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Contents

1 – Introduction

Higher Educational Institutions pride themselves on the ongoing provision of safeguarding. With procedures in place to report concerns, all universities must comply to current regulation, ensuring their staff complete specific training and report concerns. As another aspect of their role, and in such creative spaces, course content is created to address real risk and threat through their undergraduate provision. As part of an ongoing commitment to assessing sector-wide provisions, recent research conducted within a UK Higher Education Institute focused on Prevent, specifically the duty-to-report requirement upon university lecturers. The qualitative approach focused on university lecturers delivering policing and security courses in the North of England.

It is from this research the following findings can be used to help address the question posed: What approaches are most effective for identifying and intervening to prevent young people being drawn into extremism?

2 – Summary

The UK Government's Prevent policy forms one part of the four elements of the *Counter Terrorism Strategy, Contest: Pursue, Protect, Prepare and Prevent* (Home Office Prevent Guidelines 2023 s:2(12)). The Contest Strategy itself recognises an increased terrorist threat, within which Prevent provides an outline of responsibilities aimed at deradicalisation through collaboration (Qurashi, 2018, p. 2). Structures to prevent acts of terrorism continue to develop and as the threat evolves, so too does the guidance originally introduced in 2003 and subsequently enshrined in law in 2015

under the *Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015.* The referral process has been defined through legislation within section 2(14) of *the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015* which outlines robust structures to safeguard those people potentially susceptible to radicalisation. This creates a responsibility in law, rather than any voluntary code within which professionals work. Higher Education provision is specifically catered for under section 5(164) of the 2015 Act and under section 2 of the *Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023*. The 2023 Act re-emphasises the duty within sectors including education, to actively identify risk and intervene accordingly. In Higher Education the issues identified include problems in determining threat, decision-making around intervention and the inadequacies of the Prevent training which is currently delivered online.

The referral process covers areas of responsibilities placed on professionals (Home Office, 2015-2024, s:2(48)). Qurashi (2017, p. 25) assesses that the duties in education are difficult to implement due to subjectivity around what constitutes relevant political discussion and what is differentiated as extremism. If the professionals charged with the same responsibility under UK law have different experiences, how can one policy cover differences in individual approaches to making referrals?

Focusing on the perspective of lecturers using questionnaires and subsequent semi-structured interviews, this research highlights the views of those charged with the same responsibility in law. It evidences that despite having received the same mandatory training, individual approaches and interventions differ. This ultimately determines their own decision making when considering referrals, leaving the legislation open to interpretation. Especially when time spent with their students is limited and their online activities cannot/should not be measured.

3 - The issue

It is acknowledged that amendments may be required in response to evolving threat and the positive approach to potential changes already adopted by the government.

Overall the issues with the current approach were found to be the duty-to-report, training and feedback, and what counts as extremism. In the context of delivering undergraduate courses in policing and security, it should be no surprise that students choosing to study in this field, are interested in crime and often fascinated with horrific cases. Learning about human relationships with criminality, along with respectful debate, is encouraged.

Participants in this research felt that how any perceived risk presents in the classroom was unclear. Each lecturer starts from their own viewpoint, *"You don't think….your students are terrorists"* (Interviewee #3). There is potential for risk to go unnoticed. This theme specifically links to the individual experience of the lecturer and it is apparent that risk forms part of the understanding and assessment within the referral process. Findings reinforce existing knowledge that it is inherently difficult to individually measure which behaviours should be cause for concern (Stewart, 2017, p. 67). Interviewee #3 raised the point that any real risk could not be identified due to the very nature of the offences being considered, *"…from a logical perspective, if I was a terrorist, if I was a good terrorist, I wouldn't let people know that I was a terrorist."*

Established legislation has made the physical possession of articles in connection with acts of terrorism illegal, contrary to section 57 of *the Terrorism Act 2000*. Here terrorism is broadly defined as an act or threat, used to influence or intimidate and which relates to a political, religious, racial or ideological cause. Radicalisation and extremism are noted as terms used interchangeably to refer to the threat which the legislation aims to prevent (Faure-Walker, 2019; Danvers, 2023). Zempi & Tripli (2023, p. 231) argue that there is no single working definition of the concept of terrorism and this makes working within its parameters, difficult.

