collective* activities such as research and teaching that may impact on society and at the other **end**, there are activities wherein *individuals* place themselves against dominant currents of society.

McKeever et al. (2023) also note collective action as an indicator of activism, and that where collective efforts lead to organisational ties, **this may determine further activism.**

Barnett (2021) perceives the two axes as sliding scales, with movement along each. The scales yield four quadrants, locations for different forms of activism: oppositional-collective, oppositional-individual, diplomatic-collective and diplomatic-individual.

Activism therefore manifests in differing ways within higher education settings, one manifestation being AiR programmes. Within UK universities, such programmes are relatively rare, with some notable exceptions (see the section 'AiR programmes: insights from existing examples', below, and Table 1). Where they exist, their purpose is to give a space and a platform to individuals and/or groups whose systems of knowledge acquisition and production are different from those of universities. Characteristically, they focus on social good and/or social justice causes, inviting expertises, epistemologies and world views which, in their difference, challenge not only the culture and production of knowledge within universities, but also modes of organisational functioning and conceptualisations of success.

We note at this juncture potential links or inspiration from the longer tradition of artist-in-residence programmes in higher education, residencies that aim to 'provide artists and other creative professionals with time, space and resources to work, individually or collectively, on areas of their practice that reward heightened reflection or focus' (Open Method of Coordination (OMC) Working Group of EU Member States Experts on Artists' Residencies, 2014: 9). Indeed, this tradition is strong at King's College London, the institutional home for our AiR case study (see the section 'Applying a reflexive process evaluation framework: a case study from King's College London', below). King's has run artist-in-residencies for some twenty years, conceiving them as important learning models that create networking opportunities and ongoing dialogues between academics, students and the wider arts and culture sectors (King's Culture, 2020). As Kester (2004) contends, dialogic aesthetic can underpin art practice – the practice can facilitate dialogue among diverse communities. Exchanges may catalyse 'surprisingly powerful transformations in the consciousness of their participants' (Kester, 2004: 153). While a full comparison between artist and activist residencies is beyond the purview of this article, we observe their shared desire for transformational dialogic exchange.

We now turn to more detailed analysis of motivations and tensions common to AiR programmes.

AiR programmes in higher education: motivations and tensions

Universities and activists: motivated by social justice

As sites of learning and knowledge production, universities play a role in addressing complex contemporary social issues through critical debate, investigation and teaching (Boyer, 2016; Cuthill et al., 2014; Holmwood, 2011). However, the social status of universities as experts in knowledge generation creates a research-knowledge authority monopoly that tends towards the exclusion or marginalisation of other forms of discourse, research and expertise (Bhambra et al., 2018; Biesta, 2007). Historically, those who have produced knowledge in universities have not been representative of the full diversity of society; powerful elites have been sustained, and discriminatory power structures re/produced (Holmwood, 2011). Universities have become sites of epistemic or cognitive injustice through 'othering' the knowledges, experiences, and ways of generating knowledge of marginalised peoples, prompting essential movements such as decolonising the curriculum (Hall et al., 2013; Martin, 2016; People's Knowledge Editorial Collective, 2016).

The 'scholarship of engagement' seeks to tackle such injustices, enabling universities to better fulfil their role of critiquing society and resolving complex social problems (Boyer, 2016). Engaged scholarship performs a democratic mandate, and is defined as 'a collaborative form of inquiry in which academics and practitioners leverage their different perspectives and competencies to co-produce knowledge about a complex problem or phenomenon that exists under conditions of uncertainty found in the world'

Table 1. Examples of activist and artist residencies in higher education institutions

University	Centre/department	Type of residency	Country	Website
The London School of Economics and Political Science	Centre for Women, Peace and Security	Activist-in-residence	UK	https://www.lse.ac.uk/women-peace-security/people/activist-in-residence
Goldsmiths, University of London	Centre for Postcolonial Studies	Artist-in-residence	UK	https://www.gold.ac.uk/postcolonial-studies/people/artists-in-residence/
University of Sussex	Centre of World Environment History	Activist-in-residence	UK	https://www.sussex.ac.uk/cweh/research/academia_and_activism
University College London	Urban Laboratory Grant Museum of Zoology	Artist-in-residence	UK	https://www.ucl.ac.uk/urban-lab/people
University of Brighton	Centre for Transforming Sexuality and Gender	Artist-in-residence	UK	https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/museums/tag/artist-in-residence/
University of York	Centre for Applied Human Rights	Activist-in-residence	UK	https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/ctsg/2020/07/29/activists-in-residence-to-work-on-issues-of-gender-and-sexuality/
Barnard College	Centre for Research on Women	Arctivist (collaboration of artist and activist)	USA	https://www.hrdhub.org/arctivism
University of California, Santa Cruz	Research Centre for the Americas	Activist-in-residence	USA	https://bcrw.barnard.edu/bcrw-launches-the-social-justice-institute/
University of California, Los Angeles	Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy, Asian American Studies Centre, cityLAB, and Centre for the Study of Women	Activist-in-residence	USA	https://huertacenter.ucsc.edu/programs/residence-program/
Smith College	The Steinem Initiative	Activist-in-residence	USA	https://challengeinequality.luskin.ucla.edu/activist-in-residence/
Eastern Washington University	Centre for Gender, Women's & Sexuality Studies	Activist-in-residence	USA	https://www.smith.edu/academics/applied-learning-research/jandon-center-community-engagement/steinem-initiative
University of Oklahoma	Centre for Social Justice	Activist-in-residence	USA	https://www.ewu.edu/cahss/gwss/activist-in-residence/
University of Cincinnati	LGBTQ Centre	Activist-in-residence	USA	https://www.ou.edu/cas/csaj/programs/activist-in-residence
Columbia Law School	Human Rights Institute	Practitioner-in-residence	USA	https://www.uc.edu/campus-life/lgbtq/signature-programs.html https://hri.law.columbia.edu/our-work/transformation-and-empowerment/practitioner-residence-program

