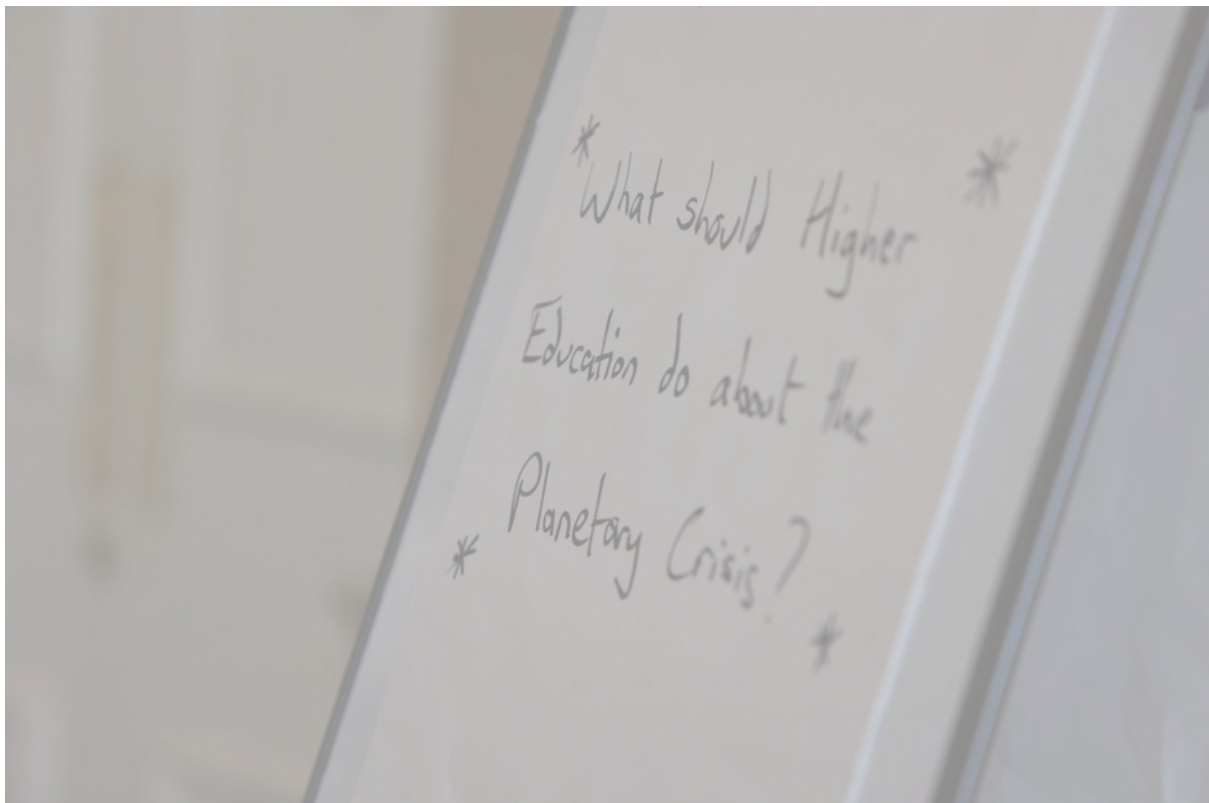# 'What should Higher Education Institutions do about the Planetary Crisis?'

Organisers' report on 3rd November 2023 event at Galway Bay Hotel, Galway

January 2024

With this report, we seek to present, synthesise and provide some analysis on insights gathered during the 3 November 2023 workshop 'What should Higher Education Institutions do about the Planetary Crisis?' at the Galway Bay Hotel. The event was co-organised by a team from University of Galway and Queen's University Belfast and benefitted from the participation of university staff, researchers, students, community members and activists from across the island of Ireland.

The origins of the meeting lie in concerns about how and in what ways institutions of higher education across the island of Ireland and elsewhere are not fully responding to our worsening climate and ecological crisis, nor transforming themselves to be 'fit for purpose' in relation to it.

We would in particular like to thank Davie Philip and Chris Chapman for their facilitation of the event, to the University of Galway for generously funding it, to our 'provocateurs' – Prof Hannah Daly (University College Cork), Dr Su Ming Khoo (University of Galway), Prof Peadar Kirby (University of Limerick), Eddie Mitchell (Activist, Love Leitrim) and Áine Treanor (Activist, Communities Against the Injustice of Mining (CAIM)) – and to Prof Mary Murphy (Maynooth University) for acting as a keynote listener. We would also like to thank those who came on the day and participated in the discussions, as well as those who expressed interest and support for the initiative but could not make it – we hope to see you at a future session.

This short report represents our attempted distillation of the main themes and issues that emerged on the day through our small group discussions and plenary deliberations. While it is not therefore a verbatim record, we hope that those who participated can recognise it as a fair summary. We also published an article based

[on the conference](#) in The Irish Times on 11th January 2024 (Sheehan, McGeown and Barry, 2024).

We hope the event held in Galway is the first of many such meetings and related discussions between those working in HEIs in Ireland (and beyond) and between HEIs and the wider community, to work together, share ideas and collaborate on figuring out how and in what ways HEIs need to transform to help co-create solutions and coping mechanisms for our planetary emergency.

A follow-up event is scheduled to take place on **Friday 15th March 2024** at Queen's University Belfast, with plans for subsequent events in Dublin and Cork.

Please pass this report to others in your places of work, caring, interests or activism, along with information about forthcoming events. And let us know if you or others would like to join the informal network we have helped bring together.

Dr Sinéad Sheehan   sheehan.sinead@universityofgalway.ie

Dr Calum McGeown   cmcgeown16@qub.ac.uk

Prof John Barry   j.barry@qub.ac.uk

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Introduction

Given the planetary crisis is linked to other gender, racial, social and economic injustices, what we are facing are multiple and interlinked crises. Together, these constitute a 'polycrisis', a moment of urgency. What, then, can and should our Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and those working and learning within them, do in response?

This report covers the proceedings from a one-day participatory event that was hosted and supported by the University of Galway and held at the Galway Bay Hotel. The workshop was organised in response to a perceptible and growing sense of discontent with the levels of action our HEIs are taking to address the planetary emergency. Its purpose was to bring people working and learning within HEIs across the island of Ireland (researchers, students, cleaners, management, estates, procurement, HR, etc.), as well as others who have a stake or interest in the knowledge, research and other activities of higher education (local community members, farmers, activists, civil society organisations, etc.), together to begin discussing what a different plan of action – one more commensurate with the urgency of our situation – may look like.

Event aims

Connect across borders Higher Education Institution staff, students and community activists in a non-hierarchical format to learn from each other and work together on a common goal.

Engage in discussions informed by a wide variety of perspectives on the topic of what universities in Ireland (and beyond) can and should do at this time of global crisis.

Create an island-wide network of activists, staff and students.

Compile action points which attendees (and those who cannot attend) can continue to work towards as part of this network.

