Preventing Critical Thinking? The pedagogical impacts of Prevent in UK higher education.

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The Prevent counter terrorism strategy (‘Prevent’) - specifically the duty to report those deemed vulnerable to, or causing suspicions of, radicalisation - has been intensely criticised within UK higher education for its racialised and colonial agenda; its potential to curb academic freedom; and its reframing of the pedagogical dynamic as one of surveillance. A specific concern is that Prevent limits possibilities for critical teaching and learning which is predicated on notions of openness and mutual exchange. This paper responds to the claim that Prevent and the statutory duty it implies, prevents critical thinking using empirical data collection with 14 academic faculty teaching Politics across 4 English universities. These data reveal how Prevent's effects are neither uniform nor straightforward but that its bureaucratic and legalistic framing produces significant and detrimental ‘critical closures’ with an urgent need for higher education institutions to approach future guises of Prevent both critically and pedagogically.

Keywords: critical thinking, teaching and learning, Prevent, higher education

**Prevent and its closures**

Prevent is one of the four “Ps” of the UK government’s counter-terrorism strategy along with Pursue, Protect and Prepare as set out in the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (2015). Its intention is to safeguard and support those vulnerable to radicalisation and to prevent them from engaging in or supporting terrorism. From the outset, the strategy and its legal and political ramifications have prompted numerous debates over how it can meet the societal challenges faced by ‘radicalisation’ whilst maintaining freedoms over speech and liberty (see Holmwood and O’Toole, 2009). Prevent places 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). This ‘duty’ has been intensely criticised within higher education for its racialised agenda (Guest *et al.,* 2020; Saeed and Johnson, 2016; Scott-Bauman, 2017) its potential to curb intellectual freedom (O’Donnell, 2016; Durodie, 2016) and for reframing the pedagogical dynamic as surveillance (Davies, 2016; Furedi, 2016). This paper responds
to the claim that Prevent (and the statuary duty it implies) prevents critical thinking, through empirical data collection capturing the experiences of academics teaching Politics in UK universities. Contextualising these data requires exploring interconnected and complex debates about academic freedom, securitisation and the definition and valuing of criticality.

A specific criticism levelled at Prevent is that it negatively reframes the pedagogic relationship. For example, the National Union of Students (NUS) (2020) claim Prevent positions students as ‘suspects’, with lecturers, in turn, asked to review the legality, as well as the quality, of the arguments students make. This position has been endorsed by the union representing many academic faculty in the UK - University and College Union (UCU) - who support the NUS’s call to end Prevent. The inserting of a specific legalistic dynamic around radicalisation and vulnerability into the higher education classroom, as both unions claim, is linked to broader shifts to securitise educational settings (Davies, 2016; Novelli, 2017). Here, questions of surveillance, legality, safety and risk enter into pedagogic relations and this is seen to limit freedom of expression (Taylor & Soni, 2017). Moreover, as O’Donnell (2016) describes, it also implies that radicalisation occurs through a linear pathway from ideas or belief systems to violent actions and that these processes of inculcation of the ‘vulnerable’ are observable by teachers in university classrooms. Indeed, no clear evidence has been produced to demonstrate that universities directly radicalise students into sympathising with, or engaging in, extremism (Scott-Bauman, 2017). Yet, as a policy discourse, Prevent creates a pedagogic context whereby students and their ideas can be read as ‘potentially’ suspicious or guilty. In addition, academic faculty are positioned as being able to make straightforwardly intelligible judgements about ‘risky’ knowledge and knowers.
The intellectual valuing of higher education as a space of ‘open’ critical debate is seen to be uniquely challenged by Prevent. Furedi (2016) argues it ‘undermines the capacity of universities to provide students with the opportunity to gain clarity through the free exchange of opinion’ (no page). While the Counter-Terror and Security Act (2015) claims to uphold academic freedom – in practice the demarcation of ‘risky’ knowledge and knowers muddies the waters of such a promise. Notions of academic freedom invoke the scene of an intricate dance between promoting freedom of speech and protection from harm for the individual and the wider collective. Some argue that with appropriate restraint and rigour, there is ‘no forbidden territory’ in what academics can say, no matter how radical (Barrow, 2009, p. 188). Yet this position can too easily, without sufficient safeguards, enable or privilege hate speech. It can also fail to recognise that ‘freedom’ of speech is not neutrally embodied and that marginalised identities experience the right to speak as always already monitored and curtailed (McGarry & Mythen, 2015).

