

Pushed to the edge: the consequences of the ‘prevent duty’ in deradicalising pre-crime thought among British Muslim university students

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the results of a mixed-methods survey of 152 self-selecting Muslim university students sampled across a range of higher education institutions across the UK in late 2019. The study explores perceptions of the impact of the new Prevent Duty among UK Muslim students, especially concerning questions of self-censorship and self-silencing for fear of referral to Channel (a multi-agency board tasked with early-state support). Beyond clear evidence of self-censorship and self-silencing in response to Prevent, this study also highlights the damage done to the staff-student relationship and the mental health of individuals targeted by Prevent.

KEYWORDS

Countering violent extremism; deradicalisation; Prevent; British Muslims; suspect community; higher education

Introduction

In 2003, the UK government established the Counterterrorism Strategy (CONTEST) comprised of four 'Ps': Protect, Prepare, Pursue and Prevent. The overall aim is to reduce the threat of terrorism in the UK, while the objective of the 'Prevent' pillar is to diminish the threat of home-grown terrorism by calling upon individuals in public-facing roles to report anyone they suspect of being vulnerable to radicalisation and terrorism (HM Government 2018). The remit of the Prevent pillar was extended by the 2015 Counterterrorism and Security Act. Since then, university staff have been incorporated into the strategy by the Prevent Duty Guidance (2015b & c) that was legally imposed on them by section 26(1) of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (HMG 2015). The Guidance and the Act together outline that higher education institutions must attempt to prevent individuals from being drawn into violent extremism, legally obliging them to report any individuals that they suspect of being vulnerable to radicalisation.

Prevent concentrates on the threat posed by 'home-grown' terrorists, including those who arrived in the UK as migrants. The policy attempts to achieve three objectives: to respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism and the threat posed by those who promote it; to prevent individuals from being drawn into terrorism by providing them with appropriate advice and support; and to work with sectors and institutions where there are risks of radicalisation (HMG 2020). In effect, the Prevent policy employs a pre-emptive strategy to identify those at risk of being radicalised and drawn into terrorism. In an attempt to intervene before an individual becomes radicalised, the policy distinguishes members of the public vulnerable to radicalisation and refers them to Channel, which is a multi-agency process designed to safeguard individuals from being drawn into terrorism (HM Government 2018). The Channel process aims to provide advice and support through counselling, faith guidance, civic engagement, access to support networks, and mainstream public services. However, several conceptual challenges surround radicalisation, as a range of structural,

local and social factors can contribute to the radicalisation of an individual (Schmid 2013). Moreover, grievances such as marginalisation, exclusion and discrimination can stimulate and contribute to individuals becoming radicalised (Abbas 2019; Aly and Striegher 2012; Pearson and Winterbotham 2017).

Studies have shown that Muslims are negatively impacted by counterterrorism policies in the UK (Heath-Kelly 2013; Qurashi 2018). Seeking to explain this phenomenon, scholars have proposed the ‘suspect community’ paradigm, which generally refers to communities that are silenced, marginalised and subsequently constructed as ‘suspects’ who may be innocent but punitively targeted by a suspicious audience (Hillyard 1993). The term was originally used in reference to the Irish in Britain during the period of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (1974). The ‘suspect community’ paradigm is used by scholars to explain why Muslims are negatively impacted by counterterrorism policies in the UK (Pantazis and Pemberton 2009; Awan 2012; Breen-Smyth 2013). However, the theory can potentially also explain why Muslim university students are disproportionately affected, as British Muslims face the negative gaze of the counter-terror state as well wider political, societal and media institutions that impact on perceptions relating to Islam and Muslims.

First, this paper explores debates on the securitisation of British Muslims, in particular the Muslim ‘suspect community’ paradigm, both of which have intensified in the light of the so-called ‘war on terror’. This is followed by an analysis of the implications of Prevent in the university setting, as measured by a survey of university students enrolled in various UK higher education institutions since 2015. Here, we consider how the policy encourages self-censorship, and the resulting implications for freedom of expression and issues relating to an open society. The way in which Prevent leads to the self-silencing of Muslims in university settings, leading some to consider withdrawing altogether, is identified as a key concern. In conclusion, this paper argues that Prevent creates major disruptions for Muslims on university campuses in the UK. There remain genuine points of

concern in relation to freedom of speech and the implications when students are denied that freedom and faced with the prospect of self-silencing, thus raising further consequences for young Muslims already enduring discrimination on campus, exclusion from society, and the wider impact of Islamophobia on their sense of self and the other.

