

**What do students think of Prevent?**

**Examining the experiences, understandings and evaluations of students in Higher  
Education in England and Wales**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report was produced in July 2021 for the Independent Review of Prevent, led by Lord Shawcross. Drawing on focus group research, it concentrates upon the experiences, understandings, and evaluations of students at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England and Wales. Key findings are:

- Many students have a good general understanding of the UK Prevent Strategy, and its broad objectives and place within UK counterterrorism policy. Confusion is, however, common around key concepts within the Strategy's vocabulary such as radicalisation and extremism, and around the Strategy's evolution over time.
- Student understanding of Prevent derives from a range of sources including secondary and higher education; training at work or for voluntary roles; representations and discussion in the media and in popular culture; and, discussion with peers and family members.
- Our focus groups uncovered a sophisticated, and nuanced understanding of radicalisation amongst students, with reflection on a range of examples and potentially relevant factors.
- Criticisms of the language of radicalisation focused on its emotive, pejorative, and ambiguous connotations.
- Although contested by some students, many of our participants viewed the threat of radicalisation within the UK to be significant.
- Evaluations of Prevent varied but tended to focus on a range of concerns about the Strategy which included criticisms over the proportionality and impartiality of its design and delivery. Despite these concerns we encountered very little sense that the Strategy was beyond reform.
- Student recommendations covered both specific suggestions of how to improve Prevent as well as a broader commentary about new directions and points of emphasis the Government could take to address the issue of radicalisation within society.

Based on our findings, we recommend the following:

- A review of the location of Prevent within the wider CONTEST Strategy;
- A review of the provision of information about Prevent within educational settings; and,
- A review of the provision of Prevent training.

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## **1 RESEARCH DESIGN**

- 1.1 The findings in this report draw on a series of 8 focus groups with 43 students based across 12 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England and Wales. The focus groups were held between 28 June 2021 and 7 July 2021 online via MS Teams. The groups lasted between 65 and 81 minutes, and all were attended by two of the three researchers: one to introduce and take notes and one to facilitate the discussion. The conversations were recorded as described in the participant information sheet (see appendix).
- 1.2 The focus groups were organised around a topic guide containing five key questions, each with supplementary prompts as necessary: (i) What can you tell me about the Prevent Strategy? (ii) Where does your knowledge of Prevent come from? (iii) What does the term radicalisation mean to you?; (iv) How successful is Prevent in countering radicalisation?; and (v) If you were in charge of the UK's counter-radicalisation programme what would it look like? Time was also dedicated at the end of each group for students to raise any additional comments or topics not previously covered.
- 1.3 Students were recruited to the groups initially via voluntary sampling in which the researchers and their contacts at other HEIs circulated invitations to participate with information on the project. Some recruitment also took place via snowball sampling in which participants subsequently recruited their peers to contribute to this study. This sampling strategy means the findings below are illustrative rather than representative of student perspectives around Prevent, with the bottom-up emphasis of focus group research producing depth of understanding, rather than replicable findings.
- 1.4 Ethical approval for the research was secured prior to its commencement from the universities at which the researchers are employed.

## 2 STUDENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF PREVENT

- 2.1 Participants in our focus groups had varying familiarity with, and understandings of, the UK Prevent Strategy.
- 2.2 First impressions of the Strategy frequently focused on Prevent as a **preventive** strategy for countering terrorism: *'a really interesting tool in the toolkit of counter terrorism'* (Group 1); *'it's ... basically just about, preventing people from turning to terrorism'* (Group 2); *'the idea is to prevent terrorism from occurring in the first instance'* (Group 4); *'getting to the root cause of things [like] radicalisation ... something that's preemptive rather than reactive. Looking to disrupt'* (Group 5); and *'it's kind of what it says on the tin, really. It's stopping these instances that have already happened from happening again. Things like 9/11, the 7/7 bombings they shouldn't have happened in the first place. It's an initiative to get as many people as they can on board to stop these actions happening before they do'* (Group 8).
- 2.3 Several participants employed sophisticated terminology relating to Prevent, including the concepts of **'radicalisation'** and **'extremism'**: *'the idea is really to help stop radicalisation before, or during it while it occurs, instead of waiting until an attack happens'* (Group 4); *'it is the sort of supporting people. Preventing them getting drawn into extremism and terrorism. Working with people to move them away from radical ideas and kind of identifying people that are on that path'* (Group 5); and, *'referring people that there are concerns about [because of their] links to or sympathy towards terrorist groups or extremist views'* (Group 6).
- 2.4 At the same time, and as discussed further below, these concepts were often thought to be **lacking in clarity or precision**: *'my conception of this program from several years ago was that it was specifically designed to prevent something called radicalisation. But ... radicalisation was not at all clear in terms of what it meant ... it seems to be that it meant a particular subgroup of people and a particular kind of process, that I wouldn't necessarily recognize [as] radicalisation myself'* (Group 3).
- 2.5 Some participants were able to demonstrate a deeper knowledge still, and to **situate Prevent** appropriately within the UK's wider CONTEST Strategy: *'I think it's like one part of four P's in the counterterrorism context, rules and strategy. And there's Prepare as well [and] the other two ... but ... Prevent ... I think is specifically the bit about preventing people from getting involved in extremism and then preparing is like preparing for attacks'* (Group 2); *'it's a ... part of the CONTEST Strategy within the UK'* (Group 4).
- 2.6 Other participants were able to provide understanding of important details relating to Prevent including the focus on **communities** and existence of a **referral system**: *'I think [it] focuses mainly on kind of community level and tackling the kind of root causes of terrorism and trying to stop people going into terrorism at the community level. From that, I think there's, if I remember correctly, [the] Channel program which you can get referred to'* (Group 7); the emphasis on **safeguarding**: *'it ... mainly focuses on tackling the causes of radicalisation ... and ... [the] ideological challenge of terrorism. It also*

*focus on safeguarding and supporting those people that may be [at] risk of radicalisation through, for example, early intervention or identifying these people and offering support’ (Group 8); on the **statutory duty** introduced in the 2015 Counter Terrorism and Security Act: ‘It puts interventions in schools [and] welfare systems on a statutory footing and allows for higher education interventions and people within the community ... that look after young children come to intervene on the basis of potential radicalisation ... There’s a big checklist, essentially of signs of children or young adults who are more likely to be sort of simulating attitudes that the Government construed as being conducive to terrorism’ (Group 7); and on **fundamental British values**: ‘sort of how British values need to be taught in primary schools’ (Group 7).*

- 2.7 We also encountered recognition in the groups that the Prevent Strategy continues to **evolve** in its framing and targets: *‘the Prevent Strategy has been around obviously since post 9/11 and has gone through several iterations since then, so I think it’s very different from how it initially was where I believe it was more community focused and has now moved to a more individual focus in terms of preventing extremism (Group 2); and, ‘[in] the 2000s ... it was mainly focused on ... jihadi terrorism and [it has] now branched out to include the far right and also animal rights activists’ (Group 2).*
- 2.8 Also – as explored further below – several participants’ first impressions of Prevent focused on **controversies** around the Strategy, including perceptions of **racial and religious bias**, with Prevent seen as targeting communities opposed to: *‘what they call fundamental British values [which are] not really defined and ... just anything that is construed as being not white ... it’s never really defined and then ... [it] tends to be ethnic minorities [seen to be] counter to fundamental British values ... and therefore kind of eligible to be intervened upon into their private life’ (Group 7); and, ‘My impression has been, generally, that Prevent has sort of been a negative thing. There’s been, in what I’ve received of it, that it puts this pressure particularly [on] teachers to be on the lookout for these radicals who are among us, you know?’ (Group 8); and, ‘some sort of community efforts to outwardly reach out to Muslim communities. Although [it] possibly had something with a good intent, I think it was potentially perceived by those communities as outright targeting them as possibly the only source of radicalisation and extremism, and a lot of social and community backlash came as a result of that’ (Group 1).*
- 2.9 When asked specifically about the **aims** of Prevent, participants referred to the targeting of vulnerable or at-risk individuals and groups: *‘kind of targeting the at-risk groups and areas and environments where people are deemed most vulnerable and as a result more susceptible to picking up ideologies as part of communities and other factors’ (Group 1); and the tackling of terrorism’s root causes, ‘I think it also aims to tackle root causes of problems’ (Group 3).*
- 2.10 When pushed on the **targets** of Prevent, some participants understood this in universal or open terms: *‘I can imagine it’s focused that anyone who is potentially likely to become radicalised’ (Group 2); and, ‘probably those most at-risk of being in contact with someone who already follows these ideologies and who’s more likely to carry out some terrorist attack. So those who are in the close proximity to people like that’*

(Group 2). Others suggested it had a geographical focus: *'they target an area of a city. So, sort of regional focus based on vulnerability'* (Group 4). For other participants, Prevent has a particular focus on specific **types of extremism**: *'when I think of Prevent, I tend to lean more towards that it's trying to counter Islamic terrorism and that side of terrorism. Trying to stop that. So, I would probably go with saying that Prevent probably targets more religious groups than any other group'* (Group 5). Others still suggested Prevent has a demographic focus whether related to **age**: *'you're gonna be more vulnerable when you're younger but you've been more impressionable. So, like I said we target them'* (Group 5); or **community**: *'I would just say that the Prevent Strategy is targeted towards Muslims ... and you can directly compare terrorism in that sense to terrorism in Northern Ireland with Protestant-Catholic thing ... Its never really construed by the government as being terrorism in the same way that Islamist terrorism is being portrayed and how Prevent disproportionately ... is keen to directly combat Islamist terrorism and extremism in that sense'* (Group 7); and, *'I think the initial target was definitely on the Muslim population. I don't know whether more recently they're trying to make it more inclusive to other people as well'* (Group 7).