University lecturers amongst other professionals, need to focus on vulnerabilities to be able to identify and then report perceived problems. This is the basis of the referral process (Zempi & Tripli, 2023, p. 230). The issue becomes apparent when considering how those legal responsibilities which directly impact professionals, are interpreted by a selection of lecturers working within Higher Education in the UK. Interviewee #1 pointed out that reasonable adjustments are in fact expected to be made for students with learning difficulties and difference does not equate to risk, *"Creating a climate in which we'll now look at any students with learning difficulties as potential suspects…would be problematic for me."*

Jerome & Elwick (2020, p. 2) note that teaching controversial subject matter brings inherent risk. When classroom discussion about terrorism is invited, should students be penalised for making comments? Stewart (2017, p. 59) acknowledges the resultant obstacles to therefore reporting concerns based on judgement alone. Students may act differently when away from childhood homes, in new groups of people and with the increasing omnipresence of social media communication. It is more likely that overall circumstances when viewed as a whole will be indicative of potential risk, but how do lecturers know what a student is posting online?

Interviewee #3 takes the empathetic viewpoint that young adults away from home often for the first time, may be finding their own opinions and their position within this new group at university. Qurashi (2017, p. 205) specifically identifies the problems in deciphering careless chatter from politically motivated or ideological threat, a theme echoed within these findings.

Identifying signs of radicalisation indicates the need to actively look for verbal and/or physical indicators, though all would be subject to individual interpretation. Directly associated with the risk factors previously mentioned, participants understood that their own interpretation of what constitutes extreme ideology, will differ. Interviewee #3 recognised limitations in their own understanding of the full picture as social media is not monitored and online personas may not match those presented in the physical classroom, *"I said this at university, I said other things online"* (Interviewee #3). This highlights the critical role of external factors as indicators of concern, as raised by Stewart (2017, p. 2), a clear risk which is also repeated in The Saunders 2023 Inquiry and remains an ongoing consideration for policymakers.

The Saunders Inquiry (2023, p. 49) provides tangible analysis that professionals continue to have a role in the security of society and of the individual. Whilst physical preventative opportunities were missed at the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing, numerous warning signs prior to the attack have been retrospectively identified as indicators of terrorism. As an area of risk, education is identified as a key institution where behaviours should be considered within the individual's wider circumstances including home life, family environment and religious ideation (Stewart, 2017; Danvers, 2023; Saunders, 2023).

Interviewee #3 discussed the resultant issue of 'policing' the classroom. They identified the negative impact this would have, silencing debate in the open culture they prided themselves in creating. They considered that their entire classroom dynamic would be negatively impacted, *"You wouldn't get another word out of the class, you simply wouldn't."* The informant genre (Faure Walker 2019, p. 492) directly impacts that environment where a lecturer's role should be to stimulate growth of mindset and facilitate critical thinking rather than censor conversation.

Previously identified as policing the classroom (Danvers, 2023, p. 1265), the impact of invoking the referral process is considered detrimental to the teacher-learner dynamic as well as to the classroom experience. Termed the chilling effect (Scott-Cracknell, 2021, p.2), participation will be limited in anticipation of negative future outcomes. Interviewee #1 also considered such self-censorship, commenting that their own biases could impact their decision-making, regardless of the circumstances or genuine concerns identified. That they may be less inclined to refer an overseas

student in case it appeared racist, counters some of the earlier analysis criticising Prevent for targeting Muslim students (Qurashi, 2018, p. 9). There is inherent risk that at least one group will be targeted, in this case to counter the earlier problems it created. The findings of this research evidenced the ongoing presence of race as a factor (Kyriacou *et al.,* 2017; Qurashi, 2018).

This research-study identified further barriers to reporting including the lack of feedback once a referral is made. Participants understood that confidentiality would play a part in the provision of updates however would also like to know if their referral had been appropriate. In considering the experiences of those teaching at UK universities, Qurashi (2017, p. 200) concludes that professional people have concerns about the implications on them as individuals. Without any feedback the lack of clarity remained and at worst, caused anxiety that they had done something wrong or their teaching was now under scrutiny. Even those lecturers who had not made a referral through Prevent determined they would not get any feedback so what was the point.