The Muslim ‘suspect community’ paradigm

Shortly after the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015, the UK government widened the remit of the Prevent pillar under Section 26 of the Counterterrorism and Security Act. Since 2015, the law required individuals to support the fight against terrorism while performing their regular professional functions, an obligation known as the Prevent Duty. Public sector workers suspected of vulnerability to radicalisation should be reported to Channel (HM Government 2018). ‘Specified authorities’ such as departments of social work, hospitals, schools, colleges and universities, must also act in support of Channel (Mark McGovern 2017). Widening the remit of Prevent therefore increased the number of actors in the counterterrorism framework, based on the belief that this would increase the effectiveness of the policy. The aim of the Channel process – to provide a mechanism to assess and support vulnerable individuals and to stop people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism – is in itself worthwhile (Durodie 2015). However, the National Union of Students (NUS 2017) claims that university staff are incapable of correctly identifying individuals who are vulnerable to radicalisation, as their training is limited. Nonetheless, as university staff are legally obligated to enforce the Prevent policy, there is pressure to report any behaviour that could be deemed ‘problematic’ or ‘suspicious’. This combination of limited training and legal pressure has resulted in a culture of over-reporting amongst university staff. The NUS found that 80% of people referred to the Channel process exit the process immediately after law enforcement officers have conducted a preliminary investigation (ibid.).

Law enforcement officers are the first to screen individuals referred to Channel. This can cause high levels of anxiety; furthermore, individuals who are referred to Channel can face social exclusion when other members of their community become suspicious of them, believing that they must have done something wrong. The referral can thus have lasting effects on individuals, even if they are deemed not to be vulnerable to radicalisation, exiting the Channel process after the initial stage (Lloyd and Dean 2015). 'Pre-crime' policies such as Prevent may appear ideal to policymakers and citizens because the criminal offence is thwarted before it occurs. However, in practice, pre-crime policies can stigmatise innocent individuals due to the complexities of accurately predicting human behaviour (Zedner 2007). The ability to pinpoint a set of factors that stimulate radicalisation at the level of the individual has eluded academics due to the large number of different 'push' and 'pull' factors that can contribute to an individual's radicalisation. Therefore, pre-crime policies such as Prevent are criticised for criminalising individuals without definitive evidence that they are going to commit a crime.

There are parallels between the experiences of Muslims during the 'war on terror' and those of the Irish during the conflict in Northern Ireland (Peirce 2008; Hickman et al. 2012). Muslims are assumed to be affiliated with Islamic extremist organisations due to generalisable religious identifiers associated with extremists who claim to be carrying out attacks in the name of Islam. Due to the link that is thus presumed between Islam and terrorism, Muslims as a whole are assumed to be capable of committing terrorist attacks and are consequently treated as suspects. Thus, although Islam is not the overriding factor motivating violent attacks, the misinterpretation of the role of religion in 'Islamist' political violence has resulted in counterterrorism policies that continue to construct Muslim populations as a 'suspect community' (Gunning and Jackson (2011; Kundnani 2009).

The Prevent policy has historically highlighted Muslims as its primary focus, further contributing to the construction of Muslims as a

‘suspect community’. In 2007, the UK government distributed £6 million across 70 local authorities in England via the Preventing Violent Extremism Pathfinder Fund (Heath-Kelly 2013). Although this fund was nominally intended to tackle any kind of violent extremism, the government allocated this funding in direct proportion to the number of Muslims residing in each local authority (Qurashi 2018). Since its inception, Prevent-funded community-based projects have aimed to stimulate Muslim community engagement, social cohesion and capacity building by creating new structures such as the Radical Middle Way project, the Mosque and Imams National Advisory Board, the National Muslim Women’s Advisory Group and Young Muslim Advisory Group. As these Prevent programmes began, volunteers and local authority employees realised that in implementing community-based projects, the government also expected them to gather information on the Muslim communities and act as providers of evidence to the police. Volunteers claimed that Prevent officers threatened them: in one case, youth workers had to cooperate with the security services or face detention and harassment in the UK and overseas (Kundnani 2009). It became apparent that, under the guise of community-based projects, the government was attempting to implement schemes of surveillance within Muslim communities (Awan 2012).