- 2.11 Although this sense of targeting was often criticised in our groups, a minority view emphasised the **appropriateness** of risk-based approaches to preventing extremism *'Idealistically, [it] should be ... a whole society approach so it should be targeted to all these individuals regardless of any city, age, gender but this is quite utopian ... for example, the data that we've got for West Midlands ... It seems to be, of course, targeted to young males coming from, you know, the kind of Muslim background, which, of course enforces the constant effort ... to target Islamic terrorism as primary threat to Western society ... we don't wanna just target people out of nowhere with no actual reason 'cause that's gonna have an impact on this subject as well'* (Group 8).
- 2.12 Participants showed a good understanding of the range of professionals and partners involved in the **delivery** of the Prevent Strategy. This included recognition of the role of public sector workers: *'people get referred through many people. So, teachers in schools, health practitioners or doctor people in any department'* (Group 2); *'My impression was it was the burden of the work was primarily on public organisations which includes educational institutions and includes social and health care institutions so that there were a number of strands that we're reaching into the details of people's lives with an approach'* (Group 3). Schools and universities received particular mention: *'when I think of Prevent, my head does tend to go to schools above a lot of other places'* (Group 5); and, *'there's some implementation responsibility within education'* (Group 6).
- 2.13 Other participants highlighted the role of third sector organisations: *'you'll start to see these organisations like third sector organisations, charities and stuff. They've kind of bought into the Prevent Strategy and they've sought Prevent training and awareness and they've created dialogue whether it be through community policing or whether it be the local social services'* (Group 3); and, *'there was a push for communities and religious leaders in particular'* (Group 1).

- 2.14 Although a number of participants recognised evolution within the Prevent Strategy, we did encounter enduring **legacies** from the Strategy's earlier iterations and explanations: *'The way I understand it is some of it comes from government funding to ... promote the fundamental British values and ... cities and communities that have a 5% population or more of Muslim or ... ethnic minority groups are given particular funding for this preventative element ... which is obviously really deeply problematic and I'm not, I'm not endorsing that at all'* (Group 7).



### 3 STUDENT KNOWLEDGE OF PREVENT

- 3.1 As noted above, most participants had a familiarity with Prevent before participating in the focus groups. This familiarity, though, likely reflects a bias in the research which relied upon voluntary and snowball sampling whereby individuals chose whether to participate in the groups. First, because the participants were often recruited by educators who teach issues relating to the Prevent Strategy. Second, because we can assume that students with no prior knowledge of the Strategy would be less likely to participate.
- 3.2 Notwithstanding 3.1, a small number of participants claimed no prior familiarity with Prevent, for instance: *'I'll be honest and say that I actually didn't hear about this until I got the email really from my university [that] asked me to take part in this [focus group] ... I didn't know about this before, I must admit'* (Group 3). Examples of this included international students that had moved to the United Kingdom for their higher education: *'I'm actually not from the UK, so it's like the first time I've heard of it'* (Group 2). Other participants explained this lack of familiarity by their being relatively untouched by Prevent, due to demographic characteristics: *'I think that ... I'm not aware of Prevent, and I think that also indicates the privilege I have ... being from a community which is not ... seen as biased ... or like targeted, that comes to extremism ... I think I saw some video in which, there was this Indian Muslim who was targeted and, so I'm sure that also indicates something'* (Group 6).
- 3.3 Other participants referenced their limited familiarity with Prevent and lack of detailed knowledge about the Strategy and its targets: *'I know personally I've not really heard about it at all. I've heard about it briefly. I feel like in the news when it's flagged up a little bit, but I don't really know anything about Prevent'* (Group 4).
- 3.4 Other participants indicated a lack of knowledge amongst their peers, for instance: *'it probably depends on the community that you come from and the background that you have but I know for me and a lot of people like me ... if you go into education [then] you probably have heard of it because there's obviously a big focus there, but it depends on your background, [the] jobs you do, and I know the majority of my peers had not heard of the scheme before'* (Group 2).
- 3.5 Knowledge of Prevent amongst participants came from a **diverse range of sources**: formal and informal; public and private. Prominent sources of this knowledge included secondary and higher education; training at work or for voluntary roles; representations and discussion in the media and in popular culture; and discussion with peers and family members.
- 3.6 Encounters with Prevent during **secondary education** varied considerably across our sample, with differences in the amount of time spent discussing Prevent in school, and contextual differences for these discussions. Some participants mentioned informal commentary about the Strategy from teachers: *'teachers would make offhand comments about not being happy with the Prevent Strategy, and I don't think many teachers liked the obligations it places on them'* (Group 3). Others discussed

encountering Prevent as an example or topic within taught content: *'the first time I had heard of it was during my citizenship GCSE, but it wasn't ... addressed, it was just ... like a sort of part of a conversation ... it wasn't really like a main topic or anything'* (Group 3), and; *'from my A levels I did Business Studies and it kind of came up when we were studying social media ... obviously they have ... guidelines to do with like terrorism and radicalisation, extremism and that kind of thing. So, it came up briefly when like studying social media as like business basically'* (Group 4).

- 3.7 In other instances, Prevent was encountered in dedicated sessions beyond the taught curriculum: *'I feel like we might have had an assembly on it where they would show you like a video and stuff but it wasn't very regularly and I can only remember it being once maybe throughout my whole time at school'* (Group 5). And, elsewhere, incidentally through posters and visualisations: *'we never actually had any assemblies or talks about. It was more just, you know, when you walk around school and they've got the boards up. It was just like one of those sorts of boards and that was about it, right? ... So, passing by in the corridor you might see something on it'* (Group 5). One participant discussed training ostensibly linked to Prevent within further education: *'I went to college and did an access to higher education course ... everybody ... regardless of what subject it was had to do, like a British values ... mini checklist thing. You had to go through like a video and some questions'* (Group 4).
- 3.8 Participant recollections of encountering Prevent at school included activities likely unrelated to Prevent but subsequently interpreted through this lens: *'[In] my sixth form we had a massive whole school sit down and we were told we're gonna do like lock down drills because ... I think at the time the terror threat went up a level and we did about a week of lockdown drills specifically designed for a terrorist attack and what to do under the circumstances and, like, signs to lookout for'* (Group 4); and, *'I think the first sort of physical experience I had [of] Prevent - I don't know if anybody else had it in their secondary school - we started doing lockdowns. It must have been year 11. We had like a specific bell that would go off and we'd have to hide under the tables, and this was in case somebody was gonna come into school and do a school shooting and this was around the time period of when America was experiencing a lot of school shootings. And I think the teachers explained it to us as if it was Prevent.'* (Group 8).
- 3.9 At the same time, activities that may have been related to Prevent but not understood thus were also mentioned in some of the groups, as in this discussion of one participant's experience of discussing terrorism at secondary school: *'It was very much more safeguarding. I don't think Prevent was mentioned at all'* (Group 4).
- 3.10 Many participants, though, reported never encountering Prevent directly in their secondary schooling or further education: *'I don't think we ever did like talk about it in school or anything like that ... it was like ignored almost. It feels like it was ignored ... yeah I don't remember ever talking about it other than you know conversations after watching the news or something like that, you know'* (Group 6); *'I don't know whether it's maybe 'cause I wasn't paying much attention, but I never really heard of it in secondary school'* (Group 7); *'I don't know whether it's 'cause I grew up in Wales ... but I never got taught anything about Prevent or kind of government stuff at school ever.'*