Prevent, as a policy discourse and in its implementation in practice, appears to disproportionately target Muslim communities (NUS, 2020). Therefore, perceptions of ‘risk’ in classroom dynamics and debates emerge as distinctly racialised. Stevenson (2018) described how Prevent, along with a ‘moral panic’ around Islamic fundamentalism has led to many Muslim students experiencing intended or unintended racism on university campuses. Consequently, Saeed and Johnson (2016) found that UK Muslim university students are increasingly perceived as a security threat so regularly self-censor their beliefs and opinions out of fear of being labelled a ‘terrorist’. This creates a context where certain topics become ‘off-limits’ for (some) to talk about, for fear of being targeted as problematic - closing off valuable classroom space for critical discussion and debate. Scott-Bauman (2017) states that such silencing of ideas and
bodies create critique absences or ‘vacuums’ that urgently need to be reclaimed. Indeed, where it is no longer considered safe to express specific views - debates which can genuinely shift radicalised perspectives are unable to occur (Saeed and Johnson, 2016).

Moreover, becoming a critical thinker is not separate from the multiple ways bodies are unequally positioned as powerful/powerless within higher education. Ahmed (2012) for example, describes how racialised bodies are regularly delegitimised and their ‘critical’ voices silenced. In relation to Muslim identity, Dorlin (2016) explores wearing a veils is positioned as symbolic withdrawal from public debate that presents a philosophical challenge to deeply-seated notions of Western citizenship as demanding persistent visibility. The Muslim body here acts as a floating signifier (Hall, 1997) such that what we recognise are signs (e.g. headscarf, beard) and that these signs are attached to racialised meaning – in this case specific forms of silence. The process of being positioned as a possible/impossible ‘critical’ knower is shaped by such processes of racialisation and policy discourses such as Prevent act as citational practices to reinforce and reproduce these signs and their signifiers. Tensions between the privilege to speak and be heard and their relationship to marginalised bodies, 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.

The UK government is currently conducting a formal review of Prevent and now represents a crucial nexus in reflecting how this future policy should be adopted, resisted and/or adapted in our universities. In parallel, the UK Equalities Minister recently called a halt on teaching ‘partisan political views’ in schools and universities, which raises important questions over what this constitutes and who decides - particularly when this includes theories that seek to reveal structural inequalities around race (Trilling, 2020). Finally, the impacts of Covid-19 and emergency 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 or contested debates. This paper considers how understandings and practices of critical thinking in higher education are being shaped by Prevent to respond to the debates described above. Specifically, it seeks to exemplify what some of the ‘critical closures’ suggested by Scott-Bauman (2017) might look like in a Politics classroom.

**Critical thinking in higher education**

Assessing the implications of Prevent for the teaching and learning of critical thinking requires a brief interlude exploring what such criticality looks like. Whilst deeply embedded in the academy’s DNA and an inherent part of its ‘brand’ this seemingly benign and transparent intellectual value has multiple meanings and enactments (Danvers, 2019). This ranges from a rational thought technique to deconstruct and reproduce ideas for academic assessment, to an ethical or activist stance that becomes aligned with students’ wider lives and studies.

Moore (2011) asked academics to define critical thinking and found that, while they have clear and developed understandings, they are also multi-dimensional and contested - particularly across subject disciplines. Despite this, he found shared understandings including a sceptical and provisional view of knowledge and willingness or openness to debate. This aligns towards an overarching definition of critical thinking as, put simply, demonstrating ‘that things are not as self-evident as one believed’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 154). Such a framing holds that the ability to question, evaluate, listen and seek understanding is fundamental to critical pedagogy. As O’Donnell (2016) argues, education ought to be, at its core, anti-extremist in cultivating space for the exploration and fallibility of multiple ideas.
The disciplinary focus of this research is Politics, a subject which requires specific recognition of the construction and contestation of knowledge via and through political discourse. Olsen and Statham (2005) explored understandings of critical thinking by Politics students in the USA and noted definitions of ‘independent, flexible and careful thinking…[of] not taking things at face value’ (p. 338). Students and faculty in this study saw an inter-connected relationship between critical thinking and political thinking but also this connection had underlying and often implicit assumptions about multiple knowledges and critique as both an intellectual and political act.

