Listening to Muslim Students' Voices on the Prevent Duty in British Universities: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The Prevent Duty requires universities in the United Kingdom to identify and report students who might be seen as 'vulnerable' to radicalisation. Since its introduction in 2015, the duty has been subject to increasing empirical research in the education sector. However, there has been limited research that specifically explores Muslim students' perceptions of Prevent in British universities. This paper directly addresses this gap in research by drawing upon the qualitative experiences of 25 university students who self-identified as 'British Muslims'. Individual, semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analysed using Thematic Analysis. The findings demonstrate the securitisation of higher education and 'policing' of Muslim students. The paper draws on Pantazis and Pemberton's use of the 'new suspect community' thesis in order to examine participants' views and experiences. When analysing the data, three particular themes are especially prominent: as a tool of 'surveillance', Prevent hampers freedom of speech, threatens student activism and forces Muslim students to hide their Muslim identity to avoid being labelled as 'radical' or 'vulnerable' to terrorism. It will be concluded that the 'surveillance' function of Prevent is problematic on the grounds that it renders universities 'modern-day panopticons'.

Keywords

prevent duty, radicalisation, surveillance, suspect communities, terrorism, university

Introduction

The Prevent Duty, which is a strand of CONTEST (UK Government's counter-terrorism strategy – organised round the four 'Ps': Pursue, Protect, Prepare and Prevent), aims to reduce the threat to the UK from all forms of terrorism by stopping people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism (HM Government, 2021). Mandated by the Counter Terrorism and Security Act (CTSA) 2015, the

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Prevent Duty (known informally as 'Prevent') imposes a legal requirement on universities, along with several other educational and public bodies in England, Scotland and Wales to show 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism' (HM Government, 2021). This means that the CTSA steps beyond voluntary cooperation and partnership and imposes a legal duty on universities requiring them, in carrying out their functions, to identify and report students who might be seen as 'vulnerable' to radicalisation (Choudhury, 2017).

Since its introduction in 2015, the duty has been subject to increasing empirical research in a variety of settings including healthcare (Heath-Kelly and Strausz, 2019), social care services (Chivers, 2018), schools and colleges (Busher et al., 2019; Coppock and McGovern, 2014; Moffat and Gerard, 2020) and universities (Guest et al., 2020; Kyriacou et al., 2017; McGlynn and McDaid, 2019; Spiller et al., 2018). However, Prevent has received sustained criticism and resistance particularly in terms of being accused of carrying out 'surveillance' and reinforcing negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims (Busher et al., 2017; Sabir, 2017).

Specifically in the context of education, Prevent has been criticised of securitising educational spaces, having a 'chilling effect' on free speech in the classroom, and deepening suspicion of Muslim students (Scott-Baumann, 2017). Drawing on a representative sample of the student population based across UK universities, Guest et al. (2020) explored how Islam and Muslims are represented and perceived on UK university campuses. Specifically, the project included interviews and focus groups with 253 staff and students at six higher education institutions across the UK. The project also included a survey which collected evidence from 2022 students attending 132 universities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The project found that Prevent reinforces negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims, and encourages a culture of mutual suspicion and surveillance on university campuses.

Although Prevent has been subject to increasing empirical research in the education sector, there has been limited research that specifically explores Muslim students' perceptions of Prevent in British universities. This paper directly addresses this gap in research by drawing upon the qualitative experiences of 25 university students who self-identified as 'British Muslims'. Individual, semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The findings demonstrate the securitisation of higher education and 'policing' of Muslim students. The paper draws on Pantazis and Pemberton's (2009) use of the 'new suspect community' thesis in order to examine participants' views and experiences. When analysing the data, three particular themes are especially prominent: as a tool of 'surveillance', Prevent hampers freedom of speech, threatens student activism and forces Muslim students to hide their Muslim identity to avoid being labelled as 'radical' or 'vulnerable' to terrorism. The paper outlines the different ways in which 'surveillance' operates in the classroom and online. It will be concluded that the 'surveillance' function of Prevent is problematic on the grounds that it renders universities 'modern-day panopticons'.