*It was nothing. I suppose you learn more about Welsh kind of nationalism and ... get more Welsh values than British kind of preventative values' (Group 7); and, 'we would talk about the 2017 attacks but the Prevent Strategy was never really mentioned. I don't think the teachers know about it' (Group 8).*

- 3.11 Many participants discussed **higher education** as a key source of their knowledge about Prevent. For some participants this knowledge was acquired anecdotally through conversation with academic staff: *'we didn't study the topic per se. It was more the latter's experiences and the lecturer telling us his experiences of how they were trained to spot or have to report any students that they were potentially worried about and how he was saying how it like sometimes made him feel like he was in a very uncomfortable situation' (Group 1), or, 'in one module, a lecturer made an offhand comment along the lines of ... "I would ask you to put up your hands and say if you've been to a protest, but I'm sure there's a reason why I can't do that because of Prevent". That got a couple of laughs, so I'm guessing there's some familiarity among my cohort' (Group 7).* Other participants mentioned extracurricular talks organised within universities: *'at university ... I've listened to a couple of talks that that were about extremism' (Group 6).*
- 3.12 A significant number of participants described studying Prevent within the taught components of their higher education, for instance: *'I was introduced to the idea in my human rights and terrorism class online and my first postgraduate course. ... when we talked about Prevent, we really, really focused the conversation in like international law, human rights, whether it's complying' (Group 1); 'I studied it formally ... I did some terrorism modules' (Group 2); 'Pretty much everything I know about it has either come through the taught content on my course or there's a couple of people on my course that work as part of Prevent so kind of their practice as well' (Group 4); and, 'it's been more like on my modules when I've been doing research ... For the essays and all that sort of stuff, and I've just come across Prevent' (Group 5).*
- 3.13 Other participants had selected Prevent as a topic for independent research, in the form of dissertation projects: *'So I completed my dissertation in the counterproductivity of British counterterrorism, which mainly focused on Prevent and the discourses that are used' (Group 1); and, 'my undergraduate dissertation was much more focused on it, so it's independent research that I really started to focus on it' (Group 7).* Or in the context of postgraduate research: *'My PhD is really quite related to Prevent' (Group 5).*
- 3.14 Several participants had received **training** related to Prevent. This included in educational contexts: *'I've received Prevent training, which I had a bit more of an insight with and that was through the university that I was studying at' (Group 1); in apprenticeships: 'I did an apprenticeship and when you had to go into the HQ to do some of the courses, their very first introductory calls, the first thing they touched upon was signs of radicalisation because it was something that they had to discuss with everyone there' (Group 4).* Training also occurred via voluntary work: *'we were volunteering, and I went to a WRAP training session (Workshop to Raise Awareness of Prevent) and this this was in 2015 ... I remember having that training 'cause it was very*

... Prevent specific, but it was the first time that I remember understanding what Prevent was and what it did' (Group 5); and through employment: 'I work in a supermarket part-time and even then, we've been given terrorism training. You know what to lookout for, what people are buying, how you should deal with that, how to report it. So I think it's a bit weird because obviously you see it from the academic side like "OK". The practical side, I didn't even know it was Prevent training until I looked into Prevent' (Group 1).

- 3.15 We encountered varying impressions of the quality and value of Prevent training received by our participants (see section 5). Although criticisms included its potential stigmatisation of communities, and its relevance to their life and work, other participants spoke more positively about their experience. The following participant, for instance, differentiates between the content and delivery of their training in a school context, praising the latter while expressing some scepticism about the lack of nuance in the former: 'I think it was taught quite well at the school I was at because they were trying to show that there is lots of different types of radicalisation and did put an emphasis as well on links to ... far-right groups ... but it still felt to me that there is this kind [of] a checklist of certain things that are a cause for concern' (Group 6).
- 3.16 Some participants discussed references to the Prevent Strategy within the **news media**, with controversial stories and examples a common focus: 'The controversies that have come up in the media so ... like I said, there's a kind of profiling in specific communities that came up under criticism in the media ... and then also ... that kind of vagueness I seem to remember it being criticized for being vague in a news article' (Group 2); 'it definitely has come up in the media and it is obviously talked about often in negative light and it probably depends on the community that you come from and the background that you have' (Group 2). As one participant noted, though, such controversies vary depending on the political proclivities of the media outlet or reporter: 'the right-wing media doesn't seem to pay much attention to it, and if they do, that's often critical in the way they are failings of the of the process. I think, that the left-wing media criticises the Strategy from a different aspect, an invasion of civil liberties and stuff like that and it's unfair on the teaching profession to have them on to their students. You know, that's ... a common narrative that comes up. And so yeah, there's ... there's nothing really there to put a positive spin' (Group 3).
- 3.17 A more common discussion was on media representations of terrorism and terrorists more broadly which were often believed to be sensationalist and guilty of stereotyping: 'It's the same with everything but they sensationalize and create moral panics around a lot of it and especially in their reporting. They play on the race and religious element when it comes to counterterrorism measures and Prevent a lot more than they would in any other news story' (Group 1); 'terrorism ... creates conversation, generates fear and that's of [public] interest' (Group 1).
- 3.18 Although popular culture was discussed as relevant in several groups, specific examples relating to Prevent were very rare. More common, here, was wider reflection on cultural representations of terrorism and terrorists more broadly, for instance: 'it's just kind of filtered through to so much of our popular culture like our

*films on our television ... Loads of our films and television ... [show this] War on Terror kind of culture' (Group 6); and 'probably like most people, I primarily got my perception through TV shows and the newspapers and books that I read about what had happened and my parents talking about events that they'd seen on TV while I was growing up' (Group 8).*

- 3.19 Some participants invoked friends or family as important sources of knowledge and information, particularly where those contacts had worked in contexts relating to Prevent such as education: *'my mum works in the school and she goes to quite a lot of training and stuff like that that I know of and I worked as part of an educational charity and I remember doing a bit on that in terms of like what to lookout for and stuff like that. And so I've got experience in that way of it, yeah' (Group 3); and 'My dad used to be in the police and my mum works in schools. I only actually became aware of it because I know mum's done some training with it before, and so I sort of just take an interest in it' (Group 5).*

## 4 UNDERSTANDINGS OF RADICALISATION

### What is radicalisation?

- 4.1 When asked what it means for someone to have been **radicalised**, some participants' answers focused on the commission of acts of violence or support for such acts: *'anyone who's willing to not only commit acts of violence, but even support those acts and support the people that do those acts'* (Group 2); *'I'd say that being radical includes being OK with some turning to violence first of all and also that you're not accepting different opinions anymore'* (Group 2); and, *'the endpoint of radicalisation is the belief that immediate violent action is necessary, is imperative'* (Group 2).
- 4.2 The answers offered by other participants focused more on an individual's **beliefs**: *'radicalise, it sort of has connotations of like taking matters into your own hands ... It's ignoring figures of authority and what the consensus in that population is about what's right and wrong and ... also suggests that people have already fixed on that path and that they can't be dissuaded'* (Group 3); *'rather than it being just like recruitment, it is more like changing, possibly targeting, someone's ideological views'* (Group 4); and, *'the internalization of external viewpoints'* (Group 7). Another described being radicalised as being a *'convert'* (Group 1).
- 4.3 Several participants emphasised that the term radicalisation can apply to **any ideology**: *'it can be left radicalisation or right, but as we're speaking about terrorism, usually far right radicalisation'* (Group 6). One sought to illustrate that radicalisation can apply to any ideology using the following example: *'if all of a sudden there was a splinter group from PETA that broke away and they killed a fur farmer in Canada, just maybe the Government would review that and say "Hang on a minute. Now we we've got an issue with veganism"'* (Group 3). Another suggested that the methods used by the military to desensitise soldiers to violence amounts to a form of radicalisation: *'I think from what I know about the American military in the tactics they use to get their soldiers angry and kind of like in prime condition is they do use scenarios to, you know, listen this happened in Afghanistan and this many soldiers got killed by this many Taliban'* (Group 1).
- 4.4 In contrast, other participants stated that the term radicalisation is associated primarily with **Islamist terrorism**: *'radicalisation, it's kind of now used interchangeably with the idea of Islamic terrorism'* (Group 8); and, *'despite whatever knowledge I've gained through university, I inevitably think of a man or young boy who is Muslim, is wearing green khaki and is surrounded by these guerrilla warfare men in their uniforms with bombs and things'* (Group 6).
- 4.5 Participants in every group described radicalisation as a **'process'**. However, some participants sought to problematise this depiction. With reference to some models of radicalisation, they stated that the process, *'is not necessarily linear'* (Group 1) and *'it's complicated. You can go back and forward. You can jump steps'* (Group 2). Others stated that the sheer diversity of radicalisation experiences makes it impossible to conceptualise the radicalisation 'process': *'It's the radicalisation process. But then that*

