

**SRHE**

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**Prevent/ing criticality: the  
pedagogical impact of  
PREVENT in UK universities**

*Newer Researcher's Award: Final Report*

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## Executive Summary

This research found that the PREVENT counterterrorism ‘duty’ had a negative impact on teaching critical thinking in higher education. 15 Politics lecturers and 2 students were interviewed across 4 English universities. They described a range of impacts of PREVENT on their teaching and learning. This includes lecturers desensitising curricula and avoiding debating contentious topics, to adopting more cautious and censored pedagogic styles. Their accounts demonstrate how a legalistic and bureaucratic operationalising of PREVENT in higher education has led to a narrowing of space for critical teaching and learning. Moving forward, I argue that the values of criticality should be re-inserted as central to future policy and practice.

## Project Aims and Objectives

This SRHE Newer Researcher’s Award funded project aimed to investigate the pedagogical implications of PREVENT in shaping higher education as a space of critical thinking and learning for students. It was motivated by the contention that the ‘critical thinking’ that takes place in university classrooms is shaped by broader social and political contexts. PREVENT offered a case study of these ‘contexts’ operating as one of higher education’s policy drivers. PREVENT is one of the four “Ps” of the UK government’s counter-terrorism strategy along with Pursue, Protect and Prepare. Its stated purpose is to safeguard and support those vulnerable to radicalisation and to prevent them from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. From the outset, the strategy has been subject to numerous debates over how it can meet the societal challenges faced by ‘radicalisation’ whilst maintaining freedoms over speech and liberty.

PREVENT placed a statutory duty on universities and colleges to have ‘due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and to report those deemed vulnerable’ (HEFCE, 2016). Thus ‘duty’ has been intensely criticised within higher education for its racialised and colonial agenda, its potential to curb intellectual freedom and for reframing the pedagogical dynamic as one of surveillance (Novelli, 2017; Saeed and Johnson, 2016; Taylor and Soni, 2017). The NUS (2020) argue that PREVENT positions students as ‘suspects’, with lecturers, in turn, asked to review the legality, and not just the quality of the arguments students make in the classroom or within their assessments. Moreover, certain topics potentially become ‘off limits’ for students or lecturers to talk about, for fear of being targeted as problematic, closing off the valuable classroom space to critically discuss and debate - activities seen as central to a ‘Western’ university education. This is echoed by Furedi (2016, no page) who argues PREVENT specifically ‘undermines the capacity of universities to provide students with the opportunity to gain clarity through the free exchange of opinion’. Specifically, Scott-Bauman (2017) argues that PREVENT creates critique absences or ‘vacuums’ that urgently need to be reclaimed for discussion, debate and questioning. This raises crucial questions about spaces for, and legitimatisations of, critical thought in higher education and the influence of PREVENT on academic citizenship and pedagogical cultures. Inspired by these provocations, this research aimed to investigate:

- How do academic faculty teaching in higher education understand the pedagogical impacts of PREVENT (e.g. on content and style of teaching, relationships with students, intellectual freedom)?
- In what ways, if at all, has PREVENT influenced the teaching and learning of critical thinking?

## Methodology

Ethical approval for this project was granted by the University of Sussex in August 2018. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 academic faculty between September and December 2018. Due to the racialised elements of PREVENT, faculty were recruited from 4 different

institutions selected due to their range of numbers of BAME students, as well as being geographically and institutionally disparate. Northern is a high ranking (The Complete University Guide) university in the north of England with 85% White British students. Midlands City is a mid-ranking inner city university in the midlands with 32% White British students. Southern City is a low-ranking inner-city university in the south with 27% White British students. Southern Coastal is a mid/high-ranking university on the south coast with 73% White British students.