While the definition of critical thinking as openness and scepticism circulates, it also becomes enacted in different contexts and through different bodies which complicates the possibility of simplistic definitions. This is captured by Butler who describes criticality as comprising of ‘embodied and affective practices, modes of subjectivity that are bound up with their objects and thus relational’ (ibid, p. 101). Fricker (2003) discusses how certain historically and socially marginalised bodies suffer epistemic injustice by being denied the right to think, speak and be heard as ‘critical’. Thus, even if openness is understood as a fundamental characteristic of criticality, access to this is mediated through embodied experiences and the episteme within which bodies are entangled. In previous work I have explored how being a student critical thinker in UK higher education is not neutral or given, but intersects with students’ embodied characteristics and the (increasingly divisive) socio-political context in which criticality is performed (Danvers, 2018; Danvers, 2019). This means that academics understanding the impacts of Prevent on their critical practices, will do so drawing on shared understandings, alongside contextualised, embodied and affectively-loaded meanings of critical thinking.
Researching Prevent

This research aimed to investigate how academic faculty understood the pedagogical impacts of Prevent (including aspects such as content and style of teaching and relationships with students). Specifically, it focused on how, if at all, Prevent influences the teaching and learning of ‘critical’ thinking. The project received ethical approval by the University of Sussex. Specific thought was given to ensuring participants felt able to express potentially politically sensitive opinions, through anonymity of people and place; ensuring participants shared only what felt safe to do so and enabling participants to approve transcripts. Interviews were conducted with 14 academic faculty and 1 NUS representative between September 2018 and February 2019. In order to gather diverse perspectives (particularly given the racialised dynamic of Prevent) faculty were recruited from 4 different English universities, selected due to their proportion of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students, as well as being geographically and institutionally disparate. The institutions, along with the participants, have been assigned pseudonyms. Northern is a high ranking (The Complete University Guide\(^1\)) university in the north of England with 15% BAME students. Midlands City is a mid-ranking inner city university in the middle of England with 68% BAME students. Southern City is a low-ranking inner-city university in the south with 73% BAME students. Southern Coastal is a mid-ranking university on the south coast with 23% BAME students. I have used the terminology BAME due to its dominance as a data ‘shorthand’ in the UK. However, it is undeniably problematic in not being universally recognised internationally and for collapsing the Other into a sanitised numeric representing numerous diverse ethnic groups. An alternative would have been to select

\(^1\) Independent UK university rankings website
institutions based on numbers of Muslim students but statistics on this remain imprecise (Stevenson, 2018).

Academic faculty from these universities work in Politics departments or teach Politics in a related social science area. They were selected and approached using their institutional web profiles. While I was cautious of ‘reifying’ Prevent as only being relevant for specific identities, 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 topics such as terrorism, security, radicalisation and international relations. Out of the 14 participants 8 were male, 6 female and 3 non-White and were spread across career stages, including senior management and early-career. I also spoke to a NUS representative with expertise in Prevent to seek further, albeit limited, information on students’ perspectives.

These institutional and identity features are listed, not to claim ‘representativeness’, particularly given the small sample, but to draw attention to how these identities may position institutional engagement in critical practices and subsequent policies that shape them. Indeed, a recruitment challenge to note were three colleagues who responded to say they could not participate specifically because their students were mostly White, British and female. This is testament to how Prevent ‘sticks’ to non-White, male and specifically Muslim bodies such that its effects are neither equally (nor benignly) understood nor experienced.