*looks different for every single person that it happens to' (Group 5); and, 'There's not like a blueprint where one size fits all' (Group 5).*

- 4.6 According to some participants, it is **vulnerable** people who are most at risk of radicalisation: *'a series of events in which someone can develop an ideology usually start from a space of vulnerability' (Group 1); and, 'the whole purpose of radicalisation is to target vulnerable people' (Group 4).* Vulnerability was frequently linked to feelings of **social exclusion**: *'the key part of radicalisation, generally, is, I think, ostracization, like feeling like you're not necessarily part of or catered for by the community that you live in' (Group 2); and, 'they've become disenfranchised with or have kind of like pushed them to the outward pillars of society' (Group 1).*
- 4.7 Participants further explained that radicalisation can involve feelings of acceptance into a **community**: *'It involves a community for sure, a welcoming community' (Group 1); and, 'feeling like there is a voice being given to you ... There's another community that is available that is saying things that you agree with and is telling you that your community doesn't care about you and people like you' (Group 2).* Echo chambers can play a role here, with one participant noting that this is not limited to the online realm: *'I think essentially everyone lives in an echo chamber of some sort. We only look at the news that we agree with. We have friends that generally have similar views to us and so on. And I think these things wrapped up and family members potentially ... these things aren't just limited to who you have on Facebook' (Group 1).*
- 4.8 Participants offered various analogies to explain the radicalisation process, including *'tunnel vision' (Group 1) and 'brainwashing' (Groups 1, 4 and 6).* One participant recalled another analogy from a Prevent video they had watched: *'I think that also resonates in the video that I saw because they literally were explicitly equating it to a mental illness' (Group 6).* Participants in this group sought to problematise this: *'most of these terrorism fighters, they are educated people. They are not mentally ill people with big problems in their life. Most of them are university undergraduates, so we can't just say mental illness. There are plenty of other factors' (Group 6).*
- 4.9 Another analogy that was mentioned in several groups was *'grooming' (Groups 1, 3 and 6): 'we talk about grooming and it's a similar process. There's no doubt about it' (Group 3); and, 'if you think about the tactics which might be used to kind of groom young people into supporting terrorist acts, it does seem like quite a fair analogy to talk about someone's culpability being reduced because of being sort of like abused or targeted and drawn into something' (Group 6).* This analogy was also problematised by some participants. Referring to the contestability of the term 'radical', one remarked *'nobody ever said, for example, one person's paedophile is another person's sex object' (Group 3).*
- 4.10 One difficulty with these various analogies, that was identified by several participants, is that they downplay the **agency** of the person being radicalised: *'it's like you're not giving legitimacy to that particular person's agency of thought ... It takes away all agency from people who are treated as ... dealing with mental illness because they are deemed as incapable of forming thoughts' (Group 6).* Several groups discussed the

case of Shamima Begum, with some participants noting the difference between discussion of her case and the various metaphorical depictions of radicalisation: *'You know a teenager who was essentially groomed into joining a group, essentially brainwashed if we're using that analogy and was a very vulnerable person. And yet, the way that she's been treated is not at all in keeping with the idea that someone has been kind of trafficked or groomed or brainwashed. It's very much that she is culpable for her own actions and so it's kind of interesting that if there is this analogy, it's almost like inconsistent'* (Group 6).

### The usefulness of the term 'radicalisation'

- 4.11 When asked to comment on the usefulness of the term 'radicalisation', participants stated that it serves as an *'umbrella term'* (Group 7) that encompasses a variety of ideologies and personal circumstances: *'there's such a wide variance between the different kind of ideologies ... we need a vague enough word to encompass all the different groups, even when they are so very different. The right-wing militias in America are very different from Islamist groups or the IRA'* (Group 2); and, *'each case could be so different. Like you could talk about someone who's exposed to increasingly extremist stuff online, and just kind of getting caught up in an online culture. You could have someone who is ... brought into stuff through a gang situation where it's literally looking after their more immediate material concerns ... And you might have someone whose parents are ideologically committed ... and is passing their views on to a child ... But each of these cases are so different'* (Group 6); and, *'radicalisation could be due to a combination of cognitive, religious and social factors'* (Group 8).
- 4.12 Given this **diversity**, participants stated that the term 'radicalisation' inevitably lacks precision: *'Any term you're going to have is going to be relatively nebulous because everything with humans is difficult to pin down'* (Group 2); and, *'It's not good that it's so vague, but then I'm not sure what the alternative would be'* (Group 7). In fact, for some, the term 'radicalisation' is *'purposefully vague'* (Group 7) in order to accommodate the variety of ideologies and personal circumstances.
- 4.13 At the same time, participants stated that this ambiguity can have **negative consequences**. It can mean that policy documents that use the term 'radicalisation' are similarly vague: *'I think it's really important if you're going to use radicalisation in a government strategy that you can actually clearly define what radicalisation means'* (Group 8). This vagueness can have knock-on effects on those tasked with implementing the policy: *'It kind of blankets all these different kinds of cases ... It's actually far more complex and there is so much more variety and different experiences than you could possibly ever explain just in a small bit of training for someone in education'* (Group 6).
- 4.14 The **emotiveness** of the term 'radicalisation' was described as powerful in encouraging people, particularly parents, to be alert: *'radicalisation through our popular culture and media has become this thing that we do not want ... In the short term, to securitize everything and to make citizens take up arms against terrorism and radicalisation, it is very effective ... appealing to parents and their emotions of protecting their children'*



(Group 6). One participant recalled watching a video about Prevent which featured the parents of children who had been radicalised and noted that all the parents in the video were mothers. The participant interpreted this as an attempt to *'appeal to the emotions of women who are considered emotional and overprotective of their children'* (Group 6).

- 4.15 Participants also described the term 'radicalisation' as *'incredibly subjective'* and *'pejorative'* (Group 4). This has resulted in it being *'weaponised'* (Group 8). One participant offered as an example the treatment of Uyghurs in China (Group 4). Another suggested that attacks committed by Islamists are treated differently to ones committed by white supremacists, commenting: *'Even though two people might commit the same crime, one is seen as worse than the other'* (Group 4).
- 4.16 Participants stated that the term 'radicalisation' is now used almost exclusively to refer to the adoption of extremist views: *'if you see radicalisation or radical in a news headline, you're immediately thinking towards extremism'* (Group 1); and, *'In a context around Prevent, you can see what is meant by saying someone has become radicalised and it's linked with more extremist views'* (Group 6). Yet, participants were keen to point out that being a radical is not necessarily a bad thing. To demonstrate that an individual might be a radical, but not an extremist, participants offered the examples of Martin Luther King, Sylvia Pankhurst and Jeremy Corbyn (Groups 1, 2 and 1 respectively).

#### **The threat posed by radicalisation**

- 4.17 A number of participants opined that radicalisation poses a **significant threat**: *'I think you should not underestimate it, because if you have young people in the UK and they are basically getting brainwashed from a very young age ... it's something we should certainly keep in mind and be aware of'* (Group 2); *'If you're specifically talking about the United Kingdom, I'd say yes, because of the history of the United Kingdom. There's a lot of kind of old grievances from colonial rule, and there's a kind of big melting pot of different cultures and histories. And there's some real legitimate grievances, and there's still things going on with British foreign policy that are causing a whole load of anger and hate'* (Group 2); *'I do think it does pose some threat, because if I'm just thinking back, I'm pretty sure that some attacks now are lone attacks so that individual has clearly been influenced and has had a change of ideology to start embracing the radical ideologies for them to carry out such things'* (Group 4); *'I do think that it does pose a threat because there's such a thin line between radicalisation and violent extremism and terrorism'* (Group 4); *'Every year or two ... somebody that's really high up in counterterrorism will say, "We stopped X amount of attacks this year". And those attacks are kind of the tip of the iceberg'* (Group 5); and, *'I think the UK will always be under threat because there's always gonna be somebody or a group of people that have an extremist view about something'* (Group 8).
- 4.18 Some of the participants who believed that radicalisation poses a significant threat attributed this belief to the rise of the **internet and social media**: *'Obviously the Internet is great and everything, but it's allowed for people to reach more specific*

communities than ever before. And it's allowed algorithms, specifically tailored optimizing for what someone wants and that can end up in an indoctrination pipeline' (Group 2); and, 'I do believe it does pose quite a threat, especially with the likes of social media now, it's so prevalent in everyday life, a lot of younger kids now are using social media as well. And a lot more than they did a few years ago, which is also a very easy way for these radicalisation things to occur' (Group 5).