Workshop format

The workshop was styled as a World Café event and guided by experienced facilitators. It was structured around three distinct but closely related topics that form the foundations of academic practice and HEI operations: Research; Education; Community Engagement and Outreach.

Each session began with two/three short 'provocations' from academic and activist guest speakers before attendees engaged in a round of small group discussions, with

approximately four people per group. At the end of these discussions, each group was asked to produce three clear, concise and distinct **insights** which encapsulated the main themes they addressed as a group. These insights were then collected and drawn upon as the basis of a whole-group feedback session and wider discussion about each topic.

It is these insights, generated by small group discussions, that have been used as the basis of this report (see appendix for full list).

To end the day, a fourth and final session focused on points of action and next steps, which have been listed at the end of this report. We hope that they provide some inspiration now, and also that they will be further developed in future events of this kind.

Research

The first session of the day focused on the topic of research, how it is often currently conducted and how it could or should be conducted differently. The 48 insights harvested from the tables (see appendix) are indicative of expansive and critically reflective discussions that ranged from concerns about individual researcher practice/s to the institutional values, processes and incentives that affect and/or constrain them.

As an overarching theme, these insights suggest that participants believe research, and researchers and HEIs more generally, can and should take a more proactive or 'mission-led' approach to addressing social needs and issues of (un)sustainability. As per the event's focus on action, they also provide suggestions on how this might be achieved. These have been organised into the following themes (though some individual insights speak to more than one of these):

- Research as/for public good
- Research culture and academic practice
- Alternative funding models, processes and priorities
- Institutional responsibility

Research as/for public good

A standout theme concerned the relationship between research/researchers and the wider (i.e. non-academic) community, suggesting that more should be done to ensure community representation within and control over research agendas, priorities and practices. For example, one insight noted that "The public should own the research – be part of it and be able to impact it".

Others reinforced the idea that public concerns should be central to current and future research through notions of academic service and co-production, for example identifying a need for a "community campus" focused on research in and with the community that begins with the question "What do you need?". These notions were complimented by concerns for greater accessibility to, equality in and de-professionalisation of research, including a need for "de-commodifying research", "valuing knowledge by experience", "decolonizing research", using less jargon and "policy speak" in communications and "devising a mechanism where activists can seek a researcher" for their needs.

One insight was more specific in identifying the potential for engaging with refugee/immigrant communities through research, "to learn what's happening in their country (e.g. global south)" and provide education that is diverse and addresses relative privilege in Ireland.
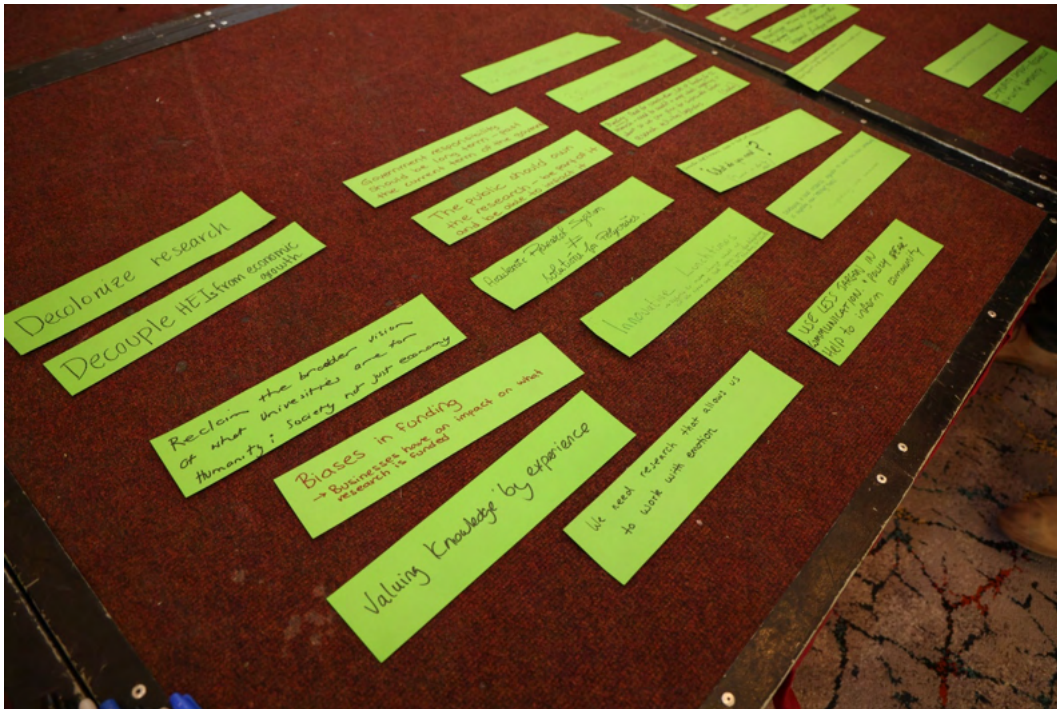
Research culture and academic practice

A need for establishing greater levels of collaboration emerged as a major theme, in terms of both research culture and practice. Regarding academic culture, one insight noted that it currently "works against collaboration and cross-pollination", another that an "extractive approach to academic career development encourages individual non-collaborative ethic". This competitive logic was also identified as existing at (inter-)departmental levels, where "different departments are often industry-led, others more socially/environmentally conscious". These insights and others suggest that more institutional incentives and support are required to promote collective and interdisciplinary approaches to research.

Pursuing the implied 'collaborative ethic' within institutions also compliments concerns for establishing greater levels of co-production with communities as noted above (see Research as/for public good), which might be conceptualised as a need take a more democratic approach to research in general. This analysis is supported by other insights suggesting that research should be impact-led. Two of these insights offered practical ideas for tools that could be developed to encourage/incentivise such an approach, including "developing consistent metrics to assess social and environmental impacts of research" and "using criteria about climate/biodiversity impact for promotion", to demonstrate what difference research is making in practice. One suggested that an academic Hippocratic Oath could instil a formal commitment to "do no harm to the environment".

Building on research impact, other insights focused on the theme of academic activism within research culture and practice. These included advocating that research ethics "needs to align with activism" as well as offering some practical ideas

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for how individual researchers/research teams and their institutions could accommodate and encourage academic action/activism, including (re)allocation of time and resources to support activist engagement and the development of interdisciplinarity and "new thinking for climate". While some noted that "duty and vulnerability are unevenly distributed" within the profession, others suggested "slow scholarship" as a form of activism, "particularly when balanced with outreach".


Alternative funding models, processes and priorities

Given the extent to which research projects and agendas are required to respond to priorities outlined by funding bodies and HEIs, it is unsurprising that a need for 'upstream' changes to funding models were widely cited by participants. The issues raised were wide-ranging, suggesting that (a) concerns about funding relate to all aspects of 'academia-as-usual', not just how specific research may or may not be funded, and (b) there is therefore no straightforward or one-size-fits-all 'fix' for these issues. For example, one insight raised the fundamental issue of how Higher Education is funded as an external challenge: "If HEIs were sufficiently funded through taxation (and not reliant on corporate sponsors, for example) many of the obstacles and tensions we discussed would be less of a problem".