(Van de Ven et al., 2006: 803). The concept is foundational to the ways universities seek to engage with communities to benefit university actors and partner communities, and to respond to complex political, economic and social issues of context (Peterson, 2009).

Engaged scholarship includes varied ways of conducting research with communities (Cuthill, 2012), such as community-based participatory research (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2003), co-production (Banks et al., 2018) and participatory action research (Kindon et al., 2007). Scholarship on these practices and models demonstrates how they create spaces for reflexivity about the involved researchers' own positionalities and identities, indicating that the evolution of self-awareness and sense of self in the process of research helps all participants involved in collaboration to contribute to social change (Stevens, 2020). In this tradition, AiR programmes bring together the expertise and resources of activists and academics to target a common social cause, while stimulating heightened reflexivity of ways of 'being' and 'doing'. They offer a means to enact engaged scholarship and to respond to critiques of universities as detached from wider society.

Tensions in AiR programmes

In recent years, universities have been subject to a neoliberal shift which re/orients their role from knowledge-democratic to knowledge-economic ends – towards the production of economically beneficial effects with 'real-world' impact (Bourke, 2013; Burawoy and Holmwood, 2011). Hence, the rise of elaborate indices and measurements of output and impact across the sector – including the Research Excellence Framework, the Teaching Excellence Framework and the Knowledge Exchange Framework – that look to calculate the quality and efficiency of universities' research, education and third-mission activities. Such measures have pressured academics to achieve, maintain and demonstrate links of their work to socio-economic impacts and/or to other measurable ways of contributing to a neoliberal conception of the university (Chubb, 2017).

Working with activists in such neoliberalised settings may be risky (Chubb, 2017; Reiter, 2014). While engaging with communities can be a method for more inclusive knowledge production, it also risks conscripting such communities into working regimes which might otherwise be the very target of their activism. Burawoy and Holmwood (2011) highlight the rise of instrumental engagements with communities, which emphasise outcomes for policy and policymakers, and which serve as a measure of professional success for academics, rather than as critical, reflexive knowledge-building exercises targeted at enhancing public good. The 'participation' of communities thereby becomes their co-optation to serve neoliberal ends (Leal, 2007). When activists agree to take on a role in universities, they enter the neoliberal-infused procedures and priorities of academia.

Even if engagement with activists is undertaken as a genuine attempt to contribute to social justice and to develop more inclusive processes, further tensions arise through the process by which activists enter universities. The question of who is selected and deemed a 'viable' and 'productive' activist by any given university is key. What values (and concomitant constraints) lie behind decision-making processes? The mere fact of a university issuing an invitation to engage (often through the competitive context of an open call) conveys the relative distribution of power. As Leal (2007: 545) notes:

Genuine empowerment is about poor people seizing and constructing popular power through their own praxis. It is not handed down from the powerful to the powerless, as institutional development has conveniently chosen to interpret the concept. Those who give power condition it, for, as Paulo Freire (1970) best put it himself: 'Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift'.

Understanding power dynamics when a university provides both space and resources to activists is a critical part of assessing how universities value AiR programmes and whether and how activists are able to negotiate their own sense of identity in such collaborations (Stevens, 2020). Moreover, ways of working, generating knowledge, and the meaning of space and collaboration may all vary in the highly

institutionalised structures of a university as compared to those of activist contexts (Cameron, 2007; Kindon et al., 2007). Bringing together markedly different modes of operating is a relational activity which can lead to conflict (Barge and Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; Van de Ven, 2007).

A way to address some of these concerns about AiR programmes is to create processes that establish meaningful collaborations, including the mindful building of fair partnerships and respectful and inclusive discussion and negotiation of expectations and plans (Hall et al., 2013; Minkler and Wallerstein, 2003). Further, engaged scholarship between academics and communities requires consistent, sustained engagement throughout the entire process, and must benefit the community as the ultimate determining factor of success (Stanton, 2008). Processes that confront and address these structural tensions should be built into any residency by intentionally and purposefully creating time and space for reflection and inclusive communication (Gitlin and Russell, 1994; Ladwig and Gore, 1994). Openness to discussing conflict and failure, embedded in a process of creating a metaknowledge about the experience, can be helpful for collaborators (Reiter and Oslender, 2014; Rooke, 2016).