- 4.19 One participant shared their experiences of encountering extremist views online in groups that were purportedly concerned with animal rights: 'I'm vegan and I was really into animal rights activism. I had to ditch that because it was just like ecofascist constantly and it was really worrying ... I left all the animal rights groups I was in on Facebook because they were so racist and I just ended up getting fed up with having to report so much racist abuse on these Facebook pages and people' (Group 2).
- 4.20 Other participants were less certain about the significance of the threat posed by radicalisation. One felt that the threat level has decreased in recent years: 'Maybe not so much recently, but there were quite a lot of terrorist incidents a few years ago' (Group 7). Another stated that the threat level fluctuates over time: 'Obviously the threat level will go up and down depending on how many people believe in those views and what actions are being done to change those' (Group 8).
- 4.21 Other participants pointed out that it is difficult to know the actual threat posed by radicalisation: 'There's going to be hundreds and hundreds of reports that the general public aren't privy to' (Group 1). What is important, therefore, is how the threat is **perceived**: 'I think the perceived threat is possibly more of an issue than the quantity in the statistical accounts' (Group 1).
- 4.22 In terms of how the threat posed by radicalisation is perceived, participants pointed to the influence of the media and the possible **exaggeration** of the threat: 'I mean we're perceiving it through, you know, media and social media and the reports that we know of' (Group 1); 'The report could say "It's the next big major terrorist event" or "It's Jeff from down the road. He's just being a bit of a p\*\*\*\*\*." You just don't know' (Group 1); 'I think it's often made out to be a bigger danger than it is. So, you hear with one of these big attacks and immediately ... the media is very much on top of it and covering it and it's a huge event and it is not quite proportional to the actual danger that we face' (Group 7); and, 'When you read the Prevent Duty it stipulates at the very beginning that the terrorist threat has never been higher. But then if you look at the actual percentage of people that are like to be likely to be radicalised and then go on to perform violent extremism, which then results in people dying, is so low compared to how sensationalized Islamist terrorism has become in the media' (Group 7).
- 4.23 Some participants sought to challenge the link between radicalisation and the commission of acts of violence: 'You can get a lot of people that do have these extremist ideologies that would never commit a violent crime because of them ... and people can act on the kind of extremist ideologies without fully believing them' (Group 4). One participant stated that extremism can have damaging effects besides the commission of violent acts: 'there are obviously forms of non-violent extremism and

*non-violent beliefs which are still inherently damaging. And you still want to prevent people from getting to that point' (Group 2).*

- 4.24 Other participants suggested that it is not radicalisation, but the Prevent Strategy itself that poses a security threat: *'You know members of particular communities are massively at risk ... that can change their societal view and can reinforce those in- and out-group dynamics, which I think is something that as a society we're trying to break down. I think the risk is really in people's views and building up walls instead of knocking them down and the repercussions that come as a result' (Group 1); and, 'Actually, Prevent is potentially a threat to UK security. How, if we're sort of profiling certain people, and we're potentially alienating particular communities, we're actually giving credence to some of these ideas and ... that's quite a significant threat' (Group 8).*

## 5. STUDENT EVALUATIONS OF PREVENT

- 5.1 Students' evaluations of Prevent were diverse in both form and appraisal. On the former, a small proportion of participants spoke about Prevent on a macro level and provided overarching sentiments about the Strategy but more common was a tendency to focus on specific elements or consequences of it. On the latter, participants voiced a comprehensive spectrum of perspectives that ranged from Prevent being necessary and positive to it being discriminatory and counterproductive. Nevertheless, appraisals that could be interpreted as "wholly positive" or "wholly negative" were less common and most participants offered qualified appraisals that leaned one way or the other to different degrees.
- 5.2 Before considering some of the specific evaluations offered by our participants it is worth noting that some felt providing an evaluation was difficult based on a lack of publicly available information and challenges determining a benchmark for success. One participant remarked that terrorist attacks are: *'Black swan events anyway, so it's kind of hard to get a baseline of what would be normal and then figure out whether or not you're winning or losing'* (Group 2). Another mentioned that their knowledge of Prevent was mostly derived from largely negative media coverage but added that they were reticent to evaluate based solely on this as it was likely a "skewed perspective". They went on to say: *'We don't hear enough about the successes. We only hear about the failures and maybe the successes have to stay secret'* (Group 4). Finally, one participant felt they could only evaluate the Strategy having spoken to those who have experienced its functioning via referrals (Group 2).

### Positive evaluations of Prevent

- 5.3 As mentioned in 5.1, unqualified assessments were rare (either positive or negative), but some participants were forthcoming with appraisals that could be understood as positive or broadly positive. For example, one participant with experience working on Prevent in a previous career said: *'yeah, I think I can think of a number of positive cases within my region that I worked to make me think that it's doing enough that is positive and right'* (Group 3). Another felt that the focus Prevent placed on young people was particularly valuable: *'I definitely think Prevent is a good thing and it should be in society because, I think it's important that we have, something to kind of look for signs of radicalisation and young people 'cause I think that's an important kind of stage where they can perhaps be changed on a different path or be, you know, rehabilitated or things'* (Group 7).
- 5.4 Others thought that as a "proactive" form of "soft power" Prevent was a better alternative to forms of reactive hard power, as seen in the following examples: *'I mean, it's one of the only sort of organizations that actually deals with this sort of thing proactively, rather than reactively so having something like that in place is always going to be worthwhile'* (Group 4); and, *'It's good in the sense that, like when it comes to tackling like terrorism and violent extremism, there should be like a soft power response rather than just like purely hard power like to like you know, arresting people and that kind of thing'* (Group 4).

- 5.5 While not as explicit in their support of Prevent other participants voiced a sense of **reassurance** that the policy existed: *'I do feel safe 'cause I'm very aware of the Strategy and the signs and things to do with it'* (Group 5). This participant went on to confirm that their sense of reassurance correlated with their knowledge of Prevent and that the more they learnt the safer they felt. Another participant concurred that they felt reassured Prevent existed but could not establish exactly why they felt this way: *'I think I feel more reassured that I know it's there, but then I can't point to any specific experience where I know somebody that's being referred and they've had help or even in the university, I can't think of anybody off the top of my head or even like a case where somebody is being stopped doing something because of it'* (Group 5).
- 5.6 Alongside the positive appraisals outlined in paragraphs 5.3 – 5.5 was another category of broadly positive evaluations that recognised Prevent as **necessary**: *'There is a clear need for Prevent, right? Like people are being referred and then those cases are being taken up so ... It's successful if you get one person, right?'* (Group 1). On occasions these responses came with explicit reference to the participant's own reservations before concluding that on balance Prevent was a necessity: *'I mean, obviously there are improvements that need to be made, but I do think it's a good thing that it's there because if it wasn't there then I feel like more people would be oblivious to the situation, especially people in certain institutions like teachers and stuff'* (Group 4); and, *'I think there's already significant flaws with it, and it needs to be rapidly changed, but I think the idea of scrapping it is kind of a scary thought. So even though it's not perfect, it's much better to have it than not have it at all'* (Group 4).

### **Negative evaluations of Prevent**

- 5.7 Similarly to the point made in 5.3 about positive evaluations, *criticisms* of Prevent that rejected the policy wholesale and called for it to be **scrapped** were voiced but quite rare. For example, one participant said: *'I kind of think that the fundamentals of Prevent should be kept, the idea behind it, but that the main body of it really should be scrapped'* (Group 7). However, criticisms were a frequent feature of discussions, but they tended to be levelled at specific elements or consequences of the Strategy and were coupled with an explicit or implicit suggestion that this was potentially something that could be rectified.
- 5.8 On the more serious and fundamental end of the critical spectrum some participants **questioned the viability** of the Strategy. One highlighted their belief that it was inherently discriminatory and stated: *'I can't see how Prevent can be justified in the way that its current iteration works given those racist overtones'* (Group 7). Another participant drew attention to the context from which Prevent had emerged and the consequences this has had on its implementation and will continue to have: *'For me Prevent came from a place of sort of reactionary anti-Muslim feeling, post- 9/11. Moral panic. You know just freaking out? And I don't think we can get it to a place where it's going to be working efficiently against far-right terrorism from the place where it started. I think you would need a completely different organization and policy for that, I think. I don't think it's a good thing as it is at the moment. And yeah, I don't see much hope for it, really'* (Group 8).