Others noted a need for greater levels of transparency and addressing biases in funding, citing the influence that business and industry have over what research is funded. Two insights cited the influence of funding from polluting industries in particular, with one suggesting that HEIs should "seek alternative funding from ethical companies without conflict of interest" and the other that more space should be made for critiques of "green growth".

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Some practical proposals for reorienting funding processes and priorities towards research on the planetary crisis were also given. These included a commitment under which HEIs "would only sign off on research applications that show clear positive impact on [the] planetary crisis" and allocating Corporate Social Responsibility funding to an institution's "activism pot". A proposal was made for engaging in a process of auditing and mapping of climate change research, for which there is lots of funding, to determine "what's happening and where so we can plan for sustainable research activities/agendas" at scale.
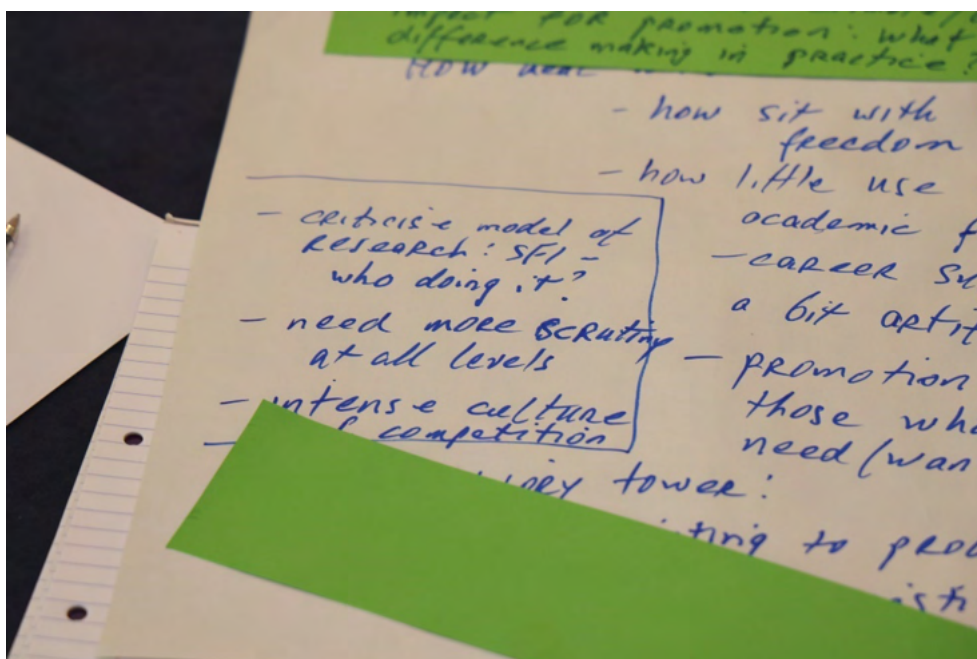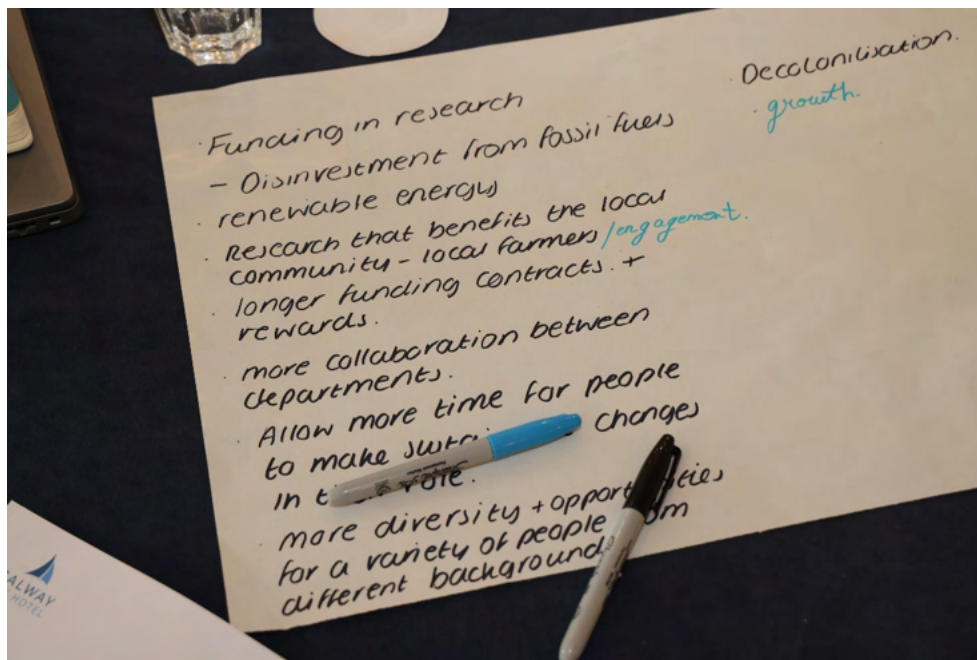
Institutional responsibility

While implicit across each of the above themes, some insights more directly addressed the need for significant change at (inter-)institutional levels, in turn suggesting a need for more leadership from HEI senior managers regarding solutions-focused research on the planetary crisis. These included "resourcing sustainability teams in universities", the "targeted hiring of academic staff with expertise in climate" and accommodating/encouraging interdisciplinary research. A proposal was made for creating university clusters – e.g. an "Office for Climate" – to share knowledge locally and globally. Relatedly, a need to close the gap between research and education universities was noted as necessary for teaching novel ideas and establishing dialogue between students and research.

In reference to their operational logic (or purpose), two insights referred to HEIs' relationship with/impact on the wider economy, with one proposing that HEIs should be decoupled from economic growth and another that there is a need to "reclaim the broader vision of what universities are for – society not just economy". Another suggested they should be more proactive in creating "green jobs".

Education

As the core mission of all HEIs, discussions around education in the context of the planetary crisis were, unsurprisingly, lively. This resulted in a wide range of insights across various themes, which we have organised as the following:

- Unlearning as well as new learning
- Diversity, interdisciplinarity and pluralism
- Critical and systems thinking
- The democratisation of learning, pedagogy and teaching
- Embedding sustainability in every course
- Narratives and language
- Emotional learning

Unlearning as well as new learning

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the notion that 'unlearning' is as much a part of re/designing education as 'new learning', and which ranges from recognising and transforming unhelpful institutionalised habits and established hierarchies of knowledge, emerged as a major theme. For some groups participants, this extended to questions about "what should we *not* teach?", including suggestions that HEIs should not be teaching "hyper consumption" practices.