After the terrorist attacks of September 2001 in New York, March 2004 in Madrid and July 2005 in London, the distinct focus on Muslims, the approach to community engagement through the prism of counterterrorism, and the overlap between Prevent and community cohesion policies led to the securitisation of state engagement with Muslims (Thomas 2012). Despite the UK Muslim population comprising a complex mosaic of people divided along lines of class, sect, clan, ideology, levels of religiosity, and ethnonationality, the UK government presumed all Muslims were equally vulnerable to radicalisation. The government placed Muslims *en masse* under suspicion, considering them as ‘problematic’ not because of any wrongdoing, but because they shared their religious identity with

Islamist extremists (Heath-Kelly 2013). The government had hoped to use instruments such as Prevent to access the Muslim community and redefine the relationship between the state and Muslims in Britain. Stimulating greater state engagement with hard-to-reach Muslim communities was considered crucial in stopping Britain from becoming a 'safe haven' for terrorists (Lord Carlie of Berriew 2011).

Changes were later made to the allocation of funding, which meant that funds were no longer distributed according to the number of Muslims in each constituency; following this, the coercive pressure to collude with the security services and provide information on innocent people led to an exacerbation of existing troubled state- Muslim community relations (Thomas 2012). By means of intrusive and intensive policing techniques which cast the entire Muslim population as suspects, the public was encouraged to view Muslims along these lines too, stimulating Islamophobia throughout society. Therefore, despite its purported aim of improving state engagement in Muslim communities and improving community cohesion, Prevent in fact triggered more disengagement and helped further the construction of Muslims as a 'suspect community'. This in turn has made it more likely for Muslims to be suspected of being vulnerable to radicalisation and then disproportionately referred to Channel.

Methodology

The target population of this study was university students who had been enrolled at a university at any point since 2015 (i.e. the year when CTSA 2015 was introduced) and who identified themselves as Muslim. The Muslim university student population in the UK makes up 0.3% of the whole population of the UK (ONS 2011). As the aim was to elicit the views of Muslim students in particular, this study employed a survey that specifically targeted members of the UK Muslim student community. To reach the intended respondents, UK universities' Islamic/Muslim societies were contacted via social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In addition, Muslim students

were invited to post the link to the survey in their Islamic/Muslim society WhatsApp group chats. Using social media and instant messaging platforms to distribute the survey in this way allowed us to directly engage the UK Muslim student community, as well as ensuring a rapid response rate.

As this study collected data on a topic that could be considered sensitive in nature, it was important to ensure that the medium for data collection provided complete anonymity and confidentiality to allow individuals to feel secure about participating in the survey and increase their willingness to answer truthfully. To this end, this study conducted a web-based survey via Google Forms, which includes a function to switch off the recording of IP addresses, which means that respondents cannot be individually traced using this information. The use of a web-based survey had other benefits; for example, the possibility to reach many respondents in different locations in a short space of time, and advantages relating to the efficiency and accuracy of data collection. Furthermore, the absence of the interviewer at the point of data collection reduced the risk of volunteers experiencing a sense of social pressure to respond in a certain way, thereby maximising the authenticity of responses.

The survey presented participants with 20 statements relating to Prevent. Respondents were asked to indicate their opinion of each statement on a 5-point Likert scale, from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. An open-ended question provided the opportunity for respondents to detail any further information, opinions and experiences that they had had regarding Prevent. The questions based on a Likert scale were designed to examine the opinions/perceptions of participants related to a single latent variable, namely to understand Muslim students' perceptions of Prevent. There were also questions to ascertain the demographic profile of respondents, including a question about whether the university the respondent attended was a Russell Group university or not. Due to the politically sensitive nature of Prevent, each respondent's identity remains anonymous.

Utilising the internet to conduct surveys opens up unique

possibilities for empirical research in the field of social sciences, creating opportunities to measure new or complex concepts such as perceptions (Schonlau et al. 2009). However, there are also numerous drawbacks to conducting web-based surveys. First, they often suffer from coverage error due to a mismatch between the target population and the frame population (Umbach 2004). As it was not possible to contact all individuals that belong to the UK Muslim student community, the frame population does not cover all of the individuals in the target population. A key step to addressing this was to contact gatekeepers: by contacting gatekeepers who had direct access to the target population, it was possible to stimulate over 150 participants to engage in the survey. Second, sampling error is another source of error in web-based surveys. Unless all members of a population have an equal chance of being included in a sample, the sample, no matter how large, cannot be representative of the population. To reduce the impact of this limitation, the survey was advertised through several different channels, including university lecturers, social media, WhatsApp and word-of-mouth. Third, studies that depend on the voluntary engagement of participants run the risk of self-selection bias. Self-selection bias may skew the conclusions, as the resulting sample tends to over-represent individuals who have strong opinions on the matter under study. Finally, research using surveys relies on truthful responses from participants to draw meaningful conclusions; however, all research that gathers information from respondents faces limitations due to response bias, particularly with regard to social desirability. Given the sensitive nature of the topics dealt with in this survey, and the fact that socially desirable responding is most likely to occur in responses to socially sensitive questions, social desirability bias is a key limitation of this study. However, as mentioned above, with survey responses gathered anonymously online rather than in person by an interviewer, the pressure on participants to provide socially desirable answers was reduced.