In sum, the essential purpose of AiR programmes is to put into action the combined knowledge created in universities and in the work of activists, while creating a transformative space for both activists and academics that ignites critical consciousness. However, the default positionings of collaborators – with activists oriented towards action and academics towards reflection (Stevens, 2020) – will likely present tensions in motivations, approaches and outcome expectations that themselves require negotiation.

AiR programmes: insights from existing examples

In recent decades, AiR programmes established in the USA and in Europe have been housed in higher education institutions whose work is linked with a social good or with social justice. To glean insights into the current use of AiR programmes in universities, we conducted an online search and reviewed materials (calls for applications, scheme descriptors, blogs and so on) from 15 programmes based across 14 higher education institutions – 8 in the USA, and 7 in the UK (see Table 1). Mindful of the overlapping learning and inspiration from artist-in-residencies (see the section ‘Activism within higher education settings’, above), our search also included 3 of these. In general, we were struck by the paucity of publicly available documentation on AiR programmes, and the scant narrative evidence about the nature of such programmes, their successes and failures, and the tensions and opportunities that arise from both activist and institutional perspectives.

Based on the information we did find, we conducted a thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), which investigated the goals and aims, format and type of AiR programmes, alongside potential or actual effects, outputs or impacts. We found that AiR programmes varied greatly in structure and length, with some lasting a few months and others, years. Some covered living expenses or accommodation and a stipend, others offered grants towards projects and were not (necessarily) ‘residencies’ in the sense of a sustained on-site presence. We also noted that several institutions used nomenclature beyond simply artist/activist-in-residencies. Columbia Law School named its programme the ‘practitioner-in-residence’ around its intention ‘to promote human rights scholarship grounded in practice’ (Columbia Law School, 2020), while the University of York’s ‘activist’ programme awarded grants to online collaborations between activists and artists that addressed social challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic (University of York, 2020).

Whatever the chosen nomenclature, residencies focused squarely on interdisciplinary issues: for example, women and gender (LSE, 2020), LGBTQ and sexuality (University of Brighton, 2020a), and human rights (Columbia Law School, 2020). While residency work may itself be broadly interdisciplinary, we also found several scheme descriptors that asserted that topics should ‘align with the mission of the [institution]’ (UCSC, n.d.: n.p.). For example, for the LGBTQ+ AiR programme at the University of Brighton, one selection criterion for activist involvement was ‘the fit with the ethos and aims of the [institution]’ (University of Brighton, 2020a: n.p.) – a desired conformity between university and activists

which might constrain the latter's willingness 'to bite the hand that feeds', a fostering of 'diplomatic' rather than 'oppositional' activism (Barnett, 2021)?

Our search surfaced manifold benefits to activists of AiR programmes, including the time and space to enrich their work. The offer of campus resources (for example, desk space, library resources) was common (University of Brighton, 2020a). Many of the AiR programmes focused on kick-starting, developing and/or promoting the activists' own work (LSE, 2020; Smith College, 2020). Expectations regarding the residency work typically remained open and flexible, but sometimes involved a 'tailored plan of engagement' (LSE, 2020), and were framed frequently as a space for reflection (LSE, 2020; UCLA, 2020). Several AiR programmes marketed the residency as a way to 'deepen' (Barnard College, 2018), 'advance' or 'develop' (University of Brighton, 2020a) the activists' thinking.

AiR programmes also sometimes explicitly offered spaces for activists to build movements, bringing people together, drawing attention to 'public scholarship or service projects', and developing communities and networks around social issues (UCLA, 2020). There was recognition of activist expertise in fostering a spirit of social activism and of developing similar expertise in students through, for example, workshops, class visits and field research opportunities (EWU, 2020; UCLA, 2020; University of Oklahoma, 2020).

According to available documentation, it appeared rare for activists to inform research approaches or to 'contribute to the University's intellectual and political culture' (University of Brighton, 2020a: n.p.). Some schemes mentioned a generic hope that activists would introduce new ways of thinking into academia (Goldsmiths, 2020; UCLA, 2020), or would lend their expertise in a way that 'harnesses disruptive ideas, open debate and progressive thinking to redress inequalities and social injustices of the twenty-first century' (University of Brighton, 2020b: n.p.). However, in general, there was little articulation as to how activists might disrupt the universities themselves, and how they might reframe dominant academic practices – once again, a bias towards diplomatic rather than oppositional activism.

In sum, our search highlighted that scheme descriptors foregrounded the benefits to activists over those to institutions. This may be a simple reflection of the power dynamic inherent to an institution 'inviting in' activists, but we believe institutions would profit greatly from careful thought about, and explicit articulation of, the benefits back to themselves of AiR programmes.

Evaluating AiR programmes: a reflexive process evaluation framework

In this section, we propose a reflexive process evaluation framework to reflect on the planning, design and delivery of AiR programmes, with the aim of mitigating tensions and challenges. Our hope is that the framework will support the effective establishment of new AiR programmes, and offer a useful tool for evaluating residencies as they unfold.