This could be expressed as a strong 'Freirean' view of education that many participants shared, viewing not just 'education as a practice of freedom' (thus moving beyond the dominant 'banking' view of education as the filling of 'empty heads', and instead viewing learning as facilitating self-directed, co-created knowledge acquisition by learners) but also that education should relate to the lived experiences of learners, connect to the real world situations of communities we (teachers and learners) belong to, and that education is to help understand and change the world. The latter can be connected to other issues that were discussed, such as encouraging and cultivating curiosity, creativity and imagination, especially in relation to very different futures beyond the 'greening' or 'decarbonising' of our current political and economic order, but also connected to critical thinking and interdisciplinary forms of knowledge production and acquisition.

Diversity, interdisciplinarity and pluralism

As no one discipline contains either the solutions for the crisis nor a complete analysis of its causes, this means greater interdisciplinarity is needed in education as well as in research (see above). The call for greater pluralism included an explicit focus on the limits and dangers of the lack of pluralism in the teaching of economics, with particular concern around the domination of neoclassical economics. The need

for placing its insights within a broader and more diverse range of thinking about the economy – e.g. feminist, ecological, Marxist – was highlighted, alongside the fact that students should be taught all forms of economics (including neoclassical economics) or forms of political economy that contain ideological and normative assumptions and principles.

Critical and systems thinking

The explicit encouragement of critical thinking or challenging dominant modes of thinking, including what is being taught in the classroom, was viewed as an important component of the type of education needed for co-creating knowledge to equip students for the age of the planetary crisis. This lack of critical thinking was related to insufficient attention to co-creating both interdisciplinary learning and to systems thinking.

Systems thinking was viewed as particularly important in connecting what at first glance seem like disparate domains, for example seeing that the carbon energy system is not only a major component of the economic system but also the food system, given its heavy reliance on carbon energy inputs.

The democratisation of learning, pedagogy and teaching

This theme was expressed in a number of ways, including students co-creating modules with teachers, choosing their own assignments, working in groups on problem-based learning, etc. (e.g. "Student led power for change – giving students a voice in their education). There were also suggestions that regular 'Citizens' Assemblies' on campus could help focus on reviewing and transforming teaching,

learning, outreach and engagement and on-site campus management and procurement in relation to the polycrisis.

The inclusion of non-university groups and interests in designing curricula also emerged as a major strand within this theme, largely viewed in terms of extending beyond the 'usual suspects' of businesses and the policy community (two groups whose involvement is already well catered for within HEIs) to explicitly include community and activist groups and organisations. On this issue, consideration might be given to awarding students credit for working with the local community and helping the solve problems without being extractive or exploitative of these communities or creating more work for them.

Embedding sustainability in every course

The embedding of sustainability in every course was proposed alongside a mandatory module on the causes and consequences of the planetary crisis, as well as its solutions, that every student should take, regardless of degree programmes. Both were motivated by a sense of care for students to ensure they are equipped with the knowledge needed for the world now emerging – e.g. "Focus on teaching skills and values for students to live in a world that doesn't exist yet" – and that educators were being derelict of this duty if that knowledge is absent in the learning experience of students. For some, this means moving beyond a carbon focus for example, in learning about the root causes of the planetary crisis, and students exploring how the capitalist organisation of the economy and its imperative for growth needs to be seen as the source of that crisis. For example, one insight suggested that embedding sustainability into every module should be coupled with "deconstructing how capitalist ideas are embedded into everything, in language [students will] understand". This links back to the teaching of economics in particular.

Additional ideas, closely connected to the mental health/emotional dimensions of learning about the planetary crisis (see below), include extra-curricular 'climate and ecological cafes' where staff and students can come together to talk openly and honestly about it.

Narratives and language

A strong theme emerged around the importance of storytelling in teaching. One insight in particular emphasised a greater need for using language and insights that learners can understand, including positive and realistic stories of hope and change, as well as visual and more imaginative and inclusive modes of communication.

A surprising issue that arose spontaneously on the day was the use of the Irish language, with a portion of the group choosing to talk in Irish. There was strong support for greater use of indigenous language, both as a good in itself and also for providing new insights and ways of connecting with the land, nature and the environment. Its use was noted as part of the process of realising the decolonisation of knowledge production and dissemination, which was itself a strong topic of discussion.

Emotional learning

Given the strong feelings that are associated with learning about the climate and ecological crisis, and their connection with histories and contemporary realities of injustice and harm, integrating emotions and emotional learning was discussed as important in redesigning curricula. For example, insights gathered from small group discussions noted a need for "more diversity in knowledge and language used, incorporating emotions and hope" and "holding emotional spaces" or create "space to feel emotions and options to participate in change for hope".

From a recognition of the climate and ecological anxiety expressed by man students (and teachers) – and the legitimacy of including those emotions in the classroom – to the importance of the mobilising power of emotions such as anger at injustice and hope for a better future, participants suggested a need to decisively move education about the polycrisis beyond the intellectual/cognitive level. Part of this involves greater attention on teaching skills and values for students to live in a world that does not yet fully exist. As one insight suggested, there is a role here for learning from history and connecting past lessons with future challenges, while also acknowledging the truth of 'the future is already here, it's just unevenly distributed'.

The integration of emotions and emotional reactions to learning about the crisis needs some careful thought, given the impacts of such an approach to teaching on both teachers and learners. However, there is also great untapped positive and

transformative potential. One instance of why care is needed is around how and in what ways all learning about the polycrisis should include a consistent honesty about the changes needed – 'Everything, everywhere all at once' (IPCC/Antonio Guterres) – and how climate breakdown will require us to be prepared for futures that our society is currently unprepared for.

This latter point linked to other themes present in discussions around moving beyond 'techno-optimistic' solutions, towards embracing hopeful political and economic innovations and transformations. This was based around two important distinctions that are commonly confused; one is the difference between 'resilience' and 'transformation' as a response to a shock or challenge, the other between 'hope' and 'optimism'. While a common response to difficulty is to cultivate skills and capacities for resilience (whether personal or collective), such as an honest reckoning with the polycrisis, a resilience response can be viewed as conservative and sub-optimal. Resilience commonly means 'bouncing back' from adversity or crisis – i.e. to return to the *status quo ante* – whereas what we need is transformative responses – bouncing forward, as it were – if, from a critical and systems perspective, that status quo is the root cause of the crisis and therefore what is required is structural and system-level change.

This conservative-resilience response is also connected to dominant techno-optimistic responses to the planetary crisis – from, *inter alia*, geo-engineering solutions such as solar radiation management to carbon capture and sequestration or negative emissions technologies – which are effectively around limiting responses to the crisis to within the current political and economic system. Such technological 'solutionism' leaves the political economic system untouched, and effectively amounts to 'greening capitalism' or 'biofuelling the hummer' (Barry, 2016). Of the many questions that should be asked of this strategy, three stand out. First – we have little empirical evidence to suggest such technological solutions can 'decouple' that economic system from its resource, pollution and emissions impact (European

Environment Bureau, 2019), making it high-risk for societies to pursue. Second – what if we already have all the technologies needed to address the crisis but what is required is to explore and implement social innovations alongside largescale structural changes in how our economies are organised? Third – why are we limiting solutions to the crisis to those compatible with the dominant socio-economic and political status quo? In teaching about the crisis, should we only focus on looking at those solutions compatible with that status quo or focus on the full range of sustainable solutions, any of which require transcending that status quo?