In total, there were 152 respondents to the survey. Of these, 64 (42.1%) indicated that they were aged 18–21, 31.6% were aged 22–25,

8.6% were aged 26–29 and 13.8% were aged 30 or older. These findings are aligned with expectations, as The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA 2020) indicates that most students are aged 20 or under when they enrol in a higher education institution. In addition, there was an almost equal number of male and female respondents: a total of 70 (46.1%) respondents identified themselves as male, whilst 72 (47.4%) identified themselves as female. Having slightly more female than male respondents is also concurrent with the expectations, as in 2015/16 there were more female Muslims (52.8%) than male Muslims (47.2%) enrolled in UK higher education institutions (Malik and Wykes 2018). The majority (67.8%) of respondents were born in England. This again aligned with expectations, as most people who attend higher education in the UK are from England (HESA, 2020). Furthermore, the low engagement of Scottish individuals could be explained by the fact that there is separate guidance for the implementation of the Prevent Duty in Scotland (Education Scotland 2018). Students who were born in Scotland and remained in Scotland for university education may not have engaged much with Prevent and may consequently not have felt much inclination to respond to a survey on the topic. Additionally, the number of Welsh Muslims is less than 1% of the overall Welsh population (Office for National Statistics 2011), so the expectations of Welsh Muslim university students engaging with this study were very low.

A total of 91.4% of respondents self-identified as Muslim (whereas only 9% of the UK student community self-identified as Muslim in 2011; Equality Challenge Unit 2011). The most common ethnicity reported by respondents was Pakistani (31.6%). The ethnicity of respondents is reflective of the general British Muslim population, as UK census data from 2011 indicates that the most common ethnic group for British Muslims to identify as is 'Pakistani Muslim'. Furthermore, in 2011, the second most common ethnic group that British Muslims identified with was 'Bangladeshi Muslims'⁵⁷, which is also in line with the ethnicity of our respondents (19.7%). The majority (64.5%) of respondents had attended state non-selective secondary schools, while

13.2% had attended state selective secondary schools, and another 13.2% had attended private or independent secondary schools.. The mismatch could be due to the fact that many Muslim-faith secondary schools in the UK are low-cost private schools (Coughlan 2016).

There was a close split between respondents from the Russell Group and non-Russell Group universities: 48.7% of respondents attended a Russell Group university, whilst 40.1% attended a non-Russell Group university. The majority (51.3%) of respondents studied Humanities and Social Sciences subjects, whereas 19.7% studied Sciences, Agriculture and Engineering subjects, whilst 15.8% of respondents belonged to Medicine or Medical Sciences faculties. This is again aligned with expectations.

In summary, then, the respondents in this study were predominantly individuals aged 18–25 (73.7%), born in England (67.8%), of South Asian ethnicity (61.9%) and self- identifying as Muslim (91.4%), who had attended a state non-selective school (64.5%). There were 29 written answers in response to the open-ended question. As the survey was conducted anonymously, each of these respondents will be referred to by a randomly assigned number from 1–152. In addition, the comments made by respondents have been presented in gender and age-neutral terms.

Analysis: the harms of prevent

As mentioned above, the survey consisted of 20 statements, to which respondents were asked to respond on a Likert scale. Below is a summary of the most salient findings among these responses:

- Only 12.9% of respondents agreed with the statement ‘university lecturers are adequately trained to spot signs of radicalisation’.
- 91.4 % of respondents agreed with the statement ‘the Prevent policy operates on Islamophobic ideas and stereotypes’.
- 94.9% agreed that ‘Muslim university students are more likely to be *wrongly* referred to the channel prevention programme’.

- 90.8% agreed that ‘the implementation of the Prevent policy at universities has been introduced to increase surveillance of the Muslim student community’.
- 91% agreed that ‘the Prevent policy has increased the level of anxiety experienced by Muslim students at university’.