Participants in these institutions worked in Politics departments or teaching Politics in a related social science area. While I was cautious of 'reifying' PREVENT as *only* being relevant for specific disciplines or topics, I wanted to hear from those with direct experiences of PREVENT in relation to their teaching and research and, consequently, approached those with specialisms in broad topics such as terrorism, security, radicalisation and international relations. Participants were emailed an invitation for an interview in person, on the phone or Skype, with the majority opting for the latter. Interview participants were 54% male, 46% female and 23% BAME. A recruitment challenge worthy of further analytical consideration elsewhere were three colleagues who did not feel they could participate specifically because their students were mostly white British and female.

The project originally intended to conduct focus groups with the students of the interviewed faculty to consider their experiences of criticality alongside those of their teachers. However, this proved challenging due to the sensitivity of the topic, as well as the additional demands it placed on faculty. Instead, 2 additional interviews were conducted with a national and an institutional representative from the NUS in February and March 2019 to provide some, albeit partial, insight into student perspectives.

Interview data was transcribed, anonymised and uploaded to NVivo where common themes were coded and reflected on using theoretical provocations from Ahmed's (2012) work on the politics of institutional belonging and Mahmood's (2008) theorisations on the intersections of academic thinking with religion, geopolitics and culture.

## **Findings**

The research notes three broad findings. Firstly, that critical curricula (and the bodies who teach and learn within it) become framed as risky knowledge/knowers and subject to processes of caution and self-censorship. Secondly, I highlight how academic's experiences of Prevent are embodied via a racialised and gendered dynamic, as well as being shaped by career status and perceptions of job security. Finally, there was an intensifying agenda of surveillance and governance, shaped by neoliberal contentions of not wanting to take unnecessary risks and provoke unhappy 'customers. Together, this research suggests that PREVENT constructs blunt, binaried and decontextualised models of legibility and risk that have the potential to curtail critical knowledge and knowers.

## **Findings**

### **Cautious criticality**

PREVENT was described as having an actual and potential negative impact on critical thinking in higher education classrooms. Participants, spoke of de-sensitising and de-politicising curricula, with the consequence that students were less able to access and debate a broader spectrum of critical opinion on contentious topics. A striking example was avoidance of discussing debates

around terrorism in a Politics degree for fear of susceptible radicalisation and, instead, only presenting students with the ‘facts’:

*‘We purposely don’t discuss radicalisation, for a good reason. Which is just in case there were to be someone in the room who might be susceptible in the future. I don’t want them to have me in the back of their mind when they are deciding they want to become a terrorist. So, in that respect, I stay away from some of the... I deal with facts’.*

**Ben, Southern Coastal**

Echoing a similar approach, Peter (Southern Coastal) spoke of de-politicising a module on global terror to avoid their lectures being taken out of context or seen as dogmatic and potentially leading to them, as a teacher, being reported as suspect. These processes of self-censorship were motivated by concerns for their students, as well as themselves, with one lecturer removing contentious or radical readings from a reading list to protect students from being targeted by accessing it. She commented that *‘it is really challenging and really sad’* (Francesca, Southern City). Yousef (Southern Coastal) states that *‘academic freedom is afforded to us, but we practice it very, very carefully’*.

Importantly, these impacts were described to different levels of intensity. While all participants were highly critical of PREVENT’s implications - some directly changed their teaching and research practices and others felt relatively unaffected. The most common response to understanding the impact on criticality is typified below in which lecturers claim not to ‘feel’ PREVENT in their roles but as they start to think this through, their narratives nonetheless suggest something otherwise:

*‘I’m a politically engaged sociologist and that means that, you know, I do wear my politics on my sleeve, but I also try and give the students the best sense of what I think the evidence show....So when it comes to evidence to the cause of terrorism for example, I don’t feel the need to sort of stress the official line as much ... So, I think to a certain extent I’m always trying to give students a balanced view...And I’m certainly making an effort not to propagandise in the classroom’*

**Tobias, Midlands City**

The issue emerging here that such ‘propagandising’ becomes situated not simply as poor or uncritical teaching but also becomes pedagogically risky under the legalistic framework of PREVENT. Consequently, this lecturer and others appeared to present their critical practices more ‘cautiously’ with this in mind. While critical thinking is a diverse set of knowledge practices with multiple meanings and enactments (Danvers, 2019) a commitment to openness, to questioning and to free exploration is seen to be particularly significant, aspects which appear to be curtailed by the possibility or actuality of what PREVENT implied.