Introducing process evaluation

Largely used in the health and development sector, process evaluations are defined as studies that aim:

To understand the functioning of an intervention, by examining implementation, mechanisms of impact, and contextual factors. Process evaluation is complementary to, but not a substitute for, high-quality outcomes evaluation. (Moore et al., 2015: 8)

Process evaluations focus on 'how' change happens rather than on the outcomes of an intervention. These kinds of evaluations engage with the complexity of an intervention, which expresses itself in (at least) the following ways (Craig et al., 2008; Keshavarz et al., 2010; Moore et al., 2015) (and here we draw parallels with the complexity in AiRs):

- The variety of programme components, how they interlink, and the skill sets needed for their delivery. AiR programmes may include multiple modes of engagement (conversations, collaborations, teaching interventions and workshops) with multiple actors (students, faculty, communities, activists), which may come together to give unexpected results.
- The way in which the intervention links with the context, and how the context itself feeds into the programme. AiR programmes are, almost by definition, framed as an attempt to change the institutional and societal status quo (that is, to act as a source of productive tension).
- The degree of flexibility in the programme, and the permitted variability in outcomes. While AiR programmes are established with a larger purpose, their emphasis on flexibility ensures that the activist and university have space to create critical discussions, processes and outputs.

While we draw on the concepts and components of process evaluation, we modify the tool to suit the complexity and power dynamics inherent to AiR programmes, encouraging a reflexive stance. We believe that mindfully focusing on the process of engagement during an AiR programme can address, and even change, power dynamics and defuse tensions, so as to build meaningful, rather than instrumental, collaborations. Further, reflection may focus on established institutional dynamics and ways of doing and thinking, thereby offering an opportunity to crystallise experiences into ignition points for institutional change. So, we propose a reflexive process evaluation framework to assess the effectiveness or otherwise of engagement processes involved in the planning, design and delivery of AiR programmes.

Proposing a reflexive process evaluation framework

Our starting point is [Moore et al.'s \(2015\)](#) three components of process evaluation – ‘implementation’, ‘mechanisms of impact’ and ‘context’ – to which we add two more: ‘motives for collaboration’ and ‘overarching reflection on power and processes’. We detail each of the five components below, and summarise them in [Table 2](#).

Component 1 – Motives for collaboration

Activists and universities should have open and honest conversations as to their motives for collaboration, and how these may vary and shift in importance throughout the residency. While activists and universities may share larger, societal change goals, they may simultaneously hold different views on what constitutes change, on how change is brought about, and on what signifies successful change. We recommend formulation of a theory of change to articulate shared change goals.

The benefits of any given AiR programme need not, and likely will not, be the same for each collaborator, but there must be mutual benefit from collaboration. Intentional discussions should aim to create an understanding and recognition of what may be gained from collaboration, but also what may be lost.

Our steers in [Table 2](#) seek to support collaborators to build on the common aim of mobilising a joint change vision, to discuss what each brings to the collaboration, to identify shared, and distinct, values, and to set concrete expectations in terms of both the objectives and practicalities of the programme.

We do note that multiple motives for establishing and participating in an AiR programme may coexist. A lack of a single, shared consensus should not be considered failure. If an AiR programme is to challenge existing ways of thinking and doing, then a central prerequisite must be a willingness to embrace the need for difference, even dissent, and that doing so will be a source of rich learning and reflection for all.

Component 2 – Implementation

The ‘implementation’ component examines *how* delivery of AiR objectives will be achieved ([Moore et al., 2015](#)). Delivery cannot happen without resources such as funding, training and support for those involved,

Table 2. Framework for a reflexive process evaluation of AiR programmes (inspired by Moore et al., 2015)

Component	Points for consideration	What this looks like in practice
<p>Motives for collaboration</p>	<p>Identify the overarching goals and theory of change for the residency In this, look to elucidate the value of the residency to respective collaborators, to collectively prioritise goals and to highlight where current values and practices between collaborators intersect.</p> <p>Develop mutual understanding and articulate benefit Building on the above, you may explore divergent or convergent understanding of 'activism' among collaborators, and identify the respective roles each will play in the residency. The goal here is to articulate what a meaningful collaboration will look like for those involved, and the mutual benefits to be had.</p>	<p>Initial scene-setting discussion between collaborators as to the points of consideration, see left.</p> <p>Ongoing reflection on how the theory of change and goals are evolving (for example, at beginning, mid-term and end of the residency).</p>
<p>Implementation</p>	<p>Identify the resources in place, or required, for successful implementation of the residency Resources stretch beyond simply the financial to include the likes of people, networks, activities, documentation and so on that facilitate the work. You could identify the knowledge brokers in the residency, those tasked with spanning inter- and intra-organisational boundaries to ease collaboration.</p> <p>Agree on ways of working Not just who does what, but how decisions will be made and documented, how collaborators will communicate and engage with each other, any red lines, the need for openness and flexibility in collaboration, adopting an iterative approach to delivery and so on.</p>	<p>Brainstorming and re/prioritising possible resources and modes of engagement.</p> <p>Discussions with various actors (students, relevant staff groups, researchers and departments) about resources and potential modes of engagement.</p> <p>Documentation of the modes of engagement.</p>
<p>Mechanisms of impact</p>	<p>Understand how change from the residency is mobilised This necessitates exploring the relative success, or otherwise, of residency activities, appreciating how they have triggered change through varied participants' interactions with them. You might note that different participants engage with different activities in varying ways, and with varied consequences. One aim of such exploration might be to identify how activist expertise and knowledge is best shared across the university.</p> <p>Build on this understanding Are there any unintended consequences, helpful or otherwise, arising from the residency? And how might your understanding of what did and did not work in the residency inform future work?</p>	<p>Feedback from actors on different activities and engagement.</p> <p>Amendment of activities, mechanisms and modes of engagement considering feedback.</p> <p>Documentation of unexpected consequences, and unintended or surprising effects.</p> <p>Separate and combined reflections by actors on change, and their responses to it.</p>
<p>Context</p>	<p>Consider institutional factors affecting the residency, and vice versa You might explore how dominant institutional ways of being, doing and knowing shape the residency or are shaped by it. In the latter instance, is there evidence for the status quo being disrupted?</p>	<p>Initial discussion between actors to understand respective contexts and possible tensions. The context of the university and its processes, and the culture of the activist organisation, are salient.</p>