The training is directly linked to this lack of confidence in the current procedure. The current online provision is deemed inadequate, a tick-box exercise, its existence serving to safeguard nobody, *"...it was a bit of token gesture rather than anything real"* (Interviewee #2).

4 - Potential remedies and proposals

Potential remedies come from the literature and this study's findings, learning from the lecturers lived experiences thus increasing validity.

Potential remedies must involve changes to ensure Prevent is set up effectively to stop people with mixed, unclear and unstable ideologies from becoming radicalised. This study specifically highlights that current Prevent methods are not effective, demonstrating that at best, uncertainty about the referral process remains. Participants do not know how to fulfil their duty-to-report. This a key finding in Whiting, Spiller, & Awan's (2024) work and becomes relevant when considering concerns of observed in-person and online comments or behaviours.

Lecturers have a voice and a role within the Prevent referral process, currently incorporated within a general professional curiosity. Their decision making must always be justified. The same behaviours observed by two individual professionals will be assessed differently by each of them. Whether a decision is made to ultimately refer or not, each has a role in being alert to the threat. Greater awareness of and confidence in the referral process may itself influence that decision-making.

The overarching aim of the Prevent Strategy is to safeguard. This study identified that lecturers in security and policing at one university recognise its importance but in reality, do not feel it achieves its aim. Signs of radicalisation could be dismissed, evidencing the nuances of threat which Whitaker (2012, p. 69) points out, is simply guesswork. Incorporating semi-structured interviews within this study afforded clarification of the sometimes controversial comments made. Interviewee #3 considered their students to be lower risk due simply to the university's semi-rural setting, expanding that they would think differently if teaching in a more urban environment. Does this correlate to the thoughts and practices of other Higher Education institutions and result in complacency or conversely, over-referring?

Participants suggested that better training/guidance is now needed. Tick-box exercises do not provide adequate learning. Instead, face-to-face training provides greater understanding of the subject matter as well as building confidence around the process to refer. Specific cases where referrals had been made are suggested to better relate to their own classroom environments.

Policy which places responsibility on the individual should be supported with adequate training to enable them to better fulfil their role. Tick-boxes safeguard the provider rather than arm the practitioner with knowledge and confidence. As professional lecturers, each identified that engaging content is more effective when learning. Like their own students, when immediate clarification can be sought to address any misunderstandings, greater understanding is achieved. It is acknowledged that in-person Prevent training is a more expensive approach.

When linked so closely with legislation, there are opportunities to provide the bespoke guidance suggested by participants, including how to capture online activity whilst avoiding policing the classroom. Without studies such as this which listen to the voice of the lecturer, policy cannot be adequately informed. Current guidance is considered limited in its safeguarding capacity by those responsible for its implementation. I am minded that the participants in this study had a total of thirty-three years overall experience and that only one referral had been made between them.

Looking more closely at training enables greater analysis on its impact and how this is perceived in reality. Qurashi (2017, pp. 199-205) supports the view that training delivered under Prevent at universities is in place to show that staff comply to mandated training, rather than to enhance their understanding of the referral process. The vagueness of the policy, as well as differences in definitions, leads to a lack of clarity. This uncertainty is mirrored throughout integral issues including what constitutes a political grievance to be legitimately discussed, versus the radical extremism the policy hopes to identify and neutralise. James (2020) in Busher & Jerome (2020, p. 141) finds that training those staff charged with responsibilities under Prevent should be invested in, and in Further

Education this is addressed with training delivered in person by a safeguarding lead. Approaches to Prevent training clearly differ. Best practice guidance is recommended to help lecturers complete a referral, where certain words or behaviours are observed or boundaries of acceptability crossed.

Previous reviews into UK terrorist attacks have tended to repeat the missed warning signs, including the gaps created when individual pieces of information remain separate from others. When viewed overall, the real risk becomes a lot clearer. These findings evidence the need to continue to engage with practitioners on a detailed level to better understand from their perspective, thus provide an improved approach to identifying and intervening to prevent extremism. Balance needs to be struck between protecting individual data and arming professionals with the wider intelligence picture to enable the sound decision-making expected of them.

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