Ultimately, much of what was discussed in terms of education was creating learning opportunities for students to figure out for themselves their own understanding of our planetary crisis, including its root causes, uneven consequences and the contested character of the diversity of possible solutions. Implicit across the insights generated from discussions was the need to enable students to connect hope with action and agency, as well as within their learning, to work out their own 'theory of change'. One way of summarising some of the areas and issues discussed around education and pedagogy would be to say that what is required is to focus on co-creating learning for empowering and equipping students with the skills and experiences that look at the 'whole person' and not simply view students as 'brains on legs'. This involves designing teaching and learning that focus on the head, heart and hands. That is, on the necessary intellectual knowledge and skills (the head) coupled with emotionally driven learning that takes head-on the emotional impact of the planetary crisis (the heart), all combined with seeing how knowledge acquisition should be mobilised and used for individual and collective action that seeks to transform rather than simply describe the world (the hands).

These outlines of a 'Hedge School' for our turbulent times might be viewed as contributions towards a 21st Century updating of Newman's 'the idea of a university', and an answer to the question, 'If the world is on fire and we are facing a planetary emergency, why are Higher Education Institutions still operating in a 'business-as-usual' manner?'

Community Engagement and Outreach

The workshop's third round of discussions focused on the topic of community engagement and outreach, which is recognised as a core function of HEIs. The insights gathered from these discussions has been organised into five themes (some insights speak to more than one of them; see appendix).

- Power, empowerment and activism
- Communication and engagement
- Time and space
- Values
- Research

Power, empowerment and activism

Given that two activists acted as 'provocateurs' for this session, it is unsurprising that some of the table discussions focused on activism. The topic often appeared in the context of both power and empowerment. For example, one insight suggested a need to "build into job description incentive structure to allow public engagement partnerships between non-profits and NGOs and academics (currently penalised)", another that there "needs to be security for academics to engage in activism".

Both examples suggest a desire amongst participants to engage in activism, but also the need for more empowerment from the wider institution to enable this style of engaging with the issues of the planetary crisis in relation to the wider community. The insights suggested a need for more incentives and support for activism and community engagement, i.e. as "incentivising community work" and "power-sharing" between the community and HEIs, for example through co-production, university procurement and "community ownership of research".

Community and engagement

The word 'engagement' appeared with high frequency in the insights (7/36), suggesting that discussions tended to stick to the topic at hand, i.e. community engagement. There was a sense that communication in relation to community engagement needs to improve: "Whose voices are not being heard?" "How can we get HEIs to listen?"

Some suggested ways of overcoming this barrier – expressed as "breaking down the walls of knowledge in university" – were to "invite community groups into HEIs to discuss their needs" or "bring together academics/students and public organizations/non-profits".

Time and space

The issues of time and space were discussed in relation to capacity to engage or create engagement between HEIs and the wider community regarding the planetary crisis. 'Time poverty' as a barrier to meaningful community engagement was raised in a number of insights, for example as part of an "algorithmic war on attention", as a need to "break out of rush and hurry" and as "right to time – logic of the way universities are structured makes time rights a real issue".

There was a clear desire for 'creating space', both physical and temporal, including in person and online, for "co-creative conversation" between students, staff and the wider community. There was a desire for the community to come into HEIs and for HEIs to be more active in the community beyond their campuses, for example by "inviting citizens into the university" and for staff to "show up to protests and strikes". The conflict between existing demands on staff and students within current university infrastructure and the additional time needed to engage with the community on issues related to planetary wellbeing was apparent from the insights.

Values

Interestingly, many of the insights on community engagement related to certain values that participants believed were necessary to facilitate better engagement. Examples included "humanity and trust", "reconnect with nature", "spirituality" and "transparency about funding, to avoid bias of greenwashing". It was clear that there was a sense that HEIs do not currently operate on the basis of these values but if they did, there would be better engagement with the community in relation to the planetary crisis.

Multiple insights referred to "extractive values", signalling the likeness between mining or extraction of wealth/minerals/resources from the earth with the extraction of work/time/skills/resources from those who work in HEIs and the wider community. There was a call for "non-extractive research", i.e. research that gives more to the community than it takes. Extractive values were juxtaposed with the conceptualisation of "inner development goals", where staff, students and general wellbeing should take precedence over, or at least be treated with the same importance as, the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Research

Research was a separate topic for discussion outside the conversation on community engagement (see pages 3-5). However, because these separate topics are all related, insights around research were also indicated in relation to community engagement, for example in reference to "research to respond to community needs" and making resources and research expertise available to communities.

Overall, the community engagement conversations provided insights into participants' desires for reciprocal interaction between HEIs and the wider community in terms of empowerment of staff, students and others to create meaningful spaces for communication within HEIs and within community setting, as well as time for activism within and beyond universities. The barriers to engagement between HEIs and the community include lack of recognition or incentives for the time spent by students and staff in community engagement and activism. Often, the extractive nature of universities, where HEIs have become industries of knowledge production for the capitalist economy, presents difficulties for universities to respond to the needs of the community or the planetary crisis.

On the other hand, values such as transparency, openness and connection with nature were considered as facilitating communication and engagement between HEIs and the community, so that universities could interact more effectively with the issues of planetary wellbeing in terms of research, teaching, engagement and activism.

Actions

The 'Actions' section was facilitated in a different way compared to the previous three sessions. Two keynote listeners spoke for approximately five minutes each and referred to the previous discussions. One of the facilitators wrote down theme words during each of these speeches so that there were 17 themes and then allocated one table for each theme (see appendix). Participants were asked to seat themselves at the table which best represented the theme on which they wished to take action and discuss proposed actions. Each table wrote their proposals under the headings of 'I', 'We' and 'They' - what should I do, what should we do together, what should they do. The actions section aimed to consolidate the group's ideas about what could be done to bring about the desired changes based on the previous sessions. The main ideas from each of the headings are discussed here with reference to theories and evidence relating to behaviour change, because 1) any new actions taken can be conceptualised as a change in behaviour and 2) the relatively large body of evidence about behaviour change is underutilised in relation to understanding climate action.