Table 2 (continued)

Component	Points for consideration	What this looks like in practice
	<p>Consider external factors affecting the residency, and vice versa Likewise, how might wider societal issues shape the work of your residency, or be shaped by it?</p>	<p>Joint reflection on how engagements are affected by institutional/external contexts, and what could be done differently in the future. Reflection on the activists' presence in the university by both the activist and the university.</p>
<p>Overarching reflection on power and processes</p>	<p>Reflect on power dynamics Power dynamics may be evident in the way collaborators interact or in the residency's modes of engagement. Do collaborators feel that power is equalised? Reflect on processes You might explore the efficacy or otherwise of communication processes between collaborators, or ensure documentation of residency engagements and conversations to enable a basis for onward reflection and meta-learning. You might instigate feedback loops to enable iterative evaluation of the residency.</p>	<p>Documenting engagements, collaborations and events. Noting products and outcomes of the residency: papers, activities in the community, student participation and so on. Discussing potential ideas and future plans.</p>

along with communication and management structures (Moore et al, 2015). The 'implementation' component evaluates how resources are organised and prioritised in programme delivery, while keeping in mind relevant internal and external contexts (see Component 4).

An open and flexible approach to implementation acknowledges that activists may have ways of working that are so fundamentally different from that of academia that any prescription might undermine and/or impoverish association. Flexibility can counter difficulties that may arise in planning or implementation; initial ideas may change, and work may take on different directions and require new partnerships (ACA, n.d.; King's Culture, 2020).

The role of active knowledge brokers – that is, individuals who act as intermediaries between actors in an AiR – is crucial to balance the goals of individual actors with the shared goals of the residency, and to work across new ways of 'being' and 'doing'. An effective knowledge broker facilitates conversations, and helps develop networks and relationships that maximise the efficacy of modes of engagement (or 'mechanisms of impact' – see Component 3). As the programme progresses, a knowledge broker should be attuned to how actors are interacting, and which modes of engagement are, and are not, working.

Component 3 – Mechanisms of impact

'Mechanisms of impact' are activities and modes of engagement between different actors and processes that drive change. AiRs often make room for different ways of 'doing', with their activities evolving iteratively. In such situations, a process evaluation provides structure to test and evaluate novel activities. Additionally, programme activities may produce unintended consequences; activity outcomes may not pan out as planned. A process evaluation facilitates space to review unintended consequences in relation to power dynamics and residency goals.

Knowledge brokers are key to testing and refining modes of engagement in practice. We suggest that they should organise the documentation of residency activities and convene intentional discussions about issues, unanticipated responses, successes and failures, so that the residency may evolve through an ongoing, active reflection process. Such discussion enables course corrections, addressing tensions and failures as they arise.

Mechanisms of impact may vary greatly, and may include, among other things: ways of raising awareness (for example, presentations, visual displays, news articles); exposure to different contexts (for example, co-curricular and curricular opportunities for students, volunteering opportunities); working collaboratively or advising on research (for example, co-producing new lines of enquiry or research agendas, contributing to steering groups); and finding ways to translate knowledge into usable, accessible forms for communities and activists (for example, exhibitions). Analysing implemented activities is fundamental to understanding whether a residency is effecting change: who is reached (and who is not), whether and how (different) participants respond to activities, and which combinations of activities and modes of engagement are reaching and engaging participants (see Table 2 for guiding thoughts). Whatever the 'mechanism of impact', it is crucial to ask for feedback from participants as to how they experience it, how different modes of engagement may or may not be attuned to their needs and/or to achieving desired outcomes.

Component 4 – Context

'Context' refers to external factors that shape the functioning of a given programme. As Moore et al. (2015) contend, 'context' refers to anything beyond a designed intervention which impedes or strengthens its effects. Contextual factors can vary from the global (for example, the Covid-19 pandemic) to the local (for example, shifts in institutional priorities). While the focus of this component is on how intervention is affected by context, intervention may also occasionally shape context. Indeed, an explicit focus of AiR programmes may be to disrupt institutional contexts while simultaneously shaping activists' working practices.

