

## The 'war on terror' on campus threatens important freedoms

*Against a background of increasing claims that universities in the United Kingdom provide environments conducive to the inculcation of Islamic radicalism, [Ian Cram](#) argues that we must seriously reconsider the assumptions on which such a view rests. Given the relatively large percentage of young persons attending higher or further education institutions in the last decade, it would be surprising if universities were entirely insulated from such radicalism.*



The suggestion that universities in the United Kingdom might provide useful environments for nurturing a younger generation of violent Islamists has started to gain some traction. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab – known as the 'underpants bomber' was sentenced to life imprisonment in February 2012 for attempting to detonate a bomb as his flight was due to land in Detroit. He had been an engineering and business finance student at University College London (UCL) between 2005-8. Roshonara Choudhry, a former student at King's College London was convicted in 2010 of the attempted murder of Labour MP Stephen Timms at his weekly constituency surgery. She said in police interviews that she had stabbed the MP because he supported the Iraq war.

Lord Carlile of Berriew – formerly the Coalition Government's Independent Reviewer of Counterterrorism law and Policy – accused universities of being 'slow or even reluctant to recognise their full responsibilities' in the face of 'unambiguous evidence' of radicalising activities. The Prime Minister told the House of Commons in December 2010 similarly commented that '(W)e have not done enough to deal with the promotion of extremist Islamism in our own country. Whether ... it is making sure that we de-radicalize our universities, we have to take a range of further steps, and I am going to be working hard to make sure that we do.'

The Government's Prevent policy has been re-focused to target prisons and universities where the Home Office claims 'propagandists for terrorism are known to be operating.' The rhetoric of organisations such as the Quilliam Foundation and The Centre for Social Cohesion has also contributed to a narrative in which our institutions of higher education are considered to be breeding grounds for the next generation of jihadists.

The defence of the universities as open institutions in which debate and challenge to prevailing views are welcomed and where it is legitimate for controversial and offensive ideas to be aired has been led by Universities UK (UUK), an umbrella organisation representing 134 institutions in higher education. This freedom to challenge orthodoxy extends beyond members of the faculty to include students, visiting speakers and invited audiences.

At the same time, UUK works closely with the police and counter terrorism/Special Branch sections of local police forces to monitor the activities of those suspected of involvement in terrorist activity. Of greater concern perhaps is the fact that some universities also reported contact with the National Extremism Tactical Coordination Unit – an organisation whose democratic accountability has been openly doubted by Sir Ken McDonald a former Director of Public Prosecutions. A specific concern in the case of measures targeted at UK Universities would be the absence of empirical evidence causally linking a specific terrorist act to exposure to ideology/persons at university.

Instead, given the relatively large percentage of young persons attending higher or further education institutions in the last decade, it would, on the contrary, be wholly surprising if, among the extremely small number of those convicted of involvement in terrorist activity, a sizeable proportion of this statistically tiny group did not have a connection at some point in their lives to an institution of higher/further education. This connection alone however does not establish that the person was radicalized at university or became more likely to get involved in terrorist activities on account of

experiences at university.

Indeed, the notion of linear progression along a 'conveyor belt' from exposure to radical ideology, through grievance formation to involvement in violence is doubted, not least by elements of the Coalition Government and the Security Service MI5. A leaked memorandum prepared for the Home Affairs Sub-Committee is reported to have criticised the 'conveyor belt' thesis as misreading the process of radicalization and overplaying the role of ideological factors. A Briefing Note prepared by the Behavioural Science Unit at MI5 in 2008 also rejected the idea of a 'typical pathway' to involvement in violent extremism.' Based on case studies of several hundred persons profiled by the security services, the Briefing Note concluded that it was not possible to define a stereotype 'British terrorist'. At the same time, a detached onlooker might reasonably suppose that Western and UK foreign policy/armed interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan may have played some role in respect of the radicalization of some of those engaged in violent extremism. Curiously however, this trigger for violent extremism hardly merits a mention in Prevent or in the published output of the Quilliam Foundation or Centre for Social Cohesion.

In practical terms, the suppression of campus speakers who espouse a radical, anti-western message might in any case be thought too ineffective as a device for preventing people holding views considered 'extreme'. Rather, adherents (and potential adherents) of such views are more likely to become less visible (and, perhaps as a result, less easy from the state's perspective to monitor).

Conversely, the intolerance shown to such extremist groups encourages the well-worn criticism that liberal democracy's cherished freedoms of thought, belief and expression are permitted only to the extent that their exercise conforms to mainstream values. This would seem to offer a powerful recruitment tool when seeking converts. Other suggestions that have been made to monitor the activities of Islamic extremists include the Orwellian notion that tutors might be asked to monitor the essays and seminar contributions of their students for signs that the latter may have jihadist sympathies. Not only is the idea deeply antithetical to intellectual mission of universities, it is difficult to see how it would gain the support of academic staff – or enough of them to make such a policy workable.

When, in times of a perceived terrorist threat to persons and institutions, policy makers hold out the prospect of enhanced levels of security through a selective reduction of the freedoms of others with a different worldview to the mainstream, few opposing voices will be heard. Even if the official response appears in retrospect to have been heavy-handed, the 'differentness' of its targets will elicit less objection than where the restriction on individual liberty had been experienced by others.

A range of laws in the UK already impinge very broadly upon the freedom of persons to criticise official policy (witness the criminal convictions of persons for burning poppies on the basis that they had caused 'offence' to the feelings of those in favour of a continued military presence in Afghanistan). A well-functioning liberal democracy gives stronger protection for dissenting speech forms than is currently available in the UK. It is important that the university sector at least continues to enjoy some freedom to question established truths and orthodoxies – including the wisdom of a government policy aimed at curtailing criticisms of mainstream opinion.

**This article was first published on the Extremis Project's [website](#)**

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

### **About the author**

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