### **Risky knowers**

Experiences of PREVENT were also distinctly embodied with BAME participants describing feeling additionally visible and vulnerable:

*‘Being potentially a suspect, subject, being a Muslim academic myself, who leans toward critical thinking, yes, sometimes I wonder whether some of the things, the way I teach, or some of the things that I say in class could be misconstrued. So I have become more self-conscious in my teaching especially....so if I’m saying this, if I’m talking about this, it might come across as trying to justify or defend. So perhaps maybe more disclaimers need to be used’.*

**Maryam, Northern**

The critiques of PREVENT as Islamophobic (see Saeed and Johnson, 2016) resonate with Maryam’s account and such discourses have clearly filtered into higher education classrooms to position *some* lecturers and their students as being seen to be more risky knowers than others. This is additionally compounded by other intersections of academic identity such as being early-career or untenured, as Tanisha describes:

*‘I can imagine that if you’re from a Muslim background and Islam background and let’s say quite reasonably, legitimately you wanted to use ISIS propaganda or whatever in a pedagogical way, it might have a slightly chilling effect on that. You might wonder if that was the right thing to do, particularly if you’re not tenured or you’re a PhD student or you’re a postdoc or something like that’*

**Tanisha, Southern City**

While PREVENT may present itself as a neutral technology to understand and challenge radicalisation among students, it materialises itself to bodies differently and is shaped by who is ‘at home’ (Ahmed, 2012) in higher education institutions, disciplines and classrooms. Both Maryam and Tanisha’s stories suggest this leads to a nervousness about engaging in critical debate or discussion and in offering the opportunity to engage with particular narratives or texts. PREVENT created a context where these perceptions of both risk and vulnerability around whose views could be made legible/mute created critical ‘closures’ that were experienced by marginalised bodies more intensely (Mahmood, 2009). Moreover, this was seen to have specific consequences for understanding and critically thinking about the very topics PREVENT sought to address:

*‘Where does there ever become a space to talk... Well, things just become hidden and more and more unspoken and... if you feel that you’re under surveillance all the time...it doesn’t exactly help things in terms of, yes, opportunities to question the state in all sorts of different ways...I think it’s really damaging’*

**Louie, NUS**

The closure of particular knowledge or knowers was seen to be particularly problematic for higher education which situates its core pedagogic value in preserving critical debate.

### **(Am I?) being watched for ‘risky’ business**

While participants gave examples (as above) of how PREVENT shaped their critical teaching and learning – they also explained that PREVENT was rarely applied in a direct or heavy-handed way by universities. Instead, its presence was much more underhand, with participants describing an often highly subtle sense of surveillance over their pedagogic practice:

*‘I haven’t changed the focus of the course and the pedagogical goals remain the same, but there’s definitely more self-awareness, more concern about how this might be seen. How the system might be monitoring what I’m looking for to teach material I’m developing, and so on’.*

**Maryam, Northern**

*‘As I was putting together the material for that class, I was very conscious about not including particular images or videos...I was really worried about how it might get taken out of context or what might filter out of the classroom’*