Our review of existing AiR programmes (see the section ‘AiR programmes: insights from existing examples’, above) indicated that institutional change was relatively rare. Within such programmes, power imbalances may leave activists feeling ‘obliged’ to moderate their activism to an institutionally ‘acceptable’ level so as to retain access to a university’s resources. Careful thought and discussion are required to negotiate, on the one hand, the desire to invite and cultivate institutional disruption and, on the other **hand**, the risks that such disruption may bring to people’s working lives.

No matter how well planned an AiR programme is, and how well attuned to institutional practices, there is always the matter of events beyond anyone’s control. Recently, the Covid-19 pandemic brought multiple challenges to engagement activities, and disrupted the case study presented in this article. Within a process evaluation, reflecting on, and responding to, external events and institutional contexts should be considered (see guiding thoughts in [Table 2](#)).

Component 5 – Overarching reflection on power and processes

A final component that we propose for an AiR reflexive process evaluation framework is that of ‘overarching reflection on power and processes’. Space must be made for open, challenging dialogic exchange aimed at acknowledging how power dynamics affect modes of engagement and redressing problematic power imbalances.

We recommend that reflection focuses on three areas:

- 1) **Communication:** How does communication between the activist and the university take place throughout implementation? Communication must be planned and regularly maintained, and should include initial conversations about roles and responsibilities, succeeded by ongoing discussions to prompt critical reflection **on the AiR programme** ([Office of Public Art, 2014](#)).
- 2) **Feedback loops:** Throughout residency processes, feedback should be sought from all involved. Gathering feedback enables exploration of new, more effective ways of collaborating, and allows plans to evolve in changing contexts. Feedback and reflection may vary in format, and may be incorporated into the activists’ work to shape the residency ([King’s Culture, 2020](#)).
- 3) **Documentation:** There should be consistent documentation of modes of engagement, mechanisms of impact, and ongoing communication and feedback. Creating such documentation provides the basis for subsequent reflection and for meta-learning. Documentation can take many forms – visual, audio, prose and notes ([King’s Culture, 2020](#); [Office of Public Art, 2014](#)).

In [Table 2](#), we suggest areas to consider, all aimed at better understanding the role of power dynamics and processes as they shape effective practice in AiR programmes.

In the next and final section, we present a case study of an AiR programme at King’s College London, and evaluate it considering our reflexive process evaluation framework.

Applying a reflexive process evaluation framework: a case study from King’s College London

Case study background

Our case study is an AiR programme that ran from 2019 to 2021 between Queer@King’s, the centre for research and teaching in gender and sexuality studies in the Faculty of Arts & Humanities at King’s College London, and a nascent charity working at the intersection of LGBTQ+ **and disability issues**. Our starting point for the programme was that academic work is not in itself a form of activism but rather, ‘the concept of activism gains traction where academic work is intentionally contending against an unfair or unjust situation’ ([Barnett, 2021](#): 522). We hoped that Queer@King’s academic practice, both research and teaching, might be leveraged to critique and/or ameliorate the societal injustices that the charity was actively tackling, drawing attention and adding legitimacy to their cause.

With reference back to Barnett's (2021) four quadrants that locate different forms of activism (see the section 'Activism within higher education settings', above), our reflection is that our AiR programme would be best classified in the diplomatic-collective quadrant. The programme was designed explicitly as collective, drawing on diverse academic practice researchers from the interdisciplinary Queer@King's research centre, alongside the professional practice and knowledge of several representatives from the charity, and it was diplomatic in that activists were invited in (those wishing to be oppositional would have been unlikely to accept the invitation in any case). It was hoped that insights from the programme would bring about fundamental reform, where needed, of challenges lying at the intersection of LGBTQ+ and disability issues, and in potentially oppressive hegemonic academic practices.

For us, establishment of the AiR programme provided an intentional institutional space, a structure, for activism to take place. Here, we envisaged structure not as an oppressive force but rather, to 'open spaces', and to inspire activists' minds to 'open structures' (Barnett, 2021: 521). We were conscious, perhaps even hopeful, that the space might be re/formed by the activists, with new possibilities – for example, new democratic structures – arising.

Data for our case study consist of information provided by key participants of the AiR programme, including the authors and a representative of the charity (with the latter's informed consent to include their insights, albeit unnamed). Through conversations, and written and verbal reflections, we applied our reflexive process evaluation framework to test its effectiveness as a usable tool for AiR programmes. Process evaluations can be applied during or after the implementation of an intervention. In our case, we developed and applied the framework after the conclusion of the AiR programme. As such, we will have missed opportunities for structured data collection. Nonetheless, the framework's post hoc application still generated useful insights.