The following section discusses the securitisation of higher education, which is important for setting the scene for the empirical discussions to follow. The three empirical themes are then explored in detail, followed by a discussion and finally the conclusion.

Prevent, counter-terrorism and the 'surveillance' nexus within higher education

Universities as 'suspect' sites

As mentioned above, universities (as well as schools, colleges, NHS, prisons and other public institutions) in England, Scotland and Wales have been specifically targeted in counter-terrorism

and counter-radicalisation measures. The Office for Students (Office for Students [OfS], 2021) monitors what higher education providers do to prevent people being drawn into terrorism. To comply with the Prevent duty, providers need to (OfS, 2021): assess the risks associated with Prevent and draw up a plan to mitigate these; have effective welfare support systems, linking to DfE Prevent coordinators, local authorities or the police if necessary; have systems for assessing and mitigating risks around external speakers and events on campus, while maintaining the existing duty to promote freedom of speech; arrange ongoing Prevent training for relevant staff; have an IT usage policy, and where appropriate a research policy, which cover the Prevent duty; engage with students and ensure that students' unions and societies are aware of policies concerning activities on campus. If the OfS assesses that a provider is not demonstrating 'due regard' to the Prevent duty, then this provider will be referred to the Department for Education. Also, individuals identified as 'vulnerable' are referred, via the police, to Channel, the Government's de-radicalisation scheme. According to Section 36 (3) of the CTSA Act, this should be the case 'only if there are reasonable grounds to believe the individual is vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism'. However, it is not evident in the CTSA Act how the concepts of 'vulnerability' and 'reasonable grounds' are determined (Davies, 2016). The elusiveness of the concept 'terrorism' complicates matters further (Davies, 2016).

Although directed at all forms of 'extremism' (including far-right groups), Prevent has disproportionally focused upon 'Islamic extremism' (Allen et al., 2019). Pantazis and Pemberton (2009) argue that Muslims have been constructed as the 'new suspect community' through the implementation of UK counter-terrorist legislation. Drawing on Hillyard's (1993) notion of the suspect community, Pantazis and Pemberton (2009: 649) define a suspect community as: '. . . a sub-group of the population that is singled out for state attention as being "problematic". Specifically in terms of policing, individuals may be targeted, not necessarily as a result of suspected wrong doing, but simply because of their presumed membership to that sub-group. Race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, language, accent, dress, political ideology or any combination of these factors may serve to delineate the sub-group'. Building on Pantazis and Pemberton's (2009) 'new suspect community' thesis, Coppock and McGovern (2014) argue that Prevent reinforces the construction of British Muslim youth as a 'suspect community'.

Indeed, a key criticism of Prevent is that young British Muslims are subjected to scrutiny because of concerns of their perceived vulnerability to radicalisation (Robinson et al., 2017; Saeed and Johnson, 2016). Hamid (2011: 247) observes that 'the words "Muslim" and "youth" together most often trigger associations with violent extremism'. This narrative reproduces pathologised constructions of Muslim youth as 'suspect', violent and dangerous, and as fundamentally different from normative young people (Durodie, 2016; Hamid, 2011; Mythen et al., 2013). This narrative also renders universities, especially those with a large number of Muslim students, a 'suspect' site. Consequently, universities have come under scrutiny as 'sites of suspicion' because of fears of young Muslims becoming radicalised by Islamist groups. This has led to a shift in securitising educational settings, particularly in terms of Muslim students' freedom of expression and activism, as outlined below.

Freedom of expression and activism

Prevent has been critiqued in terms of reframing the pedagogical dynamic as 'surveillance', which has implications for students' freedom of expression and activism. This entails that universities as spaces of 'open' critical debate is undermined by Prevent. Danvers (2021) argues that the fact that 'surveillance' has entered into pedagogic relations prevents critical thinking and limits freedom of expression, especially for Muslim students on the basis that they are seen as vulnerable to

radicalisation. To this end, Prevent creates a pedagogic context whereby Muslim students and their ideas are seen as either 'suspicious' or 'guilty' (Danvers, 2021).