Participants were emailed an invitation for an interview in-person or online, with all but two opting for the latter. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing space for participants to offer their experiences and reflections. My role was to listen and gently guide, inspired by Kvale’s (1996) metaphor of the researcher as ‘traveller,’ ‘wandering together with’ their participant in the process of arriving at insight (p. 4). The interviews
were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data analysis comprised of a first stage of initial organisation and coding using NVivo, from which several patterns emerged. This was followed by a second, more reflexive, process of ‘writing towards and against’ these patterns using freewriting to enable me to expand on their meaning, whilst also being attentive to what else glowed as data ‘hot spots’ (MacLure, 2013, p. 173). For example, an analytical provocation was the desire to find thematic consensus whilst recognising that if some things were experienced differently that there is validity in exploring the power of such ‘dissensus’ accounts. This was particularly the case, as I explore below, where non-White colleagues described ‘feeling’ Prevent more intensely than their White peers. A commitment to making visible these data tensions is important politically in exploring ‘diverse’ policy encounters and avoiding a simplistic narrative. Methodologically, I was drawn to Fine et al (2000) who describe how exploratory rich qualitative approaches are able to illuminate ‘issues of the common and the specific, without diluting either’ (p. 111). The final stage of data analysis was using the theoretical tools of Sara Ahmed and Karen Barad as provocations to explore the significance, meaning and contingency of the emergent themes.

Ahmed’s (2012) work on the politics of institutional belonging reveals how acts of closure and silencing delineate ‘legitimate’ knowledge and knowers. For example, the commitment to ‘diversity’ work in higher education acts as ‘non-performative’ in that the act of speaking diversity does not result in actions that enable diversity to be done. Instead, diversity policy has the tendency to have a merely symbolic role, reassuring people that their interests are represented yet resulting in a lack of momentum to effect change. The consequence is that the concept of diversity tends to become divorced from the structural inequalities it claims to represent and that this silences talk about racial inequality. This process of speech acts, standing in for acts
(saying but not doing) is a way to understand the tensions and closures provoked by Prevent.

Moreover, I am also drawn to Barad’s (2007) concept of the apparatus to understand the multifarious impacts of Prevent on critical pedagogic encounters. For Barad (2007), apparatus (such as a microscope or interview schedule or potentially a legal or policy framework) are not simply observing instruments but ‘boundary-drawing practices, specific material (re)configurings of the world, which comes to matter’ (p. 140). Baradian conceptualisations prompt consideration of how knowledge is constructed through the tools and situated perspectives of the knower, or the mode of seeing. The Baradian apparatus foregrounds how understandings become gathered and boundaried through routinised practices that construct particular, and often naturalised, viewpoints with which to see (and judge) phenomena. The ‘apparatus’ is a way to conceptualise how Prevent’s effects are not straightforward nor felt equally, through understanding the entangled perspective of the ‘duty’ it entails with the academic teacher, the student, the institution and the critical practices in question. As Prevent circulates within institutions as an ‘entangled’ mode of seeing, it works to make legible critical thinking and critical thinkers in specific ways. This paper seeks to explore how, in so doing, Prevent shapes and limits the possibilities of critical thinking.

**Prevent/ing Criticality? Findings**

Three broad themes emerged from data analysis that relate to the impacts of Prevent on possibilities for critical thinking. Firstly, critical curricula (and the bodies who teach and learn within them) become framed by Prevent as risky knowledge/knowers and subject to processes of caution and self-censorship. Secondly, academics’ 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 is an intensifying agenda of surveillance and governance, shaped by Prevent alongside neoliberal contentions of not wanting to risk the possibility of unhappy ‘customers’. Taken together, these suggest that Prevent constructs blunt, binaried and decontextualised modes of legibility and risk that creates ‘critical closures’ for knowledge and knowers.

Here, I am predominantly exploring Prevent’s symbolic effects as an entangled policy discourse but I do so whilst also recognising its very real implications for people’s lives within and beyond higher education institutions. As I write, I am continually reminded of the warning from one participant who said ‘it's not just a theoretical issue, you know, it's something that is going to impact on a lot of people's lives’ (Tobias, Midlands City).