These findings indicate that students perceive university staff to be targeting Muslim students and treating them with prejudice because of their religious identity. The survey confirms allegations that widening the remit of Prevent to include university staff has resulted in an increased perception of surveillance and discrimination of Muslim students in higher education settings. These findings highlight the distinct negative perceptions relating to the implementation of Prevent at universities. One respondent concluded that Prevent is ‘a policy designed to [do] exactly that, surveil, target and ensure self-censorship’ amongst Muslims (Respondent 9). In what follows, comments from the open-ended question of the survey relating to perceptions and experiences of Prevent are examined in more detail.

Societal implications of prevent

According to the results of this survey, Prevent induces anxiety within some Muslim students and the fear of Channel referral means that they no longer feel safe to express their ideas in class. As some Muslims feel excluded from academic debates, they see no alternative except to ‘turn inward’ (Respondent 28). Some Muslim students believe that they cannot speak freely in class because other individuals will not understand their perspectives. They fear that their opinions may be misinterpreted to such an extent that they will be referred to Channel. Consequently, such individuals will only speak openly or discuss contentious topics with a small group who they trust and believe will understand their perspective without jumping to judgment. This has the propensity to create separation between Muslim and non-Muslim

students at university. Such division echoes the separateness that occurs at a societal level, as the ghettoisation of Muslim and non-Muslim communities is entrenched by Prevent's construction of Muslims as a 'suspect community':

[Prevent] creates a suspect community. It furthers problems that it is supposed to help. It creates Alienation . . . it makes us different. Basically, it turns you into a victim because you are the community that is being watched, you are obviously different (Respondent 28).

Inherent contradictions were said to be found in the policy. One of the central aims of Prevent is to develop resilience among young people; in particular, the capacity to stand up to narrow interpretations of social norms, including the 'othering' of people different from oneself. For some, far from ameliorating the situation by empowering people to better know themselves and those around them, Prevent in fact does nothing to challenge race, racism and racialisation. As one respondent stated:

Where I have disagreed it is because [the] freedom to express racist ideas has not been reduced, which in theory Prevent should be affecting if implemented as it claims. (Respondent 85).

This respondent further argued that the ability to question was prevented by a policy that seemingly removes students' agency to explore sensitive topics. The respondent reported the following:

I know of Muslim students who have been made to feel suspected by university staff due to researching questions about Islam on the university computers, whereas their non Muslim, white peers have searched questionable topics on those computers yet haven't been flagged in. In some colleges and universities, students who hold strong views on e.g. segregation, have been flagged and as a result been traumatised with fear. Islamic Societies have been targeted and shut down because of Prevent, alongside the monitoring of students who use the Prayer Rooms. It's absolutely disgusting. (Respondent 85).

Respondents felt that there were wider implications of the policy that affected many individuals, families and communities beyond the immediate impact on the individual concerned. The respondents argued that as Prevent discriminates against Muslims, the policy ‘otherises’ Muslims, constructs them as dangerous and casts them as a threat. As law enforcement treats Muslims with suspicion, the public is also encouraged to treat Muslims with scepticism, thus stimulating Islamophobia in society, furthering hostility and distrust between non-Muslims and Muslims, and causing Muslims to cluster and isolate themselves from other communities.

Prevent and self-censorship

One of the key findings of this study, which is corroborated by other sources, is that Muslim students feel they are forced to self-censor their opinions and appearance to avoid being seen as critical, to reduce their ‘Muslimness’, and to avoid discrimination (Steadman, Grace, and Roberts 2020). In some instances, students go to the extent of removing themselves from the university environment to avoid discrimination and any chance of being referred to the Channel process. Respondent 66 outlined how the implementation of Prevent at university destroyed any trust in their student-tutor relationship and forced them to isolate themselves from tutorials:

Wanted to stop attending tutor sessions when I heard that the professor will be looking out for any signs of “radical behaviour” or changes. Then I realised that this might be suspect so I resumed going but made sure that I didn’t get a hair cut just before it, always made sure that my appearance was normal, if I was wearing anything too funky on the day made sure to go home and change before the meeting, and also was very very careful to only say subject relevant things to the tutor and not reveal details about personal life. This had a poor impact on my academic life as there were times where I could use the tutor’s help but did not. Right

now I no longer need to attend tutorials so I don't go, would rather just attend lectures only and do everything else remotely.
(Respondent 66)

Whilst it is unlikely that the implications of Prevent are this severe for every student, this extract outlines how devastating the impact of the policy can be for some individuals. Furthermore, the survey outlines that there is a perception that Prevent reduces academic freedom and diminishes trust in staff-student relationships. Prevent has these implications because it creates 'an atmosphere of fear' (Respondent 28). Students believe that if they express critical opinions, under-trained university staff will incorrectly perceive them as being vulnerable to radicalisation and refer them to Channel. Respondent 19 detailed the significant impact a referral could have on an individual's life, both inside and outside the university:

If someone is referred to prevent their and their families lives are turned upside down. What makes things worse is that most people don't want to associate with people who've been referred to Prevent as they fear they will either be suspected or due to not understanding the issues, they think that person must have done something wrong to be referred to Prevent. So people are blacklisted from their own community and friends for being Muslim at the wrong place at the wrong time.
(Respondent 19).