Case study insights

Component 1 – Motives for collaboration

The Queer@King's AiR programme was conceived as a pilot to understand how purposeful and structured engagement with activism and activists might benefit both the work of a research centre and that of LGBTQ+ activists and the communities that they serve. At the outset, an open call for activist applications set out the objectives and parameters of the residency as follows:

We invite applications from individuals, groups, communities, and organisations in the Greater London area – both newly/recently founded and more established – who have limited or no access to funding and resources for the realisation of their ideas for community projects and activist work.

We especially encourage applications for projects that:

- stand little chance of finding financial support through other means;
- experiment with new or unusual approaches to activist work;
- benefit causes and groups that may otherwise struggle to receive attention or are under-served/under-represented in mainstream LGBTQ+ activism;
- make the most of the resources, support, context, and infrastructure that we as a university-based queer centre can offer to amplify their work.

Despite largely positive feedback, the open call stirred some negative responses from a few individuals who saw universities as part of the repressive status quo, and thus inimical to their work; oppositional activists declining the opportunity to work diplomatically.

The activist organisation selected was a budding charity, keen for support in realising a range of events that they had planned. They saw collaboration with Queer@King's as a platform for their cause,

and as an endorsement of the importance and timeliness of their work. They were keen to highlight the intersection of disability with LGBTQ+ issues, to critically explore how disability was talked about, and to move away from ideas of needs and vulnerability to ideas of inclusivity, celebration and resilience. As the activist representative said:

Creating awareness and amplifying the voices of LGBTQ+ people is a way of activism. Addressing the lack of inclusion is not just talking about the struggles of our community, but also giving visibility to our stories of empowerment, and changing the narrative and perception of disabled people, especially in the media.

While none of the academics involved in the AiR programme questioned the suitability of the label 'activist' for the chosen charity, the charity itself did not self-describe in this way. Their representative felt that, in comparison with organisations such as Stonewall, they did not consider their work particularly activist. This is in contrast to their quotation above mentioning how creating awareness and amplifying the voices of LGBTQ+ people, the work of their very organisation, was a 'way of activism'. Perhaps this points to the power of the subjective in definitions? One person's perception of activism, of what it looks like to be an activist, might not align with another's.

Another interesting point that emerged from both parties' post-residency reflections was that, while Queer@King's referred to this period of collaboration as a 'residency', the charity referred to a 'partnership'. This was significant, because while a residency is time-limited, the activist representative saw the partnership as ongoing, and as having a legacy beyond the residency period.

Component 2 – Implementation

The first step towards implementing the pilot was developing and running an application process. The application form was designed to be clear and short, to reduce the burden on activists, asking only for one page with responses to a few questions, and offering the option to include a creative piece (writing, illustration, audio, video and so on) in response. This aimed to mitigate bias towards formats of traditional academic writing and project presentation. The approach was successful in the eyes of the activist representative:

I remember thinking 'Wow! an application for funding that's one pager!'.. the turnaround time was very quick, [they would] get back by the end of the summer ... this is all very refreshing!

A Queer@King's representative noted the scale of staff and resources required to organise a residency and to support activists (Matzner, 2022), such as setting up and maintaining websites, working with different parts of the university system, and assigning staff hours to run the residency. Post-residency, the Queer@King's representative observed that it would have been useful to have a knowledge broker. Such a person would need:

Institutional memory and orientation to spot promising connections across the university ... and they need to be in an institutional position to make introductions and support early-stage, exploratory conversations that sound out interest in and feasibility of activist ideas in dialogue with potential collaboration partners. (Matzner, 2022: 53)

The need to make concerted effort to establish contacts and resources of value to the activist also came up in the activist representative's reflections:

Queer@King's had already come up with a few links to colleagues and who to speak to. Maybe I haven't used all of them; I sort of selected one or two, but the information was there, and then you choose whatever best you think you need; but it was always very positive to have this resource there.

Additional resources considered helpful by the activist representative were use of university spaces and a university email address. They explained that, as a new charity, they regularly held meetings in coffee shops, and to be able to use university rooms in central London was useful to grow their presence.

Communications throughout the residency were somewhat sporadic, and there was no single individual assigned to document residency activity and associated learnings in a planned and consistent manner. However, the activist representative noted that meetings happened whenever needed, and that Queer@King's were always available to provide support and guidance.

A significant part of the residency for Queer@King's was built-in flexibility. The activist organisation applied for the residency with a particular landmark event in mind, a showcase of disabled and queer talent. They utilised the residency funds (totalling £2,000) to organise the event, and to make it more accessible and inclusive. However, as the activists got to know Queer@King's better, and developed a greater sense of the resources and support available, they explored further opportunities, with new ideas emerging. Eventually, the AiR programme ended up involving many different events – greater in number and diversity – than originally planned.

Component 3 – Mechanisms of impact

A variety of events took place under the aegis of the residency, including performance events and talks with artists identifying as queer and as disabled. These brought together forms of creative expression and critical dialogue, and other ways of raising awareness about disability and accessibility. For example, the landmark event planned by the activists was complemented by reflections and conversations in the form of online panels that brought together the university community, the charity and the community with, and for whom, both academics and activists sought to work.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, residency events went online, and the charity hosted a series of forums for sharing stories from the community, which were well attended and received. The charity was also involved in university-wide events, such as: LGBTQ+ History Month; a creative arts competition for undergraduate students on the theme of 'Inclusion in Society'; and an online programme for students about intercultural experiences in London. The activist representative perceived value in learning from one another through such activities.