**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 spectrum of critical opinion on contentious topics. As a policy it was rarely experienced as an overbearing pedagogic command, but it was subtly felt as a ‘pause’ or interruption, followed by ‘caution’:

> 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 reflect, Prevent contributed in, often indescribable, ways to feelings of being monitored for ‘risky business’. Another striking example of this was the avoidance of discussing aspects of terrorism for fear of susceptible radicalisation and, instead, presenting students with ‘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

This quote reveals something of Ben’s epistemological position in presenting Politics knowledge as ‘factual’ rather than contested. It also indicates a conceptual link between words, radicalisation and action, whereas, as Scott-Bauman (2017) states processes of radicalisation are more complex and contextual than this presupposes. More strikingly it links to a fear of blame – that Ben’s teaching would somehow risk radical actions. Prevent, in this example, appears to force Ben to retreat away from particular topics in which critical debate might take place and instead, present a more ‘cautious’ and potentially instrumental curricula.

Echoing a similar theme, Peter (Southern Coastal) spoke of de-politicising a module on global terror to avoid the lectures being taken out of context or seen as dogmatic and potentially leading to him being reported as ‘suspect’. These processes of self-censorship on the part of the teachers, were motivated by concerns for their students, as well as themselves, with one lecturer removing material from a reading list to protect students from being targeted as a consequence of accessing it:
The very word university is about being open to universal thinking and allowing people to ask for information…it shouldn’t be about censoring ideas. So I have ended up removing some readings for my students because of Prevent. I don’t think it’s healthy but I did it to protect the students from Prevent more than protecting the students from those ideas in the readings. It is really challenging and really sad.  

**Francesca, Southern City**

Francesca is deeply troubled by Prevent and describes how it has seeped into pedagogical relations such that her curricula have become narrowed by attempts to make them ‘safe’. In our conversation it was not obvious how Prevent influenced her decision making and there was no mention of specific institutional or departmental directives but nonetheless it prompted her to censor. The notion of students being targeted under Prevent for accessing specific texts or taking particular modules is also highlighted by the NUS representative, Louie, who reported multiple examples of Muslim students adapting their student experiences in order to not become ‘visible’. Francesca reflects on the consequences of these closures in limiting space critical thinking,

Importantly, Prevent’s impacts were described according to different levels of intensity. Whilst all participants were highly critical of Prevent, some directly changed their practices (as above) and others described feeling relatively unaffected - even within the same department and institution. However, the most common response is typified below where participants initially claim not to ‘feel’ Prevent very much in relation to critical thinking but as they think this through, their narratives suggest otherwise. For example, Tobias who earlier in our interview described it as ‘not having a huge impact on my teaching practice’ later reflects on his relationship to teaching Politics and his own personal politics:
I'm a politically engaged sociologist and that means that, you know, I wear my politics on my sleeve, but I also try and give the students the best sense of what I think the evidence shows...So when it comes to the cause of terrorism for example, I don't feel the need to sort of stress the official line as much ... 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 is that ‘propagandising’ becomes situated not simply as poor or uncritical teaching but also as pedagogically risky under the legalistic ‘apparatus’ of Prevent. In a similar vein, Pam claims to ‘forget’ about Prevent but simultaneously links the critical pedagogy she enacts as doing Prevent’s work:

I tend to forget that it’s in my daily practice…
I think the challenge is being aware of Prevent but not having it moderate your teaching style. You have to be able to allow a discussion without actually monitoring every word and sentence that somebody says. If I’m honest with, I tend to not consider it.

Pam, Southern Coastal

Despite, on the one-hand, narrating a ‘light-touch’ experience of Prevent, the terminology of ‘monitoring’ and ‘moderating’ and the parallels drawn between this and the work of critical pedagogy suggests something ‘more’. While Prevent’s effects on critical thinking were not straightforward nor clear-cut among, they nonetheless produced an, albeit subtle for some, sense of pedagogic ‘caution’.

As a brief interlude, the idea of ‘caution’ in itself is not necessarily problematic. It was seen by many as integral to facilitating a space for the inculcation of critical, independent thought. As Pam later describes, caution was essential in holding back from the projection of narrow, dogmatic or offensive positions:
You need to discuss topics, you need to have knowledge and discussion, but you need to ensure a respectful environment in which to do that, you need to allow people who have differing views to be able to speak.