Thus, even if the individual exits the Channel process and law enforcement clears them from being vulnerable to radicalisation, the impact of Channel referral is significant, potentially resulting in the marginalisation of individuals from their communities. As university staff are more likely to refer Muslim students, the implications of the policy are greater for Muslim students, who must constantly weigh up whether expressing an opinion is worth the risk of facing Channel

referral.

Through fear of referral, Muslim students are discouraged from expressing critical opinions. One respondent reported wondering: ‘how is this person gonna interpret it if I say it like this. Will I get reported for it?’ (Respondent 29). This respondent was not alone in having these concerns, as over 88% of respondents agreed that Muslim university students are forced to self-censor their opinions because of Prevent. Respondent 28 also detailed that Muslim students are particularly afraid to voice any critical opinions relating to British foreign policy:

We have a viewpoint on these things, but there’s no room for any intellectual debate or discussion. It is either you pedal what we say, the government says, or you are basically with them. You’re an extremist. (Respondent 28).

Due to the ‘us’ and ‘them’ narrative surrounding the so-called ‘war on terror’, Muslim students fear that if they are critical of British foreign policy, university staff may assume they are engaging with Islamic extremist narratives and vulnerable to radicalisation. Respondent 29 provides a further example of the anxious mindset that the policy induces: ‘if he is against the UK bombing in Syria, does that mean he is supporting the Jihadis?’ (2019). Students fear that any ideas that indicate a perspective that is critical of British military action could be viewed as extreme and warrant referral.

The survey results indicate that Muslim students worry that if their appearance indicates they are Muslim or if they say anything not seen as a mainstream perspective, this could also lead to a referral. Over 85% of respondents agreed that Muslim students are forced to self-censor their appearance due to Prevent. Respondent 28 elucidates further this constant need to self-censor:

There is the fear of being blacklisted. We’d hear that some students, they get marked, they get reported, for certain things, maybe they just looking too Islamic, maybe they’ve said something that is a bit questionable and then that mark will stay

with you (Respondent 28).

Prevent thus causes Muslims anxiety over whether their appearance could link them to Islam or Islamist extremism, or be interpreted as a 'sign' that they are vulnerable to radicalisation. This causes some Muslims such anxiety that they try and suppress their 'Muslimness' and assimilate into majority society. Respondent 28 outlines that, while this notion is widespread among Muslims, some have been affected more adversely than others:

Some have been affected so badly, they've been affected so badly by the stereotypes and whatnot that they try, they try as much as possible not to be as Muslim as they are. (Respondent 28).

Causing Muslims to self-censor in this way not only has an immediate impact on their lives but can also have a longer-term impact on their level of anxiety, with several participants from the survey highlighting how the implementation of Prevent negatively impacted their mental health. Respondent 29 outlines that, even within universities with large Muslim populations, Muslims 'still don't feel safe in that environment to talk in an open way' (Respondent 29). Respondent 1 details how '[t]he self-censorship and the way Muslim students (esp. Active Muslim students) are left to feel has caused mental health issues' (Respondent 1). Respondent 29 adds, 'it's not good for your mental health, it's just like awful, it's like, it makes you feel anxious' (Respondent 29).

According to one respondent, as well as increased anxiety, '[d]ue to Prevent, Muslim students are not accessing the mental health services because of the fear that prevent had induced' (Respondent 11). As medical staff are also obliged to refer anyone they suspect of being vulnerable to radicalisation, students fear that if they disclose details about their

psychological distress, medical staff may wrongly interpret that they are vulnerable to radicalisation. Therefore, not only does Prevent have the propensity to cause mental strain, but it also has the potential to discourage students from accessing public (mental) health services that could support them, thereby compounding the problem.