Durodie (2016: 21) highlights 'the overt and covert linkages between security and education', in light of growing concerns over radicalisation and extremism, especially amongst Muslim youth. Zembylas (2020) observes that there has been growing work on the application of securitisation theory to mainstream education, ranging from the effects of policies such as Prevent to university students in the UK (Davies, 2016; O'Donnell, 2016; Thomas, 2016); analysis of a Prevent-inspired programme in Sweden and how it contributes to the securitisation of the educational system (Mattsson and Säljö, 2018) or demands to 'harden' US schools as a result of mass-shootings (Charalambous et al., 2018; Christodoulou, 2018; Davies, 2016; Gearon, 2015; Gearon and Parsons, 2019; O'Donnell, 2016). That said, it is important to note that the concept of 'securitisation' draws on securitisation theory, which argues that an issue becomes 'securitised' after a securitising actor presents it as an existential threat (Buzan et al., 1998; Léonard and Kaunert, 2010, 2019). Zembylas (2020) explains that securitisation theory does not examine whether something constitutes a threat or not but rather how some issues are constructed as security issues. From this perspective, securitising higher education creates a surveillance regime that seeks to monitor and police the behaviour of 'problem' individuals such as Muslim students who are inclined to be drawn to radicalisation (Arshad-Ayaz and Naseem, 2017).

Relatedly, the fact that Prevent legislation has made it a statutory duty for schools and universities to prevent terrorism means that staff have become agents of the state and thus utilised as tools for 'surveillance' within universities (Arshad-Ayaz and Naseem, 2017). Drawing on qualitative interviews with 20 university lecturers, Spiller et al. (2018) examined academics' views on the Prevent Duty, and how this role impacts on their university responsibilities. The findings showed that Prevent undermines some of the core functions of the university namely freedom of speech as well as stigmatising Muslim students as 'suspects' and 'other'. Participants raised concerns about the erosion of freedom of speech amongst Muslim students and external speakers. Participants also reported feeling uneasy about what is being asked of them, feeling caught between upholding principles of academic freedom and being obligated to identify signs of radicalisation. Along similar lines, in McGlynn and McDaid's (2019) focus group study with university students, when they were asked about the potential impact of counter-radicalisation legislation on campus, there were references to Orwellian societies and lecturers being forced to police their students.

As a tool of 'surveillance', Prevent also restricts the space that Muslim students have to be politically active. In this context, universities are presented as 'inherently radical spaces' and Muslim students 'at risk to radicalisation as a result of inhabiting this location' (Brown and Saeed, 2015: 1955). Brown (2010) argues that since Prevent was established, spaces for Muslim activism on campus are restricted or even lost. In the words of Coppock and McGovern (2014: 253), Prevent 'denies young British Muslims social and political agency'. In a parliamentary inquiry, written submissions from the Student Union at the University of Oxford and the NUS Black Students' Campaign stated that Muslim students have been dissuaded from becoming involved in student activism out of fear of being reported under the Prevent Duty for expressing opinions on certain issues (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2018). This ties in with the research findings of NUS (2018) that Prevent negatively affected Muslim students' engagement opportunities, for example, in terms of taking part in political activity.

Similarly, Guest et al. (2020) found that Prevent has the effect of discouraging free speech within universities. Serious concerns were expressed by students and staff across all of the six case study campuses in this study about the impact of Prevent on freedom of expression, limiting academic enquiry and demonisation of Muslims. Guest et al. (2020) argue that Muslim students

tend to self-censor their discussions, especially on topics such as terrorism, fundamentalism or military conflict, to avoid being labelled 'at risk of radicalisation'. Prevent also has the effect of compromising academic freedom for staff as they are sometimes discouraged from exploring, researching or teaching about Islam; in some cases, course material has been 'flagged' as 'high risk' and academics have been deterred from researching or teaching certain 'sensitive' topics (Guest et al., 2020).

