

The Prevent Strategy in the University Sector: The Student Perspective

by Professor Mathew Guest (7th Sept 2020)

The UK Government's counter-terrorism Prevent Strategy has long been criticised for stigmatising Muslims and reinforcing negative stereotypes about Islam. On university campuses, where the Strategy is implemented, Prevent is also criticised for encouraging a culture of surveillance and discouraging free academic debate. However, these critiques have rarely been backed by research that is rigorous, independent and nation-wide. Moreover, defenders of Prevent have all too often depended on evidence furnished by government bodies, who have a vested interest in reinforcing the government line and claiming the coherence and efficacy of existing policy.

In response to this gap in the evidence, a multi-university team of academics, working on the [Representing Islam on Campus](#) project, commissioned a national survey of over 2,000 students about their views of Islam, Muslims and the impact of Prevent on campus life. The survey covers 132 UK universities and respondents were subject to quota sampling to ensure a sample representative of the national student population. The full results and analysis are published in the free online report, [Islam and Muslims on UK University Campuses: Perceptions and Challenges](#).

Key findings include the following:

(i) **Among the majority of students, Prevent has only limited visibility within their experience of university** (59% had never heard of it). Among those students who are familiar with Prevent, learning about it via their university is strongly associated with viewing Prevent as damaging to university life. In other words, **those closest to its implementation are most concerned about its consequences.**

(ii) Among students unaware of Prevent, over 40% nevertheless expressed a view on it. This reinforces our finding that **matters of counter-terrorism often elicit strong views even when individuals acknowledge limited direct knowledge or awareness of the issues.** Misinformation and misunderstanding are therefore serious concerns.

(iii) The UK government has long maintained that radicalisation is a problem in UK universities and that Prevent is an essential means of tackling it. **Students who agree with the government line are significantly more likely to express negative views about Islam and Muslims.** For example, students who see radicalisation as a problem on campus are four times more likely to deny that Muslims have made a valuable contribution to British life. Those who support Prevent are almost 3 times more likely to see Islam as intolerant towards non-Muslims than those who believe Prevent damages university life. **Policy makers may not intend Prevent to perpetuate unhelpful stereotypes, but its assumptions resonate most with those who hold hostile views on Islam.** A review of Prevent must therefore consider whether it is helping to maintain negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims and that policy is thereby sustaining prejudice.

Our research underlines the importance of assessing policy in light of its consequences (*intended and unintended*) using research that is independent of the machinery of government. Only then will it be truly evidence-based.

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