Fear, paranoia and self-silencing

Radicalisation is a difficult topic to navigate due to the conceptual challenges surrounding definitions of the term. While Prevent attempts to stop individuals from becoming radicalised and support those who are vulnerable to radicalisation, this study also aimed to address the idea that the policy could in fact be having the opposite effect – namely, contributing to the radicalisation of some individuals. Respondent 28 detailed how Prevent and referral to the Channel programme deeply unsettled them. As they were ‘innocent’, the referral created much confusion: the very fact that someone is referred to Channel would seem to vouch for their innocence, as, if they were revealed to have committed a crime, they would surely be triaged into the criminal justice system rather than Channel. This respondent therefore did not understand why they were being referred to the Channel programme; they reported that being targeted by the Prevent policy caused so much confusion that they suffered from paranoia, with a lasting effect on their life:

It changed me; it made me suffer from paranoia. Very paranoid. It created a lot of confusion in my mind. Like why me? Why am I being referred? Why am I being harassed, why am I being harassed? (Respondent 28).

By provoking students to rationalise their referral, the policy can incite students to start questioning their identity. Students worry about what it could have been that caused someone to refer them and about whether

they need to act or dress differently to avoid being referred again. By causing students to introspect in this way, the policy can initiate a process whereby students may begin to question whether they belong or are accepted within society, including those who have not experienced a Prevent referral.

Research on policies that support counter-radicalisation, such as Prevent, uses social identity theory to suggest that the process of radicalisation starts when people become confused about their identities (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010). That is, the process of radicalisation is believed to begin when people examine their identities, as questions surrounding identity and belonging can lead to further contemplation of whether they are treated equally relative to majority groups in society. If individuals begin to perceive that they are the victim of unequal treatment and injustice, this may pave the way for a belief that violence is a legitimate response to these injustices, as has been attested especially in retaliation to oppressive counter-terrorism legislation and Islamophobia. Over time, these frustrations build up until individuals are no longer able to withstand the pressure, causing them to lash out. Social isolation, too, leads to alienation and grievances, which can culminate in violence. Respondent 28 alludes to this pathway, outlining how self-censorship can be a factor that stimulates acts of terror:

It creates silence, some people end up going crazy over that, and they are the ones that in the end, end up committing some of these acts of terror. Because they are, isolated, they had to isolate themselves from society because that's the only option that society gave to them. They didn't have a voice. If they wanted to get clarification on something like fighting in Islam or Jihad or terrorism then they could not, because that is a red flag (Respondent 28).

Prevent is perceived to have dissolved a significant level of trust in

student-staff relationships, as well as reducing academic freedom and impeding academic discussion. If students are powerless to discuss contentious topics at university, they are unable to seek advice relating to issues or questions about religion, identity, or terrorism, and must seek out other platforms to debate these issues. Some of these platforms have the potential to lead to exactly the problems of violent extremism that the policy was intending to counteract.

Discussion and concluding remarks

After the 2010 review of Prevent, the counter-terrorism legislation was enhanced to ensure Muslim-specific locations were no longer the object of the policy (Heath-Kelly 2013). However, it appears that despite this change, and since the implementation of Prevent in universities, Muslims nonetheless remain the focus of the policy, and are most likely to be affected in both schools (Sian 2015) and universities (Gholami 2021). The European Convention on Human Rights ensures that all individuals have the right to be free from discrimination on any grounds such as religion (Steadman, Grace, and Roberts 2020). Under the UK 2010 Equality Act, it is against the law to discriminate against anyone on the basis of religion. Despite the change in legislation, and the Human Rights Accord and the Equality Act legislating against religious discrimination, this study has found that Prevent is perceived to continue to target Muslims. The 2019 case of Dr Salman Butt, chief editor of Islam 21 C, who brought a legal challenge against the Prevent Duty Guidance, is of note here. While he failed to succeed on the grounds of human rights or equality law, he was successful in the Court of Appeal with regard to one aspect: namely, that the Prevent Duty Guidance for Universities had implied that complete mitigation of the risk of radicalisation had been required when holding events. This was found to have been unlawful on the part of the Minister who had published the guidance.

Section 26 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 places a duty on UK higher education providers, in exercising their functions, to

have ‘due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism’. The Prevent duty also asks UK higher education to go beyond existing laws when governing speech on campus; that is, forms of non-violent extremism. This concerns speech that is not necessarily illegal under existing law, but which operates within a pre-criminal space. Yet, the duty also goes beyond this to include censoring potential speakers who are deemed too ‘extreme’ because of the opinions they hold. The term ‘non-violent extremism’ is thus revealed to be subjective and open to interpretation, with the potential for it to be used to label those with unpopular opinions or views that are different from the mainstream. This new policy and the onus on institutions to police extremism has led to Muslim students being characterised as suspect communities in UK universities.