'I'

Altogether there were 29 action suggestions for 'I' and these are summarised into three main ideas:

- Know myself
- Educate myself
- Change myself

Know myself

It appeared as though many attendees ended the day with the intention of personal reflection, for example "reflect on my work", "accepting/addressing trauma", "embrace emotion", "be honest with ourselves", "accept the importance of being wrong". This can be recognised as a positive outcome of bringing 100 or so people together from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds and discussing a common goal. There is undoubtedly a great opportunity for learning from each other and taking on new views when people take time to share and discuss on a topic of interest for approximately six hours. Given the broad agreement that radical systemic change is needed, the first thing we usually need to change is our own behaviours, although it can be difficult to know which behaviours to change in order to impact the planetary crisis. Behaviour change can often start from personal contemplation leading to readiness to change (Proshaka & Diclemente, 1983; 1986; Grimley et al., 1994).

Educate myself

Another recognisable positive outcome is the clear desire from attendees to learn more. Given the multidisciplinary nature of the workshop, attendees were given a taste of different kinds of knowledge, including existing knowledge in the community outside of academia as well as in other disciplines that we often do not have access to. The attendees often expressed a desire for education in collaboration with others in the network for example "inform ourselves on ecology and systems thinking...could be a function of the network", "deepen understanding of the central importance of decommodification", "collaborate/listen", "learn more and make connections". While education alone does not always lead to changing behaviour, social support, such as support from colleagues or others, can be instrumental in helping individuals maintain behaviour change (Kwasnicka, Dombrowski, White & Sniehotta, 2016).

Change myself

There were clear intentions from participants that they wished to make personal change on the basis of personal reflection and education, and in collaboration with a network. Some of the changes proposed included "bring feminist principles into my work", "network of senior academics...to assist and be examples" "take the time to engage and share knowledge with citizens, communities, interest groups". Most of the 'I' changes proposed related to sharing knowledge within and beyond academia, suggesting a particular desire for broader engagement and a sense that making this change could be possible. One of the best predictors of taking action is setting an individual intention (e.g. Conner & Norman, 2022). The workshop provided an

excellent opportunity to set intentions for actions which offers the possibility of creating individual action, especially in the context of a supportive network.

'We'

There were 26 'We' action points falling broadly into three ideas:

- Collective reflection and learning
- Sharing and caring
- Demanding and rejecting

Collective reflection and learning

Similar to the 'I' action points, many of the actions listed under 'We' called for collective reflection and learning, suggesting attendees recognised a need for support and a network for change to be more impactful. Some examples of action points in this theme include "Imagine – build ideas, plan strategy for change", "Sharing stories and positive narratives" and "organise speakers and films on campus". These proposed actions have the possibility to change perceived social norms (Moran, Murphy, Frank & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2013) which is widely considered to have impact on changing behaviour including activism and climate-related behaviour (Silke, Boylan & Brady, 2019; Allcott, 2011).

Sharing and caring

The idea of care was a prominent theme in the 'we' action points and this was related to sharing within a network, for example an "email list/facebook group/whatsapp". There was a clear desire to be part of a collective of people to create transformation together with compassionate principles at the heart of its organisation "care forms a collective" and "encouraging hope". It was suggested that we should "talk more" and "imagine". Creating system transformation isn't easy! The awareness that we ourselves in Ireland are one of the richer countries with the second highest emissions per capita in Europe and are part of the problem causing planetary breakdown elsewhere on a daily basis can lead to a wide range of difficult emotions. It can often seem like we have no control over the future of the polycrisis and this too can cause guilt, anxiety and distress (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Marks & Hickman, 2023). Sharing and caring are therefore necessary components of any network or movement trying to tackle the planetary crisis because we need to be gentle with ourselves and with each other through these challenging times. Compassion is linked to pro-social behaviour (Stevens & Taber, 2021) such as taking action on the planetary crisis.

Demanding and Rejecting

To create transformation, not only must we bring in the new; we must get rid of the old. Demanding and rejecting arose as a consistent theme in the 'We' actions because making demands or calling for rejection tends to be more impactful as a collective compared to as an individual. Examples of demanding and rejecting were, "decommodify our land and way of life" and "demand time load allocation model that recognises all work including activism" and "reject the productivity focus regime".

'They'

'They' in the actions section referred to those who have perceived power in higher education, for example university management committees. There were just eighteen suggested actions in the 'They' section of the actions notes. This might be because participants believed they could achieve more as individuals and collectives compared to trying to take action on 'them'. In fact, the Feminist themed table acknowledged the need for "inclusive language" and suggested that 'they' "belong with us". It may be that there were only eighteen suggestions for 'they' actions because it was last on the list and attendees did not have enough time to write in that section, but this is less likely as there was approximately 20-25 minutes allocated to the table discussions.

The suggestions for 'they' actions can be summarised into the following ideas:

- Value and support
- Reduce and change

Value and support

There was a desire for those with power to value and support the individual and collective actions of 'I' and 'We' through funding as well as recognition. This was expressed in suggested actions for 'they' such as "fund science shops (community engagement spaces)"; "support student actions"; "must acknowledge feminist values" and "reward community engagement".

Reduce and change

In order to bring about systemic transformation, the need for management structures to engage in reduction and change was identified by the attendees, for example "change promotion system", "reduce student timetable" and "reverse the march towards commodification". These suggestions were largely compatible with a model of degrowth, where richer entities need to use less, do less and produce less in order the reverse the trend of capitalist growth which is considered by many to be the major underlying cause of the polycrisis (Hickel, 2021).

Overall, the actions session granted participants opportunity to consider how to bring about the kinds of changes that could lead to universities doing what they 'should' do about the planetary crisis. It was interesting to note that some of the ideas suggested in the actions section were consistent with theories of behaviour change. It is hoped that this workshop and future similar workshops may contribute to bringing about personal and collective actions along with support, encouragement and ideas to those who would like to create systems change within higher education and beyond.

Conclusion

This report provides a thematic analysis of the 'insights' from attendees of a multidisciplinary one-day participatory workshop on 'What should higher education do about the planetary crisis?' The event was particularly inclusive, in that anyone with an interest in the question could attend and contribute. The discussions on research, education, community engagement touched on a broad range of topics relevant to universities in Ireland and beyond, providing a rich set of data and hopefully some mutual inspiration to action. We will continue these conversations and will hold a similar workshop in each of the provinces of Ireland, one in each of the four seasons. We will learn from each other as we grow and aim to develop feasible inclusive actions to bring about systematic change in higher education.

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Appendix

Below is a raw/uncoded list of 'insights' harvested from tables following small group discussions, grouped according to their respective themes.