**Kristianne, Midlands City**

As Maryam and Kristianne describe above, PREVENT contributed in often indirect and indescribable ways to feelings of being monitored for ‘risky business’. This was seen to be a specific consequence of an intensification of the forces of marketisation in which PREVENT became interlinked with other policies around student feedback, student welfare and inclusion to foster a risk-averse knowledge community. As a result, lecturers worried that their teaching could be deemed problematic under PREVENT *but also* under other policies around ensuring students were ‘satisfied’. This links to Durodie’s (2015) claim that the increased ‘securitisation’ of higher education under PREVENT coincides with institutions increasingly worried around the free exchange of opinion causing offence. Moreover, the majority of participants described their department or institution’s approach to PREVENT as a ‘tick box’ or bureaucratic exercise which created binaried division of risky/safe knowledge and knowers. This made many of them question their own pedagogic practices – particularly those aspects that appeared more troubling such as particular literature or broader critical perspectives. These institutional discourses around doing the ‘right’ thing (for multiple intersecting reasons, PREVENT being part of that) reflected institutional concern for unhappy customers and the avoidance of ‘*reputational risk and damage*’ (Peter, Southern Coastal) as well as risky knowledge/knowers:

*I think the university is risk averse. Maybe that’s as much as like the commercialisation of the HE-sector as much as it is to do with the Prevent agenda being impossible for me to untangle sort of where the two come from, and PR being as much of an important thing’*  
**Jon, Southern Coastal**

While academic freedom should not be seen as an unproblematic good, this closing down of ‘suspect’ knowledge or knowers for intersecting reasons of both PR and PREVENT is clearly limiting for higher education institutions claiming to foster open and educative spaces for critical thinking.

## **Recommendations**

The UK government is currently in the process of conducting a formal review of PREVENT and we are therefore at a crucial nexus in reflecting on how this future policy should be adopted, resisted and/or adapted in our universities. Moreover, the impacts of Covid-19 and moves to online learning mean these questions may be subsumed or accepted uncritically at a time when ‘getting on’ with the job may lead to ‘moving on’ from difficult questions.

Firstly, there is a need for revised and academically informed PREVENT training. None of the faculty reporting the experiences above felt adequately trained or supported by their institution to deal with situations emerging in the classroom that might be classified under PREVENT e.g. how to handle students sharing extremist views or how to support students who feel their views or cultures have been targeted and silence themselves as a result. This should move beyond an e-learning ‘how to’ guide but to a meaningful pedagogic encounter that is targeted to the specific requirements of students, colleagues, departments and institutions. It should leave vital space to understand the complex intersections of geo-politics that created policies such as PREVENT and the subsequent positioning of ‘some’ knowledge and knowers as ‘radical’ or ‘extreme’. This should enable faculty to take a more critical and nuanced approach to their ‘duty’.

Secondly, there is a need for universities to engage critically with PREVENT and what might emerge afterwards. There is currently no evidence linking higher education teaching and learning practices with radicalisation and there are consequently valid calls by student and teaching unions

to reject PREVENT entirely. This research reveals that there is a definite lack of space to think critically both about PREVENT and issues of ‘risky knowledge’ that emerge from it – questions that are central to understanding the future potential of university as a site of ‘critical’ knowledge creation and reproduction. Participants appeared to simultaneously reject PREVENT, feel confused by it and feel targeted by it but there was little space for these critiques to be discussed or taken seriously by their senior managers. Rather than higher education institutions operating PREVENT as a bureaucratic or protectionist exercise that filters classrooms and their learners for ‘risky business, there is a need to reposition our academic role as social critics to speak back to it ‘critically’ in our classrooms and with our colleagues.

## Presentations and Publications

Danvers, E. (in progress) Prevent/ing criticality: the pedagogical impact of PREVENT in UK universities. To be submitted to *Teaching in Higher Education* in Autumn 2020.

A blog on ‘Prevent/ing Critical Thinking?’ for the LSE Impact of Social Sciences was accepted pre-COVID 19 and am awaiting further response.

Danvers, E. (2019). Prevent/ing Criticality? Critical Thinking in the Politics Classroom. Paper accepted at the 2019 *SRHE Newer Researcher’s Conference* but could not attend due to maternity leave. Will submit to attend and present in December 2020.

Danvers, E. (2018). Prevent/ing Criticality? Critical Thinking in the Politics Classroom. Paper given at the April 2018 *British Sociological Association Conference*, Northumbria.

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