- 5.9 When reflecting on whether they felt reassured by the presence of Prevent, two participants were not and cited similar rationales for this that touched upon suspicion, surveillance, nationalism, and xenophobia. First was this contribution: *'There are very definite associations that not only exist but reinforced continually and the hostile environment that's been created in the UK in my mind, is very clearly connected with a narrative that says that there are certain things that are very un-British, and certain forms of oppositional politics, or certain attitudes towards the relationship between cultures etc. is all bound up in that space. So, to answer your fundamental question – "are you reassured it's there?" - I couldn't say that I am. I don't feel reassured by the presence of the Prevent Strategy'* (Group 3). Second, was the following contribution: *'It doesn't make me feel safer having Prevent in the way that exists now, because I just think it's just part of this wider culture of ... how teachers or employers or people in the health care system can be active. They've been told that to basically spy on people for immigration reasons as part of the hostile environment'* (Group 7).
- 5.10 When offering evaluations of Prevent that were critical our participants tended to be more specific than they had been when offering positive ones. One such criticism was that Prevent was **disproportionate**, as the following participant elaborated: *'I just feel like this whole culture of suspicion is not proportional to the threat that we face on a national security level'* (Group 6). Another participant cited their own experience at university to draw attention to the duty placed on public sector workers such as lecturers and seminar tutors: *'I do personally feel like it's a bit disproportionate, but in this sense, I feel like it just personally makes me feel a bit more on edge like having to consider that there are people surveilling your thoughts and ideas like as you express them'* (Group 3).
- 5.11 Other participants raised concerns about the neutrality of public sector workers when observing for vulnerability and making referrals. The following participants argued that these individuals would bring **inherent biases** to this role: *'I think the problem stems also from the fact that you can't assume teachers to be neutral bodies who do not have their own biases or ideologies that they might be promoting consciously or unconsciously by targeting certain pupils'* (Group 6). A similar evaluation was made by a participant in a different group: *'it's more because of the responsibility that's put on to public workers and a lot of it because of how they're going to report ... I do think that when like, for example, teachers, they're more likely to look out for a kid who comes from a stereotypical family because certain race and religion etc. than a white child'* (Group 3).
- 5.12 The requirement for individuals to observe others for the signs of vulnerability was another source of criticism. The language of **surveillance** and **spying** was often used to convey this unease felt around this aspect of the Duty. One participant voiced particular concerns about this happening at schools and the effects this could have on trust between teachers and pupils: *'Yeah, it's just so traumatizing the idea that you could find out that your teacher has just reported you to a government agency without having had any prior communication before, your whole trust is just going to be ... and for the parents too, it's just essentially, like driving a wedge between communities, just thinking like if the fact that you assumed this about me, often on this very small thing,*

*it's just gonna give you such a negative experience of the entire system that that is alienating'* (Group 6). Another participant drew attention to Muslim mothers specifically in this regard saying they had been: *'kind of asked to look for signs of radicalisation in their children and there was an article I read about how that's asking, like Muslim mothers to spy on their families essentially'* (Group 7). While most participants were aware that the Prevent Duty operated at university, this was not always the case. One international student, upon learning about this during the focus group, reacted negatively and stated: *'I think I should have been told that my lecturers might be spying on me for, I think that's something that should be mentioned in my visa or something'* (Group 6).

- 5.13 A criticism linked to surveillance related to the consequences of this and that it would continue to **other and alienate** specific communities: *'If you have Prevent existing in the same world as you have a hostile environment policy, it just kind of shows what is actually happening, which is that certain communities are being targeted and seen as not really welcome or part of a wider society and that that is just gonna cause bigger fractures'* (Group 6).
- 5.14 These sorts of criticisms often culminated in a discussion about the creation of **suspect communities**. There was acknowledgement by some participants that Prevent predominantly focused on Islamic extremism: *'I think that the Strategy should not be so focused on Islamic terrorism. A lot of people when they think of terrorism, you think of Islamic extremism, but a lot of people don't really take into consideration the domestic terrorism'* (Group 5). Others linked this sort of sentiment to detrimental and discriminatory consequences: *'I understand the kind of the necessity for counter terrorism, but it does alienate and criminalize and, in my view, pathologize the way that certain families live their lives. Specially given laws about religious privacy and the privacy of family life ... the current iteration and Prevent just really undermines fundamental human rights in my opinion'* (Group 7).
- 5.15 Several participants voiced concerns around the impact that the formalised observation of their behaviours and speech at university could have on the sorts of contributions they make in class as well as the work they produce for assessments. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as a **chilling effect** whereby individuals are discouraged from legitimate actions through fear of sanctions or negative consequences. One participant thought that the placement of Prevent in higher education was particularly problematic in this regard: *'University would be a space where people should be able to ... there is a kind of nuance and things in discussion and if you don't know what kind of things might be considered, the worrying statement ... yeah I have a lot of concerns about that'* (Group 6).
- 5.16 The participant in 5.15 mentioned the importance of free speech and nuanced discussion at university and alluded to concerns voicing points of view when what was considered a "worrying statement" was unknown to them. However, two other participants provided specific examples from their personal experience where they had either altered their behaviour or been warned by peers about potential consequences. The first example involved a discussion a participant was involved in

about Shamima Begum: *'When we were talking about Shamima Begum and everything to do with that, I did have to check that. Could it be because – I'm not Bengali - but I am a Muslim, and could it be because of my race or my religion that people think that I'm taking her side whereas I'm not I'm just trying to say, "what are civil liberties and what is citizenship?" These are questions that are normal and if it was me, white skin and not a Muslim, I think it would be much easier to say that and not have to verify myself'* (Group 3). The second example came when one of our participants was discussing an upcoming essay on theories of radicalisation with a fellow student: *'One student said to another student, "you want to be careful falling on one side of the debate", in terms of sort of the strategic argument, because it sounds very much like an opinion that's sympathetic to terrorism and you want to be careful that that kind of opinion isn't reported'* (Group 8).

- 5.17 Some of the negative evaluations of Prevent related to its implementation and its likely **efficacy**. At a macro level one participant questioned whether spotting vulnerability was as straightforward as Prevent seemed to imply: *'People that do, that are getting radicalised, I think they're very good at hiding it as well, and they wouldn't be exposing themselves in ways that people would expect them to'* (Group 3). Another participant questions the impact Prevent would have in the university setting: *'I struggled to see how Prevent could make an impact in the university context in the sense that if it's lecturers that are doing the training and learning about this and then you see them 2 hours a week, I feel like it isn't likely to be picked up'*. This participant went on to add: *'And even then, I feel like the period of time when people go to university is such a period of time where people question what's going on around them and it is the time when you learn to question what's happening in society that it will be very difficult almost to pick up on extremist views'* (Group 7).
- 5.18 For some participants the culmination of the sorts of shortcomings included across paragraphs 5.7-5.17 led them to the conclusion that **Prevent is counterproductive**. For one participant this came from a belief that Prevent was a means of justifying discriminatory interventions within particular communities: *'I think Prevent is being abused by the police to promote kind of interventions into communities that are deemed as suspect and in a way because of that association I believe that it kind of aggravates the cultural and community differences'* (Group 7). Elsewhere the counterproductivity was a result of a contradictory policy: *'The program itself is very contradictory ... the community cohesion that Prevent is trying to put ahead, they want to make sure that people know that the community has to be working all for the same aim, and then at the same time, the way they are putting it now, it just fractures the community ... because it inevitably creates a stigma and it actually increases the risk of hardening a defensive identification within young Muslim people. So, if they feel like they're being targeted, they would actively try to defend their own identity, which is going to be counterproductive'* (Group 8).

### **Contesting criticisms of Prevent**

- 5.19 Before concluding this section it is also worth highlighting that the sorts of criticisms outlined in the previous section did not go uncontested and on occasion participants



sought to defend the Strategy against what they considered unfair criticism or to clarify points of view that they felt were misguided.