Research

1. The public should own the research – be part of it and be able to impact it.
2. Limits to academic freedom? Climate proofing and Hippocratic oath – no harm to environment
3. Universities as spaces for reflection and critique – should be a duty
4. Government responsibility should be long term – past the current term of the government
5. Use less jargon in communication. "Policy speak". Help to inform community.
6. Community campus – research in and with community
7. Developing a local research agenda to serve the local community vs imposing new "exciting" topics – co-producing with communities
8. Universities, staff and research needs to start with community needs – "What do you need?"
9. Valuing knowledge by experience.
10. Making research more accessible, de-commodifying research.
11. Incentivising 'mission-led', inter- and trans-disciplinary research via changing the research funding model.
12. Collaboration not competition: culture, future visioning, funding agency
13. Academic culture works against collaboration and cross pollination.
14. A need for greater inter-disciplinarity. E.g. humanities and life sciences.
15. Reclaim the broader vision of what universities are for. Humanity – society not just economy.
16. Extractive approach to academic career development encourages individual non-collaborative ethic.
17. The gap between research and education universities prevents novel ideas being taught and dialogue between students and research.
18. Inter-departmental co-operation and support one another. Different departments are often industry led, others more socially/environmentally conscious.
19. Targeted hiring of academic staff with expertise in climate; need academic schools/faculties that promote trans-disciplinarity (intellectual promiscuity)
20. Academic research system [not fit for?] solutions for polycrisis
21. Have courage to do what you love
22. Creating green jobs
23. University clusters (office for climate) – sharing knowledge local and global.
24. Resourcing sustainability teams in universities.
25. Paying the PhDs more and we have academic freedom.
26. Devising a mechanism where activists can seek a researcher.
27. Fear (fear of change, fear of being different) pervasive among educators but ignored when we stay in the realm of ideas only.

28. We need research that allows us to work with emotion.
29. Duty and vulnerability are unevenly distributed.
30. Ethics needs to align with activism.
31. How much privilege we have here in Ireland and how we should open our ears/mind to refugees/immigrants coming into Ireland and learn what's happening in their country (e.g. global south). Education that is diverse.
32. Decouple HEIs from economic growth.
33. Disconnect between young activists and involvement in research. Seeing 'slow scholarship' as a form of activism and having it on young people's radar, particularly when balanced with outreach.
34. Institutions would only sign off on research applications that show clear positive impact on planetary crisis.
35. Using criteria about climate/biodiversity impact for promotion: what difference making in practice?
36. Decolonize research.
37. Innovative lunchtimes: Efforts to make change should not 'eat' into spare time. Need space for inter-disciplinary and new thinking for climate.
38. Biases in funding – businesses have an impact on what research is funded.
39. Research funding from biggest polluters. Seek alternative funding from ethical companies without conflict of interest.
40. Research budget = EE / CO2
41. Developing consistent metrics to assess social and environmental impacts of research.
42. Universities funding needs to be divested from fossil fuel industry and critical of green growth (i.e. extractive mining like lithium).
43. Research funders must give allocation of CSR an institutions activism pot.
44. Transparency of FFE funding.
45. Funding: Need for coordination; lots of funding for CC research – need to audit and map what's happening and where so we can plan for sustainable future research activities/agendas (scale).
46. Issue of how higher education is funded. If HEIs were sufficiently funded through taxation (and not reliant on corporate sponsors, for example) many of the obstacles and tensions we discussed would be less of a problem (external challenges).
47. Source of funding: Who speaks for the commons?

Education

1. Inside-out teaching: creative teaching; children are natural learners and traditional methods stifle true curiosity.
2. To co-create learning opportunities in the communities – community as a campus. Hedge School model.
3. We are not alone – multi-species awareness.
4. Co-designing future alternatives – intergenerational solidarity (reach back for examples)

5. Embedding sustainability into every module and deconstructing how capitalist ideas are embedded into everything, in language they'll understand.
6. Move to inclusive knowledge democracy: 'pluriverse'; epistemic injustice'.
7. Consolidate theory and practice – more industry insight; communication of research, cutting edge ongoings, how it applies to society.
8. Narration – more diversity in knowledge and the language used, incorporating emotions and hope. Stories are what incentivise people to change, need new and plausible stories.
9. Holding emotional spaces.
10. Space to feel emotions and options to participate in change for hope.
11. Redefine success for graduates.
12. Who needs taught? Students or university management?
13. Importance of using appropriate language that a) people understand, b) effectively communicates (e.g. visual learning).
14. Citizens Assembly on education offers opportunity to make dominant paradigm visible and challenge it.
15. Student-led power for change – giving students a voice in their education – co-creation rather than being mere recipients of knowledge.
16. Beneficial engagement with the community – giving students credit for working with the local community and helping them solve problems without being extractive or creating more work for them.
17. Climate science focused sustainability module.
18. Pedagogy/curriculum for system change – individual disciplines give tools, but missing how to use them? Ethics, disruption, activism, empowerment.
19. Leverage the climate module for continued inter-disciplinary connection throughout students and academics learning career in order to avoid siloing.
20. Compulsory climate module: across curricula and university wide; co-produced module with focus on pedagogy; field component – learn from discipline of geography.
21. Multi-disciplinary/transversal mandatory climate modules.
22. Education for action – what to do, now that they know? Not passive. Learning together.
23. Rewarding sustainability – true integration into evaluation criteria into all programs. Starting in first year.
24. Research-led teaching – cutting edge and respectfully connected to place. (Accessibility needs associated with teaching).
25. Focus on teaching skills and values for students to live in a world that doesn't exist yet. Connecting past lessons with future challenges.
26. Fully publicly funded HEIs so teaching responds to societal need.
27. Transdisciplinary education centred on power.
28. Critical thinking: do we want first class humans or second class robots? Need to stimulate critical thinking and situate in societal theory.
29. Shouldn't be teaching – 1. Marketing: hyper consumption ['We teach degrowth in our marketing' added to this card in different pen, unclear if from table or from another event participant in response].
30. What should we not teach?

31. It's the teachers (not just the students)! Who need to learn – stuck in techno-economic paradigm.
32. Collective leadership training in the community – towards co-operatives.
33. Communications and content: engaging; in class group work, dynamic and real world examples; persistent and clear messaging.
34. Engaging students in climate discussions and teach team how to become activists.
35. Spaces/committees/climate-related to open discussions around climate crisis – people from different disciplines.
36. HE for climate action must inform and empower to be capable agents for change. Co-creation, collective action across unis, place-based education – can it be taught in the classroom?
37. Holistic learning: systems thinking, nature, emotion.
38. Unlearn as well as learn.
39. Rethinking delivery models within planetary boundaries. International students (flights), staff travel, student community – note the inequalities within the system.
40. Teach and think in systems.
41. Envision an ideal UG education for the crises – systems thinking, futures thinking, survival/resilience/food, interpersonal skills/empathy change communication mindset.
42. Intentional design for sustainability into the curriculum and teaching roles. Trickery! =) E.g. lab layouts
43. Value of STEM/STEAM – elevating arts and social sciences.
44. Challenge dominant paradigm – non commodified rights based education acknowledging polycrisis. Tyranny of indoor thinking.
45. Activism (like teaching) – personal development and thriving
46. Creating opportunities for knowledge exchange in the community.
47. There needs to be a consistent honesty across modules and course about the changes needed and likely futures (of climate breakdown).
48. Recognising importance and value of action to process different knowledge (collective solidarity action) which otherwise turns to apathy or cynicism.
49. Decolonising the imagination – There are always alternatives.

