



The All Party Parliamentary University Group

Note of Speaker Meeting: “Radicalisation, the impact of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism measures on universities, and the challenge of protecting academic freedom of speech”.

Speakers:

Professor Colin Riordan, president and vice-chancellor of Cardiff University, vice-president of Universities UK and chair of Universities Wales

Dr Chris Allen, lecturer in social policy at the University of Birmingham

Jodie Ginsberg, chief executive of Index on Censorship

Professor Colin Riordan described the question of how to deal with extremism on campus as one of the ‘thorniest issues’ that vice-chancellors face, and said that the media often over-simplified what are complex questions requiring nuanced responses.

He set out the legal duty of universities emanating from the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, to have ‘due regard to the need to prevent individuals from being drawn into terrorism’. This makes obligatory engagement with *Prevent*, which universities have generally been involved in on a voluntary basis for some time.

He made clear that the sector acknowledges that it has a role to play in this agenda, as around half of young people attend university, and at a point in their life where they may be more vulnerable to extremism.

Professor Riordan described some of the particular work which Cardiff University, other universities in Wales, and the sector as a whole have done in this area. This included: a jointly agreed risk-management process for external speakers adopted across Wales; a chaplaincy service established in collaboration with the Muslim Council for Wales which has led to student-led multi-faith events; and the Safer Campus Communities website administered by Universities UK.

Because the sector was generally already doing much of what will be required of it under the new law, and so in general the sector did not oppose this legal obligation (although some vice-chancellors did voice concern). There was widespread concern in the sector about one aspect of the guidance that was published by the Home Office: the sections related to events on campus and external speakers.

Professor Riordan described a ‘multi-faceted’ role of universities, each of which requires a particular caution from universities in excluding speakers and preventing events taking place. He argued that student unions themselves play the leading role in most institutions in terms of excluding speakers, events, and even entertainment acts, and that the process of deliberation within student unions is in

itself an important part of how students develop into citizens who are culturally aware and critical thinkers. He said it would be 'very sad' if these decisions were increasingly taken by university authorities or the government.

However, it is also the role of universities to lead research into extremism and terrorism, which requires researchers who have access to material and to people who may be 'beyond the pale' in most contexts.

Professor Riordan set out the two existing statutory obligations on universities to secure freedom of speech on campus, and to ensure academic freedom. However, he pointed out that both have always been qualified by other laws and legal requirements.

Turning to the question of what should be included in statutory guidance on external speakers, Professor Riordan argued against a blanket ban on extremist speakers – pointing out that it is not illegal to espouse extremist views, and that private venues would be able to host such speakers. He argued that it was wrong to prevent debate on the ideas encompassed by the current government definition of 'extremism' taking place in universities.

He agreed that universities have responsibilities to mitigate the risk associated with extremism, they must be allowed to do so that takes into account their status as autonomous and independent institutions, and which allows their strategies to be sensitive to both differences between types of institution and between types of event.

Dr Chris Allen focused his comments on the impact of counter-terrorism legislation on society, and in particular on Muslim students. He argued that legislators should look more closely on the social implications of further regulations and statutes before implementing them.

He described how the draft statutory guidance published in January 2015 suggested that university staff were well placed to witness any changes in students which may indicate radicalisation, but he suggested that when pushed for specifics as to what these changes might be they too often appeared to boil down to the student becoming 'more Muslim'.

Dr Allen described that 'Raising Awareness of Prevent' training run by the Home Office often reduced radicalisation to visible signs of Islam such as a student adopting the veil, or a new interest in British foreign policy, for instance. He described the risk in this approach that Muslim students feel that there is tension between their identities as Muslims and as students – and particularly that there is some tension between their presence as Muslim students and the 'liberal traditions' of British universities.

Dr Allen described how Muslim students were notable by their absence in vocal opposition organised by students in response to some Islamophobic graffiti which appeared shortly after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. When he asked some students why, they suggested they were wary of 'putting their heads above the parapet' on the issue – that they were unwilling to demonstrate their anger as *Muslims* in public for fear of being viewed as potential extremists.

He summarised his concerns about an increased focus on counter-terrorism duties on universities: that as the visibility of duties increase, Muslim students may feel increasingly marginalised on campus; that it may reinforce the (untrue) perception that university campuses are hot-spots of radicalisation; that it may increase fear and suspicion of Muslim students and staff among non-Muslim students and staff; and that as a result it may inadvertently reinforce extremists' own narratives about the incompatibility of Islam and 'the West', as it is represented by universities.