- 5.20 One participant with prior experience working in Prevent contested the idea that Prevent is predominantly focused on Muslim communities and Islamic extremism adding: *'I think, people might be surprised at how many referrals are not in relation to Islamic extremism. I think the general public think it's a strategy just to combat Islamic extremism, but you know consistently in regions around the UK, far-right referrals have made considerable numbers of the referrals'* (Group 3).
- 5.21 This participant also had misgivings about the media coverage of Prevent that shared some similarities with those included in paragraph 5.2. Speaking in the context of a recently published news story where a teacher had logged a Prevent referral for a young Muslim pupil based on misunderstanding what the pupil had said, the participant said the following: *'So in that case it was referred, and some Prevent police officer staff have ended up knocking the door. Unfortunately, sometimes that's what's gonna happen. Someone's gotta knock the door and say, "you know, sorry about this but we need to talk about this incident". And then they go to the press and highlight this is such a travesty of injustice. It just seems unfair because if you then create a work environment where that teacher doesn't report it because they don't want to be accused of being racist or bigoted, and that sort of thing, and you miss that opportunity to get in and in three or four years' time you got a 15 year old traveling to Somalia or Nigeria to join Boko Haram then people turn around and criticize the school and the agencies for not doing enough at the start'* (Group 3).
- 5.22 Finally, one participant sought to clarify that the belief Prevent was specifically targeted at Muslims no longer reflected how the Strategy operated. They acknowledged this point of view was widespread and that it made them "uneasy" but spoke about it not as the current reality but rather a problematic historical legacy that continued to cause issues for the present day: *'The assumption about and the fact that it was targeted at Muslims specifically for quite a long time, the fact that that still holds and ... hearing stories from people who feel quite uncomfortable about it and that feel like they are targeted or that they are looked at a bit differently ... that still goes on and that feeling is still there'* (Group 5).

## 6 STUDENT RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 As well as asking students for their evaluations of Prevent we also asked whether they would do anything differently if given the opportunity to lead UK counter-radicalisation strategy. Students offered up a range of suggestions and recommendations that took very different forms. In the following paragraphs we outline some of these.
- 6.2 A consistent piece of feedback we received was the need for Prevent, its objectives, and its functioning to be **better communicated** to a range of different audiences. For example, speaking about their experience in education one participant commented: *'I've not really seen much. Definitely in secondary school I didn't really hear much about it and at university I haven't other than my studies, so maybe in the background it's doing quite a lot of work, but I personally haven't seen a lot of it. So maybe kind of a meeting with the university lecturer for an hour will probably do a lot of good just to make everyone aware that it's actually there and you can use it'* (Group 7).
- 6.3 Linked to the above was a sense that Prevent needed to be **more transparent**. For one participant this was to help address misconceptions: *'An element of clarity and transparency would go a long way, I feel like there are a lot of misconceptions about Prevent and about terrorism in general'* (Group 3). For another it was recommended to allow for greater accountability and less secrecy: *'the transparency of the entire system needs to be increased, I know that slowly they started releasing numbers and who is doing the reporting and how many people are getting reported ...'* (Group 1).
- 6.4 Participants were often aware of negative coverage of Prevent but much less so positive coverage. Participants recommended that if these cases existed more should be done **to disseminate positive coverage to the public**. As one participant put it: *'I think more media coverage would be really good, obviously in the news it's only seemed to be spoken down about and it's rarely spoken in praise and you're not going to be able to get the public on side with a policy if it's constantly being spoken badly about by the press'* (Group 4).
- 6.5 A recommendation that overlaps with more effective communication mentioned in paragraph 6.2 was a greater emphasis on **educating the public around issues relevant to Prevent** as well as to **enhance cultural awareness** within the UK. An effort to dislodge stereotypical understandings of terrorism was raised by one participant as something that would be valuable: *'they need to change it and they need to change the perspectives of Prevent and try and change public perception of what a terrorist threat looks like. It's not always going to be a Muslim boy or Muslim girl just because they're wearing a headscarf stood at a train station. It's got to be a sense of educating the public'* (Group 8). Similarly, in another group one participant mentioned that people need: *'... to start to understand about the differences within culture and you know that's not going to be a quick fix and that could be part of the Prevent Strategy on a long-term mission'* (Group 3).

- 6.6 **Engaging more with Prevent related issues and communicating the Prevent Strategy in schools** was a frequently cited recommendation across numerous groups. One justification for this came in relation to the benefits of an open dialogue between students and teachers and the potential for this to aid in helping those who may be vulnerable: *'I'm not quite sure what they do specifically in schools, but I feel like communication will be very important from the teachers to the students and I wouldn't know how they could do it, but just try to get people's views on certain things. And I think talking about stuff more would help to figure out, possibly potentially if any child does start to, develop ideologies or concepts that may be of that sort of nature'* (Group 4). Another participant felt that more needed to be done in schools to help support young people after acts of terrorism occur and to allow them to make sense of this violence: *'I feel you should be more active in school, especially after a terrorist attack. I got nothing after a lot of the terrorist acts in our college. Nothing was said, nothing happened. So, I think [it] should be addressed and explained to children properly because that way they could know that it's wrong and not to do that sort of stuff, or know ways around getting ... so, if they are getting exploited or something, who to speak to, where to go, that sort of stuff'* (Group 5).
- 6.7 **Making training more effective** was raised as a means of responding to both issue of ambiguity and implementation. One participant recalled what their mother (a teacher) had told them about the training they had received and that it essentially amounted to being told to "fill out this form" if they think: *'a child is becoming radicalised'*. They drew on this experience to say that what they feel is required is: *'further training to actually allow for consistent enforcement'* (Group 4). A different participant in the same group argued that the Prevent training needed to feel less like a chore to those who already have a lot of responsibilities: *'Rather than making the training feel like a chore to say, a teacher, where they have to do Prevent because they're legally obliged to report it, make them feel that it's worthwhile, worth their time, and that they can actually make a difference rather than it being a chore like a lot of other training feels like'* (Group 4).
- 6.8 Some participants recommended that any changes to Prevent would require **speaking to those who had experienced it**: *'One idea would be kind of like what we're doing now [referring to the focus group]. Take the current policy, look at who it targets predominantly or who it's shaped to target and speak to them, those communities more broadly and try and reshape it to be less discriminatory and get more [of those people] involved rather than organizing a policy and arms at an arm's length'* (Group 4).
- 6.9 Providing **more precise definitions of key terminology** was brought up as an important step given the seriousness of radicalisation and the potential consequences of a Prevent referral: *'This idea of fundamental British values needs to be better defined. Radicalisation needs to be better defined. Nonviolent and violent extremism needs to be better defined because all of these are too loose. And the impact that Prevent can have on families who are just maybe not as well ingratiated into the community, it can be devastating. Taking children away, having parents be stripped of their kind of parental rights'* (Group 7).

- 6.10 Most of what has been included above relates to participants making recommendations concerning specific aspects of Prevent. However, there were more fundamental and extensive recommendations that suggested a **rethinking or rebranding of the strategy**: *'I think there's an argument to be made for rebranding it. I think there's a lot of negative connotation that comes with the term Prevent now' (Group 1)*. Another added: *'I mean it's easy for us to sit here and criticize and say "oh Prevent is rubbish, it doesn't do anything", but unfortunately that's what a lot of people's perceptions on it is. So, I think if I was in charge, you would have to re-label it for people to think of a different perception on it ... the idea of Prevent, if it didn't marginalize some members of society, would be great because to beat terrorism you need a power and numbers' (Group 8)*. For another participant the way Prevent has permeated society via the statutory duty was one aspect that needed to be rethought: *'so, there's something very wrong about this idea of citizens themselves, assuming this responsibility with something which is clearly a national security issue and should be dealt with by the Government themselves on their own. I don't know how but it's not something that should permeate society' (Group 6)*.
- 6.11 A specific form of rethinking that was raised on more than one occasion was having counter-radicalisation **focus on "root causes"**. One participant felt counter-radicalisation needed to "look outside the box" and focus on factors like: *'... unemployment and lack of education but also looking at disengagement. I think a lot of ethnic minorities and youth, in fact, are disengaged, they're deprived and they're sitting at society's margins. So, it's letting them in, it's creating an inclusive environment' (Group 3)*. Another participant concurred that a focus on root causes would be a more effective approach: *'I think that if the causes of radicalisation and the purposes of these were explored and the resources were diverted towards that, I think that would be more helpful' (Group 6)*.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Our conclusions and recommendations focus on the following three areas: conceptual confusion and criticism; information, communication and transparency; and, training.