Pam, Southern Coastal

However, the circulation of the Prevent policy as an entangled policy apparatus (Barad, 2007) works to discursively shift ‘caution’ from openness or patience towards risk and ‘vigilance’ which is subtly different. This is also neatly exemplified by Yousef who explores the contradictions between understanding his students as educated and critical subjects whilst also, under the statutory duty, seeing them as susceptible. To him, it was illogical these subjectivities could co-exist:

I assume my students are thinking human beings…We're actually charged, are we not, by our disciplinary norms to have students be reflexive about any evidence, any media messages that they're receiving, especially if it emanates from the state. So how can I then… according to the norms in political science…separate this suspect, stigmatised, social being who is uniquely susceptible to the stages of radicalisation? I can't. I can't do it.

Yousef, Southern Coastal

One the one hand, a ‘good’ Politics student should be intellectually charged to critically confront knowledge, including Prevent itself. Yet on the other hand, Prevent produces the student critical thinker as one who could also be potentially vulnerable to external radicalisation. Academic participants, in turn, appear to conceptually separate their disciplinary critical pedagogies from the policy ‘discipline’ of Prevent that asks them to instrumentalise and vigilantly ‘judge’ criticality as being good/bad or risky/safe.

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 that Prevent implies. Prevent constructs a
particular ‘apparatus’ (Barad, 2007), or mode of seeing critical practices, which creates boundaries around particular behaviours as being ‘risky’. Its effects are multifarious and, in some cases, subtle, but in its circulation, Prevent provokes a sense of pedagogic unease amongst participants to ‘pause’ and to be ‘cautious’.

**Risky/vulnerable knowers**

In stating Prevent is experienced differently, this manifested itself noticeably in relation to embodied identity, with the 3 non-White participants and specifically the 2 who were Muslim describing feeling additionally visible and vulnerable. For example, Maryam reflects on her vulnerabilities when teaching:

> Being potentially a suspect subject, being a Muslim academic myself, who leans toward critical thinking, yes, sometimes I wonder whether…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*

Maryam feels Prevent produces her as a potential suspect and this changes how she approaches her critical practices. It forces her to add a disclaimer in order to separate herself as an academic specialist from the suspect ‘Other’ Muslim subjectivity. This is echoed by Yousef’s nerves about presenting his course to colleagues and students:

> I just thought having a lecture that says ISIS in the title at the end, what would the students been thinking about my motivation for putting it there? I just think about that.

*Yousef, Southern Coastal*

The critiques of Prevent as Islamophobic (see Saeed and Johnson, 2016) resonate with Maryam and Yousef’s accounts of feeling under suspicion and such discourses have
clearly filtered into higher education classrooms to position some lecturers and their students as ‘riskier’ knowers than others. The racialised dynamic of Prevent to Muslim bodies is referenced by all participants. For example, Carl reflects on a critical debating technique he uses:

If you were a British Asian, you probably wouldn’t be doing a class where you get people to think about future terrorist attacks. So, yes, being white and male, gives you a lot of leeway in academia.

Carl, Northern

It will be an unsurprising claim made so far that Muslim academics feel less able to access particular pedagogies within higher education classrooms. This is mapped in a 3-year study on Islam on UK university campuses which saw how Prevent regularly and distinctly reinforces negative views of Islam and Muslims (Guest et al., 2020).

However, being a Muslim academic (not withstanding this in itself being a complex and diverse identity position) is additionally compounded by other intersections of academic identity such as being early-career or untenured in shaping experiences of Prevent. Tanisha reflects on this:

I have actually got a relatively privileged position because I'm middle-class and not Muslim, I am a Brown woman but I’m from one of these good quote-unquote ethnic minorities…I can imagine that if you’re from a Muslim 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…

Also I guess I’m prepared to invest in the courses because I know these courses are going to be mine so I buy books and I read them. Whereas I think even if you want
to introduce more critical ideas … Why would you do it if you’re like on a GTA\(^2\) contract or whatever?

**Tanisha, Southern City**

The word ‘chilling’ particularly resonates in Tanisha’s account as an effect of Prevent that caused her to question the ‘right’ sorts of knowledges and pedagogies. Again, there is the recognition of the additional challenges of embodying Muslim identity in generating curricula or in designing critical pedagogies around particular topics.