This study argues that the implementation of Prevent within universities reduces academic freedom, undermines students’ right to freedom of expression, and erodes trust in the staff-student relationship. It is important to note that this concern applies to any targets of Prevent, not just Muslims; however, Muslims are disproportionately affected. Significantly, the survey reported here finds that the vast majority of the 152 respondents perceive that the Prevent policy harms Muslim university students. Due to the construction of Muslims as a ‘suspect community’, university staff are perceived to be treating Muslim students with suspicion and subjecting them to discriminatory treatment. To avoid referral, Muslim students reported self-censoring their critical political opinions, which restricted student engagement in academic discussions, triggering feelings of marginalisation and social exclusion. Muslim students also reported self-censoring their appearance in an attempt to assimilate into majority society and to avoid the discrimination that members of the ‘suspect community’ face.

With approximately 95% of respondents to the survey agreeing that Muslim university students are more likely to be *wrongly* referred to Channel, this study indicates that there is a clear perception among Muslim university students that they are targeted by Prevent. Over 85%

of respondents believed that Muslim students have to self-censor their opinions and appearances due to Prevent and over 90% of respondents agreed that the policy has increased the level of anxiety experienced by Muslim university students. Students who are compelled to take these measures and who constantly fear that they are going to be referred to Channel if they express an opinion in class are likely to experience higher levels of distress. This can have a detrimental impact on their lives, with anxiety contributing to the development of long-term health problems. Furthermore, this study indicates that by reducing the possibility to discuss contentious topics and compelling students to 'bottle up' their opinions, this policy can result in frustration, anger, and notions of marginalisation – conditions that could reasonably be expected to increase the likelihood of radicalisation, rather than reduce it. Prevent contributes to the anxiety experienced by students because it is a pre-crime policy, aiming to intervene before an individual commits a crime. As a Channel referral does not require evidence of wrong-doing but only suspicion on the part of university staff, the programme means that university staff who hold prejudices towards certain groups can refer students to Channel and trigger investigations into them on the basis of such prejudices alone, without decisive evidence of the student's vulnerability to radicalisation. By not requiring university staff to have a solid evidential basis, there is no guarantee that the university staff member who is making the referral is not simply mistaken, or worse, malicious.

A recent study by the School of Oriental and African Studies (2018) outlined that Prevent causes Muslim students to self-censor their opinions and disengage from university life (Scott-Baumann et al. 2020; Guest et al. 2020). This conclusion is corroborated by the findings of this study, and leads us likewise to conclude that Prevent must be urgently reviewed. The argument that is sometimes put forward by university leaders and policymakers that the Prevent policy is merely not being properly being communicated to students – and that Muslim distrust of the strategy rather stems from a failure of communication, which can be repaired – does not form an adequate

response to the deep-seated misgivings of the targeted population. In particular, Prevent is structurally embedded, and therefore demands a holistic appraisal of its limitations and the negative consequences it creates for British Muslim communities and society as a whole.

The construction of Muslims as suspects and the resulting conception of all Muslims as capable of committing violent attacks has contributed to discriminatory treatment of Muslim individuals by law enforcement and an increase in Islamophobia among the general public. Muslims in British universities in particular are facing the pressures of heightened and unwarranted scrutiny, resulting in a sense that they are held to represent the extreme 'other'. With the Prevent Duty, the government aims to incorporate academic staff and Muslim students into what amounts to a state surveillance programme, with university lecturers being coerced into monitoring and judging their Muslim students. The use of such measures to counter terror threats is highly questionable, and is more likely to lead to an Orwellian society in which the police and state have broad, intrusive powers and in which academic debate is silenced. A far more constructive method for tackling terrorism on campus is to rather enable participants to challenge the hateful rhetoric espoused by extremists, thereby upholding the principles of democracy, free speech and freedom of expression – in other words, the very things extremists would like to curb. The Prevent Duty on campus, rather than supporting these ideals, instead forms a threat to such principles. Moreover, by subjecting Muslim students to surveillance and discrimination, Prevent leads students to live in a state of self-censorship and fear, increasing levels of anxiety among this population. The risks for these students and their universities, as well as society as a whole, are all too evident and must be urgently addressed. The impact of prevent in such settings will continue to create ongoing issues of distrust between the British Muslim communities in the state, with implications for wider concerns relating to social cohesion, social trust and political engagement beyond the sphere of higher education.

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