### Conceptual confusion and criticism

7.2 Our conclusions here are as follows:

- Students have a good general familiarity with the Prevent Strategy and broad orientation. There is, though, still confusion around key concepts associated with the Strategy.
- Students are often aware of controversies relating to Prevent, especially perception of racial and/or religious bias in its application. In our sample, at least, the Strategy was not seen as having the toxicity of which it has been accused. This may reflect our sampling.
- Understandings of Prevent appear to endure beyond evolutions in the Strategy and its delivery. This is particularly important in the case of criticisms of Prevent that may be based in the initial formulation of the Strategy.
- Students tended to agree that Prevent or something like it was needed and rarely called for it to be scrapped. Nevertheless, an extensive list of criticisms was a distinct feature of student evaluations and allude to serious misgiving our sample had about aspects of Prevent.
- Most recommendations put forward by students tended to focus on enhancing or improving aspects of the Strategy, however, those students with more fundamental concerns recommended a complete rethinking or rebranding.

7.3 Several of the criticisms voiced by our participants – such as the ambiguity of key terms, concerns about surveillance and spying, and the creation of suspect communities – reflect a deeper tension between, on the one hand, Prevent as a Strategy to safeguard vulnerable people and, on the other hand, Prevent as part of the U.K.'s Counterterrorism Strategy. This tension was identified by some participants in discussions of the Shamima Begum case. It has also been articulated by commentators, who have described referred individuals as possessing a dual identity: regarded as both being at risk and as posing a risk.

7.4 Some of the changes that have been proposed to address criticisms of Prevent, such as rebranding it or correcting public misunderstandings, are insufficient to address many of the criticisms voiced by our participants, as they do not address the underlying tension that leads to these difficulties in the first place. **Accordingly, given Prevent's objective to safeguard vulnerable people, we recommend a review of the location of Prevent within the wider CONTEST Strategy.**

## Information, communication and transparency

7.5 Our conclusions here are as follows:

- There appears to be real inconsistency in the extent to which pupils engage with Prevent during secondary schooling. This risks: (i) perpetuating a view of Prevent as targeted at/relevant for specific communities and places; and, (ii) generating varying levels of understanding of, and engagement with, Prevent.
- Higher education students are not always clear about their past engagement with Prevent. Although this may be a result of lapsed time, it also speaks to the clarity with which Prevent-related activities are 'badged' or 'delivered'.
- A number of students in our sample would have welcomed greater engagement with Prevent and government counter-terrorism initiatives more broadly at secondary school, including those students critical of the Strategy.
- Higher education appears to be a vitally important site through which students encounter Prevent, including via taught content. Prevent appears to be taught as a topic on a number of modules including those relating to law, politics, and terrorism studies.
- Students often recommended clearer communication and greater transparency to help lift the veil off Prevent and allow for greater public awareness and clarity.

7.6 **We accordingly recommend a review of the provision of information about Prevent within educational settings.** This includes the quantity, quality and availability of information, ensuring as well that such information is properly badged.

## Training

7.7 Our conclusions here are as follows:

- Prevent training received in work and other contexts was often seen as problematic or lacking. Criticisms included the generic nature of this training; the self-evident nature of its content; and its questionable implicit assumptions about race and religion.
- There was scepticism as to whether the training currently offered is capable of capturing the complexity and diversity of radicalisation experiences.

7.8 **We accordingly recommend a review of the provision of Prevent training.** Ensuring that Prevent training pays greater attention to embedded stereotypes and offers greater contextual specificity would help to improve its credibility. Within the school setting specifically, training should also seek to ensure the preparedness of teachers to engage pupils in discussion in the aftermath of high-profile terrorist incidents.

## 8. RESEARCHER DETAILS

**Stuart Macdonald** is Professor of Law at Swansea University's Hillary Rodham Clinton School of Law. He is Director of the University's Cyber Threats Research Centre (CYTREC) and a Co-Director of its EPSRC-funded £7.6m CHERISH Digital Economy Centre and £7.5m EPSRC Centre for Doctoral Training in Enhancing Human Interactions and Collaborations with Data and Intelligence Driven Systems. Stuart is also the lead organiser of the biennial #TASMConf (Terrorism and Social Media Conference) and co-ordinates the University's contribution to the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET). Stuart has been a Visiting Scholar at universities in the US, Australia and France and in 2016/17 was the holder of a Fulbright Cyber Security Award.

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**Lee Jarvis** is Professor of International Politics at the University of East Anglia, UK. He is author or editor of fourteen books and over fifty articles or chapters on the politics of security, including *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction*; *Anti-Terrorism, Citizenship and Security*; and *Violent Extremism Online: New Perspectives on Terrorism and the Internet*. Lee's work has been funded by organisations including the ESRC, the AHRC, the Australian Research Council, and NATO.

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**Andrew Whiting** is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Security Studies at Birmingham City University. He is the author of *Constructing Cybersecurity: Power, Expertise and the Internet Security Industry*, and has had work on cybersecurity and counter-extremism published across numerous journals including the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* and *The European Journal of International Security*. Andrew's most recent research investigated Prevent within UK Higher Education and was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

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## **9. Appendix: Information sheet provided to participants**

### **Reviewing the Prevent Strategy: Exploring student attitudes and awareness**

#### **Introduction**

Thank you for your interest in our research project. This research is being conducted by Professor Lee Jarvis, Professor Stuart Macdonald and Dr Andrew Whiting who are based at The University of East Anglia, Swansea University, and Birmingham City University respectively. In this document we hope to provide you with everything you need to know to be able to make an informed decision as to whether you would like to take part in this research. If, having gone through the document, anything is still unclear we have provided our contact details at the end so that you can get in touch to ask any further questions. The research has received ethical approval from our respective universities.

#### **The Research Project**

This project that you are being asked to partake in investigates student's attitudes towards the Prevent Strategy and is looking to generate findings for submission for the independent review of Prevent that is currently taking place. You can read more about this review here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/independent-review-of-prevent>

As a student at university we are really interested in hearing what you think about Prevent and exploring your awareness of and attitudes towards it. Specifically, our research aims are to:

- 1) Explore student awareness of, and attitudes towards, the Prevent Strategy.
- 2) Understand where student knowledge and understanding of terrorism, radicalisation and counter-extremism comes from.
- 3) Better understand how students evaluate the Prevent Strategy

#### **What will be asked of me?**

As part of this research you will be asked to partake in a focus group with approximately 6 or 7 other students studying at university within England and Wales. The focus group will be conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams and will last approximately 90 minutes.

Two members of the research team will be in each focus group and we will be asking you and your fellow students about your awareness, understanding and evaluations of Prevent, as well as where your knowledge of Prevent has come from. The members of the research team will be acting as facilitators within the focus group (much like a seminar tutor within a seminar) helping to guide the discussion and ask follow up questions in response to the comments and insights you bring to the discussion.

With your consent we will record the focus group to help with writing up our discussions. There are no specific risks involved in this study over and above those experienced in everyday encounters.

#### **Are there any benefits in taking part in this study?**



Although there are no direct benefits from taking part, through this research you will be helping contribute towards a better understanding of Prevent and how it is received within society. Your voice will provide valuable insight that we hope will be used as evidence within the ongoing independent review of Prevent.

### **Your right to withdraw**

You can withdraw from this research study at any time without explanation. You are still entitled to the same benefits as an individual who completes the study. If, after taking part, you decide you want to have your responses removed from the study you will have until Friday 16<sup>th</sup> July to contact one of the research team at the email addresses included below. The research team will then omit your responses from the relevant transcript when conducting our analysis. During the focus group you also have the right to refuse to answer or respond to any question that is asked of you.

### **Your right to confidentiality and anonymity**

When signing up to a focus group we will ask for your name, email address and course of study at university. Other than this no personal information will be collected and nothing about any participant will be identifiable to an external party. For example, your name and any other identifiable information will be kept separately from the main study data, which will be stored confidentially, using a personalised anonymous code.

All digital data generated through the focus groups will be uploaded to secure cloud storage. When writing up the research, all data will be aggregated and/or anonymised to avoid revealing individual identities.

### **How will the research be disseminated?**

With your consent we will be recording our discussions and sending these recordings with our analysis to the team of analysts running the independent review of Prevent. We will also be looking to publish academic journal articles using some of the data we generate in the focus groups. We will be happy to share any outputs of the research with you.

### **Contact details and further information**

If you require any further information about this study prior to deciding whether you would like to take part please feel free to contact any of the research team at the following addresses: [l.jarvis@uea.ac.uk](mailto:l.jarvis@uea.ac.uk), [s.macdonald@swansea.ac.uk](mailto:s.macdonald@swansea.ac.uk), [andrew.whiting@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.whiting@bcu.ac.uk)

if you are unhappy at any point in the study, or if there is a problem, please contact the Business, Law & Social Sciences faculty ethics committee at Birmingham City University directly at [blssethics@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:blssethics@bcu.ac.uk).