However, Maryam also explores how those in junior or insecure positions are less likely to push pedagogic boundaries. This is supported by Leathwood and Read (2020) who researched the pedagogic decision-making of academics on casualised contracts and found that this produced short-term temporal logics that had negative impacts on inculcating critical pedagogies as opposed to more instrumental, output-driven teaching. While Prevent may present itself as a neutral technology to understand and challenge radicalisation, as an entangled apparatus, it materialises itself in bodies differently and is shaped by who feels ‘at home’ (Ahmed, 2012) in higher education institutions, disciplines and classrooms. This means that the ‘chilling’ effect of Prevent are experienced as entangled with the multiple ways academics are unequally positioned in institutions - where race and religious identity are inseparable from other factors such as, in the example here, job security.

Both Maryam, Yousef and Tanisha’s stories suggest that Prevent creates a specific policy apparatus where perceptions of both risk and vulnerability around whose views can be made legible, or are muted, create critical ‘closures’ that are experienced by marginalised bodies more intensely (Mahmood, 2009).

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\(^2\) GTA (graduate teaching assistant) refers to PhD candidates who teach on university campuses on predominantly short-term and casualised contracts.
**Bureaucratic bluntness**

Prevent as a policy ‘apparatus’ (Barad, 2007) became entangled with other policies concerned with student feedback, student welfare and inclusion as well as being intensified via the forces of marketisation. As a consequence, it is difficult to tease out exactly what impacts Prevent had on critical thinking or on higher education pedagogy, alongside these other factors. In particular, there were a sense in which Prevent operates in a bureaucratic and blunt way, influenced by concerns for student satisfaction and institutional reputational management. As Jon describes:

> 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**

Lecturers worried that critical or more ‘risky’ 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 worrying about the free exchange of opinion causing offence. Risky pedagogy does not sit well in terms of ‘good PR’ and Prevent adds an additional dynamic to this risk.

A key critical incident is described by James when planning for a module on cultural diversity which includes content on blasphemy and the Charlie Hebdo case³. There were concerns raised by departmental management that, given Muslim students

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³ In 2015, twelve people were killed and eleven injured when gunmen attacked the offices of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. The attack was claimed by al-Qaeda and in response to the magazine’s publishing a caricature of the prophet Muhammad.
made up a constituent part of the study body, to include this would be politically incorrect and unnecessary and risk upsetting and annoying students. James went ahead with the module but was left with a sense that Prevent, combined with concerns for student satisfaction, closed down particular topics by making them potentially ‘risky’. He explains that, not only did this approach take a limited view of Muslim students and their abilities to engage in critical debate but that it was an infringement on academic freedom, as well as the very tools require to challenged extremist ideas. He states:

    I think we ought to have the capacity to criticise religious thought…but this seemed to be a kind of warped almost political correctness about cultural sensitivity combined with Islamophobia…So like a genuine belief that Muslims, as a body, are collectively and unequivocally opposed to any discussion of a topic…. Which is like, outrageous, right?... I think increasingly there is an expectation from students that stupid views will go unchallenged because people are afraid of upsetting one another.

    James, Northern

Here, he described the entanglement of complex sensitivities around critical debate, Islamophobia and student satisfaction that appear to be dealt with in a ‘blunt’ way via Prevent. Indeed, the majority of participants described their department or institution’s approach to Prevent as a ‘tick box’ or bureaucratic exercise which created binaried divisions of risky/safe knowledge and knowers. This made many of them question their own pedagogic practice – particularly aspects that appeared more troubling such as literature citing critical perspectives or open, unstructured debates. While academic freedom should not be seen as an unproblematic good, a closing down of ‘suspect’ knowledge or knowers for the intersecting rationalities of both PR and Prevent is clearly limiting for higher education institutions claiming to foster open and educative spaces for critical thinking.
Prevent as operationalised in this bureaucratic manner was also seen to be ineffective as a strategy for monitoring classroom debate. All participants said they would be unlikely to refer students to Prevent, not least for what that might entail for students, but additionally because they felt that a critical discussion of these issues was the most ethical and appropriate way to respond as educators. As Erin describes, academics already have the ability to engage with extremism in their ‘toolbox’:

My concern is that universities were seeking to demonstrate that they are responding to their duties satisfactorily actually construct systems and structures which are more problematic then they need to be… because I think we have the tools in our box anyway. I think we’ve got the tools to develop our critical thinking, I think we’ve got the tools to engage meaningfully with people who have views that are not mainstream. And I think that we have tools already to engage and support people who are at risk.  