Jodie Ginsberg explained that the founding document of Index on Censorship made particular mention of the importance of academics and academia in promoting freedom. She said that Index has been increasingly concerned about some developments in universities, such as an increasing adoption of 'no platform' policies and the exclusion of 'non-conforming academics'.

She expressed particular concern about 'ever expanding' counter-extremism legislation and the enlisting of organisations like universities as 'spies', and made clear that she thinks universities should have campaigned to be made exempt from any legal duties under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act.

Ms Ginsberg explained that existing statutory duties to secure freedom of speech were not cast-iron, as the duty is to secure freedom 'within the law' – and as legal requirements related to counter-extremism expand, the scope of the duty will diminish.

She cautiously welcomed some of the changes made from the original draft statutory guidance on the *Prevent* duty published in January, in particular the idea that universities ought to vet speakers. However, she warned of a possible 'pincer movement' between legislative curbs on one hand and restrictions of freedom of expression from universities and student unions on the other, which would risk undermining universities' role as crucibles of critical thinking.

Q&A and Discussion

The Minister of State for Security, John Hayes MP, attended the meeting for part of the discussion session. He expressed his willingness to listen to the sector in making statutory guidance workable, but that the new legal responsibility was a reflection of the change in the situation in recent years. He said he was encouraged by what he saw as an increasing engagement and understanding from universities. Jodie Ginsberg challenged his claim that there was a change in situation which required new strategies, pointing out that some of the most notable atrocities in recent years were carried out by individuals and were not associated with radical Islam (she gave the examples of Anders Brevik and Andreas Lubitz).

One vice-chancellor member related a point in time when he was criticised (by different bodies) for being both anti-Islamic and for allowing particular speakers on Islam who were deemed by some to be extremists. He suggested that a *laissez faire* approach does not always ensure the opportunity of freedom of speech, as it is possible for one group of students to dominate and prevent discussion. He also argued that universities are far from the only context in which students may come across

extremist ideas, and preventing the ideas being challenged in a university setting was likely to do more harm than good.

A parliamentarian member asked about how universities could **intelligently look for signs of violent extremism in students** that would be more sophisticated than the methods criticised by Dr Allen in his presentation. Dr Allen responded that the one time he was made uncomfortable by the extreme nature of the views of a student, the student did not display visible signs of being 'more Muslim' but they did have a history of petty crime. Jodie Ginsberg expressed her concern that as strategies moved away from visible signs of Islam the pressure towards snooping on emails (for example) may increase – a practice she described as 'coming down the tracks'.

There was an exchange about **gender segregation at university events**, including segregation which was voluntary on the part of students taking part at the event. It was made clear by a parliamentarian member that such segregation was illegal, but a vice-chancellor member questioned how they could in practice stop such voluntary segregation occurring. Dr Allen suggested the answer was to be straightforward and being clear to students and visiting speakers that segregation – including voluntary segregation – was not permitted.

Some members present urged **a less defensive tone** from the sector, and a more positive argument about the role of universities in challenging extremist narratives and perhaps in providing alternative narratives. A number of members agreed this was an ideal, but that it was difficult in practice as the media and others are more interested in the simplified narratives. Jodie Ginsberg suggested that the best way of making a positive argument was to be unapologetic about the role of universities as places where views of all kinds are discussed and debated. A vice-chancellor member suggested that universities needed a more 'simplistic' message to counteract the popular press. Professor Riordan gave his view that the sector is accused of complacency if it pushes back in too simplistic a fashion against restrictions in this area.

A parliamentarian asked about **universities' relationship with student unions**. All speakers agreed this was a critical relationship. Jodie Ginsberg advocated a better dialogue with student unions to allow them to 'fully understand' what freedom of speech actually consists in. Professor Riordan agreed that involving student unions was essential, but said that challenging them on freedom of expression issues was far from straightforward and quickly gets into 'difficult water' of intervening in a community of adults who have made their own decisions.

An attendee from the sector asked about the need for **proper training from the Home Office** in order to fulfil legal duties. Professor Riordan and Dr Allen agreed that there needs to be more, better and more formal training if a legal duty is to be introduced.