Community outreach and activism

1. Humility and trust – communication; openness; engagement; non-extractive research; power sharing.
2. Education and training for all – funding; co-production; infrastructure; culture.
3. Student-led.
4. Breaking down the walls of knowledge in university.
5. Time – focus; expectations; academic time; student time; action
6. Algorithmic war an attention. Ability to concentrate. Simple truths. Orthodox = unorthodox.
7. Right to time – logic of way universities are structured makes time rights a real issue. Limited ability to engage with community and community of scholars a thing of past: impoverishes thought.

8. Empowering your own community matters.
9. Transparency about funding – to avoid bias of greenwashing.
10. Broaden the role of individuals within unis to encompass community engagement (activism/engagement training).
11. Invite community groups into HEIs to present/discuss their needs.
12. Review how to maximise local, social and community gain from university procurement.
13. Creating space for collaborative engagement and activism.
14. Incentivising community work.
15. Research to respond to local community needs/issues.
16. We need to redefine wealth from extractive values to intrinsic – what is the good life? Inner development goals.
17. Academic activists – needs to be security for academics to engage in activism; Responsibility of academics with tenure.
18. Resources – making available to communities/activists: space/expertise/research skills (rather than just researchers).
19. Central repository bring together academics, students and public organizations/non-profits
20. Creating safe spaces for co-creative conversation – from academy also from community.
21. Leadership – resources, spaces, physical/online
22. How do we get HEI leadership to listen? And create space and capacity to engage meaningfully.
23. Community engagement of university staff – e.g. show up for protests and strikes.
24. Conviction of values – even across and within institutions, beat siloed nature.
25. Activism and community building gives hope, meaning and purpose. Our island can be a beacon.
26. Build into job description incentive structure to allow "public engagement"/partnerships between non-profits and NGOs and academics (currently penalized).
27. Non-traditional engagement teaching and research outputs to meet a larger cohort of people – who is you community? (global and local)
28. We need to reconnect with nature through activism and community – spirituality?; tradition; art; break out of rush and hurry
29. Space. Need for visibility
30. Whose voices are not being heard?
31. Developing and centering self-reflective methodology inside conducting research.
32. Support with student engagement/export support.
33. Developing PhDs from community development.
34. Role of university to produce critical citizens
35. Opening the university – inviting citizens into the university and going to the community (physically and through knowledge).
36. Enabling longer research implementation by giving community ownership of research.

Actions

Feminists
I:
- Need care
- Bring feminist principles into my work, making connections
- Feel indigenous to feminism – I have responsibility to share
- Value intuitive knowledge
- Acknowledge importance of being wrong
- Community to removing oppression

We:
- Inclusive language
- Are not solely responsible for emotional labour.
- Care forms a collective
- Acknowledge feminist values
- Reject the productivity focus regime in favour of care for the world and its needs ongoingness.
- As feminists, care for others – new and old world.
- Think and feel that care must aid midwife the new world/future and hospicing the past
- Need men to step up.
- Acknowledge that being wrong is important because it gives the possibility of other mistakes.

They:
- Value care, paid and unpaid, as structural backbone and low carbon.
- Must acknowledge feminist values.
- Need care.
- Inclusive language.
- Belong with us.

Slowing down
I:
- Name the game
- Stop playing the game
- I need to reflect on my work and exploitation
- Show solidarity with other colleagues

We:
- STRIKE – hit the fuckers where it hurts
- Demand time load allocation model that recognises all work including activism and community engagement
- More people working less – not less people working more.

They:
- Change promotion system
- Acknowledge all work
- Excise the shit stuff – i.e. degrowth model.
- Reduce student timetable

Theory of change/strategy
I:
- Am going to get in more trouble!
- Want to avoid windowdressing – what are barriers to change?

We:
- Need to make real partnerships – helping community activist groups. Connections outside the university is how things happen – universities will not make change happen.
- Not enough of us get into trouble.
- Need to develop practical tangible actions – what can we do now?
- Critique initiatives – are they capable of meaningful change or are they just window dressing/green washing? E.g. SDGs
- We need to respect plurality of diverse strategies for change.
  - But we need to be intentional about developing and implementing them.
- Universities are microcosms. We need to develop and maintain intergenerational solidarity and action. Academics have access to resources and expertise, students have time and more freedom from harsh disciplinary measures.
  - Academics need to maintain activism – high turnover of students.

They:
- Need to be approachable for academics, students, communities.

Networking
I:
- Network of senior academics/pracademics using their privilege to assist and be examples – act as leaders [From a senior colleague – Hannah]
- Networking to learn more and make connections, and what I can do for them.
- Connect and be a source to connect people.
- Academics provide knowledge to activists (like they do for influence).
- Inform ourselves on ecology and systems thinking, ecological economics – could be a function of the network.

We:
- Email list/facebook group/WhatsApp
- Organise speakers/films on campus
- Ask us anything event (done by academics on climate and sustainability at UCC).
- Networking – communities of practice
- Encourage hope

THEY:
- Ask them to support networking.

Democratisation
I:
- Collaborate/listen

We:
- Talk more
- Imagine – build ideas, plan strategy for change

They:
- Get out of the way

Decommodification
I:
- Deepen understanding of the central importance of decommodification for the polycrisis

We:
- Decommodify our land and way of life (e.g. grow more food)

They:
- Find ways to extend decommodification and reverse the march towards the commodification of everything

Rehumanising – trust and emotion
I:
- Take the time to engage and share knowledge with citizens, communities, interest groups.
- Communicate internally with colleagues and build trust.

We:
- More knowledge on action research/more training for "facilitating" rather than "teaching".
- Be active convenors for our academic peers, our students, our communities.
- Opportunities for learning and self-development

They:
- HEIs should make spaces available for students to talk to each other around issues
- Reward community engagement and relational skills needed for work with communities.
- Fund 'science shops' (Community engagement spaces)

Decolonisation
I:
- Undertake personal reflection
  - Historical context
  - My role as a coloniser
  - Colonisation of the mind
- Accepting/addressing trauma
- Engaging in reclamation
  - Of identity
  - Of language
- Embrace emotion

We:
- We need 6 more hours

They:
- [Nothing written down]

Action for hope
I:
- Recognise our efforts
- Spread out knowledge to more people
- Be honest with ourselves
  - Balance between honesty and hope/cheerfulness
- Find a network of support

We:
- Sharing stories and positive narratives
- Encouraging direct action

They:
- Support student actions for the climate
- Acknowledge their environmental impact

Unnamed / uncategorised sheet
- Activism is a practical tool to implement knowledge
- Whose voices are not being heard?
  - Is activism in HEI inclusive and constructive to their communities?
- Provide a space on campus to be a catalyst for activism/change
- Cross-sector approach to engagement
- Universities are so complex.
  - Who do communities go to?
- Not very organised – collective mobilisation for specific goals.