In the desire to be better allies, Queer@King's learned from the charity about the importance of consistently providing British Sign Language interpretation at both in-person and online events, and built this into their ongoing centre activities. They also developed a guide to inclusive events for other research centres across King's, thereby extending the learning and legacy of the residency.

No single individual was tasked with documenting the residency and the feedback from participants at associated events. This was recognised as a missed opportunity; the presence of feedback loops would have been a constructive tool for agenda and future-building. It would also have been useful to capture how participants from across and outside King's had been impacted, what they wanted to do, and see done, next, and how they saw the(ir) cause being furthered.

Component 4 – Context

The Covid-19 pandemic started a few months into the programme. Resultant uncertainty cast doubt over whether the residency would continue at all. A shift to digital was agreed by collaborators, not least as a sign and act of solidarity:

We felt it's important to keeping a dialogue going during the pandemic ... And, in this moment, everyone was experiencing a feeling of isolation, even those who haven't had a problem with exclusion before. We wanted to talk about the idea of disability exclusion, because maybe it was something a lot more people could identify with now, or at least empathise with, this feeling of being left out or being alone. (Activist representative)

The activist representative recognised that the lockdown was not something anyone could have planned for, but, having now lived and worked through one, they would always have a digital contingency plan. Admittedly, the shift to online stymied key advantages of the residency – for example, access to physical university spaces – but the activist representative appreciated the effort made by Queer@King's to support online activities.

In terms of internal contexts, constraints around having to follow university processes – for example, on planning and budgeting – were noted. In practice, such processes hold a large sway over what is, and is not, possible. Workarounds commonly had to be found, not least in getting money to the activist organisation. The Queer@King's representative also noted the impact of busy periods in academic life. While they intuitively and purposefully planned around this, they recognised the need in future to communicate to activists the pinch points in the academic year, perhaps through an academic 'heatmap calendar', alongside ascertaining from the activists **where they foresaw** their own time constraints (Matzner, 2022).

Component 5 – Overarching reflection on power and processes

Communication happened as and when needed; however, we recommend regular meetings, drawing on the relevant prompts from our reflexive process evaluation framework (Table 2), to create intentional space for dialogic exchange, to review how activities are working, and to build on, and amplify, any successes.

Part of the original aims of the Queer@King's AiR programme was to give a platform to activists. While expressing a clear power dynamic – Queer@King's conditioned the offer within which activists could engage – the activist representative ultimately felt positive:

Overall, for an organisation like ours, which, at the time, was very new, to be given the opportunity by such a prestigious university was an indication that there was a need for an organisation like [ours], and that work that we are doing is relevant and timely.

Note the perception of the 'prestige' of King's. Such prestige is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, a prestigious institution may offer a greater platform for crucial, under-represented issues. On the other hand, forces of prestige may act **to constrain activist power**.

While the charity possessed its own networks, the connection to diverse people and other organisations in the university's network was beneficial. Such connections opened new prospects for future partnerships; generated ideas on how to better incorporate research into advocating for the activists' work; stimulated plans for continuing collaborations with other parts of the university; and created access to staff and student volunteers. The programme thus extended the realm of the possible, offering new ways of 'doing' for both academics and activists alike.

The Queer@King's representative noted that the AiR had a transformative effect on how staff approached and incorporated ideas of disability and accessibility, at both personal and professional levels. The residency:

prompted centre members to far-reaching reflections on how their embodied experience, for instance in terms of chronic illness, is related to their queerness and queer work in ways they had not contemplated prior to our collaboration with [the activist organisation].

Conclusion

The act of inviting activists into a university under the auspices of an AiR programme is fraught with challenges. Once so invited, critical attention to the contribution of both the activist and the academic community, and to the process of ensuing engagements, is crucial to create clarity about the transformative potential of the AiR. As universities evolve, with neoliberal metrics on one side and the desire to decolonise academic spaces on the other, AiRs provide a space for critical dialogic exchange, and the chance both to

learn from knowledge production taking place outside traditional academia and to advance knowledge democracy. In such collaborations, academics must acknowledge tensions and challenges, and make engagements, even conflicts, productive to advance social change.

This article has sought to bring together theoretical reflections with practical experience drawn from an AiR programme, using the resultant insights to propose and test a reflexive process evaluation framework that recognises imbalances and inequities inherent in such programmes, and that turns such tensions into productive learning opportunities. The presence of activists in universities requires going beyond simple acknowledgement of their expertise; it is crucial to open the possibility of learning in ways beyond the 'traditional' to effect social change. While we focus specifically on AiRs, we believe our framework can extend to other collaborations between universities and activists striving for social change. Within a context aiming to decolonise universities, and to make the production of knowledge more inclusive, we hope that more AiRs emerge, turning the gap between academics and activists into intentional spaces for mutually transformative and enriching encounters.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors were involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of the AiR that forms the case study included in this article. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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