Erin, Northern

Prevent - as a way to view extremism in higher education classrooms - appears to instigate institutional responses and systems that are unnecessarily bureaucratic and entirely separate from academic teacher’s everyday experiences of teaching. As Erin explains, the ‘tools’ of questioning, understanding and debate, central to practices of critical thinking, are those that can also be integral to good pedagogy and to challenging extremist positions. Carl exemplifies this further by reflecting on an encounter where he felt Prevent would have closed down the opportunity to engage with a student’s potentially problematic views:

In 2015 there were three underage girls who left London to go to Syria. And at the time I actually talked about this specific news. And in the large lecture…suddenly there’s a girl who actually puts her hand up and says what’s wrong with that? What’s wrong with them wanting to actually go and fight for what they actually believe in…? And then there you actually have to be able to answer in front of 280 students and you have to actually make sure that you don’t alienate them at the
same time, basically. And using the Prevent program and reporting probably would not be of much use. This has to be taken care of differently. And… I have actually still seen this particular student and she’s absolutely fine and she’s a normal student. And in a way it’s positive that she … She had enough space in that classroom to be able to question so what’s wrong with that, explain to me what’s wrong? And so, in a way, I see that as a positive, but I would imagine that maybe other lecturers would have taken a different stance and actually said well this is a problem. And then might consider, you know, reporting.

Carl, Northern

In Carl’s example, the student appeared to be legitimately questioning an incident labelled as extremist and his response as a teacher was to provide appropriate space to educate and reframe this moment. This supports the work of Saeed and Johnson (2016) who state that providing safe spaces to explore ideas enables potentially radical perspectives to be confronted and challenged. This is very much in line with Erin’s account of handling such an encounter in a way that foregrounds critical debate and openness. Yet in suggesting others might have reacted differently, the burden of individual responsibility to do the ‘right thing’ results in a lack of overall clarity on just what the ‘right’ thing to do might be in relation to Prevent. Crucially, none of the participants 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. The ‘right’ approach was seen to be an individual act of pedagogy or ethics that was almost always separate from institutional policy.

As Prevent entangles itself within other overarching discourses of student satisfaction or reputation management, it becomes experienced by academics as a blunt and bureaucratic apparatus for understanding ‘risky’ knowledge and knowers. In response, academics reject its procedures in place of their own critical pedagogies. This suggests, firstly, the importance of having critical, educative encounters with both
Prevent and extremist views to open up ‘critical closures’ that may emerge. Secondly, the gap between such positions suggests an urgent need to also find points of connection between the academics’ ‘critical toolbox’ and the bureaucratic bluntness of institutional responses.

**Conclusions: Prevent’s Critical Closures**

Prevent circulates within higher education institutions and is entangled with academic’s complex lives and identity positions. It operates as an apparatus or boundary drawing lens (Barad, 2007) to frame and map particular behaviours and knowledges. In doing so, it arguably prevents critical thinking in direct (such as the cautious approach to particular topics and pedagogies) and indirect ways (in the embodied sense of being watched for risky business). These moments can be described as critical closures – rarely as the finite closing down– but as producing, intermittent moments of conflict, caution and discomfort. Crucially and unsurprisingly, these experiences are distinctly embodied with the non-White participants in this small study stating their increased visibility and vulnerability. Moreover, as Prevent becomes entangled with other policy discourses particularly around marketisation and the associated demands of student satisfaction and institutional reputation management, it operates as a blunt and binaried tool to identify risky knowledge and knowers. In their rejection of it, the academics interviewed in this study experience Prevent as non-performative (Ahmed, 2012) in that it stands in for a semblance of action or attention to a topic which, in practice, is ineffective.

In responding to whatever emerges from the Prevent review being undertaken currently, these data suggests two ways forward for institutions and their academic faculty. First, there is a need for revised and academically informed Prevent training for
academic teachers. This should move beyond an e-learning ‘how to’ guide 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’ and to feel less individually responsible and implicated.

Second, 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 a clear 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 the 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 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 ‘critically’ in our classrooms and with our colleagues.

References


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