Finally, it is important to note that under Prevent, the securitisation of higher education relies upon the 'conveyor belt theory of terrorism', which links a radical viewpoint at its beginning to supporting terrorism at its end. As outlined below, despite criticisms of this model as ineffective, it has led to higher education functioning as a securitisation vehicle (O'Donnell, 2016).

Pathways to radicalisation

Prevent is underpinned by the concept of a process of 'radicalisation' which occurs through a linear pathway from ideas or belief systems to violent action. As such, the rationale of 'surveillance' focuses on a 'pathway' that may lead to radicalisation, prior to the point at which a person directly supports or carries out a terrorist act (Kyriacou et al., 2017). Specifically, the surveillance infrastructure perceives radicalisation as part of the 'conveyor belt to terrorism' (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008), which links a radical viewpoint at its beginning to supporting or carrying out terrorist act at its end. According to this theory, radicalisation is described as a linear process that goes into one direction – towards terrorism (Stern, 2014). In other words, Prevent theorises that a terrorist attack is the end point of the path to radicalisation, or 'the tip of an iceberg' (Qurashi, 2018: 4). This implies that there are clear observable indicators, which can signal who is at risk of radicalisation. In the context of higher education, the assumption is that this process is observable by university staff. For example, as Brown and Saeed (2015) point out, university staff are expected to monitor students by looking out for 'signs' of radicalisation in their academic writings, participation in university societies or their withdrawal from mainstream university life.

However, there is extensive literature challenging the claim that the model of the 'conveyor belt' helps to identify those at risk of becoming involved in terrorism, particularly when radicalisation itself is ill-defined within policy and academia (Githens-Mazer, 2012; Heath-Kelly, 2013; Kundnani, 2012, 2014; Richards, 2011; Sedgwick, 2010). In particular, Richardson (2015) has been critical of the conveyor belt theory of terrorism on the basis that there are a number of identifiable steps that lead from one end to the other; the fact that each step can be viewed by Prevent as a cause of concern is fundamentally flawed. It is also acknowledged that it is extremely difficult to predict who will engage in terrorism (Horgan and Braddock, 2010). The Royal College of Psychiatrists (2016: 5) states that no tools 'have been developed that can reliably identify people who have been radicalised, who are at risk of radicalisation or who are likely to carry out a terrorist act'. This means that some individuals might have erroneously been referred to the Channel programme, although there is no actual risk to being drawn into terrorism. There are media reports of cases in which Muslim university students had been arrested by the police after staff raised concerns, including Mohammed Umar Farooq and Rizwan Sabir, although there was no evidence of terrorist activity. Examples of Muslim students who have been referred to Prevent in error also include an 11-year-old primary school pupil who was referred to Prevent after a teacher mistook the word 'alms' for 'arms' during a classroom discussion (Guardian, 2021) and a 4-year-old whose picture of a 'cooker bomb' turned out to be a mispronounced cucumber drawing (Guardian, 2016). Nevertheless despite criticisms, adherence to 'pathways to radicalisation' remains a vital pillar of Prevent and has led to the securitisation of higher education.

Methodology

The paper derives from a qualitative study, which set out to explore Muslim students' perceptions of the Prevent Duty in UK universities. The study involved individual, semi-structured interviews with Muslim students in universities located in one (anonymised) region of England. The research questions examined: (Q1) Muslim students' awareness of Prevent in higher education; (Q2) Muslim students' experiences of Prevent in higher education; (Q3) the impacts of Prevent upon Muslim students in UK universities; (Q4) Muslim students' recommendations for improving this strategy. Correspondingly, the interview guide contained a series of open-ended questions related to these research questions. In total, 25 university students who self-identified as 'British Muslims' took part in the research. Participants were recruited using a purposive sample. Specifically, the study was advertised via email to the Student Unions of the 14 universities in the geographical region of England where the research was conducted. Interviews took place in a booked room in university libraries in this region. Participants' answers were audio-recorded (using a Dictaphone), transcribed and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-phase approach to thematic analysis.

Participation to the study was voluntary. The sample included 17 male and 8 female participants. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 38. In terms of race/ethnicity, participants self-identified as British Asian (12), Black (7), Arab (4) and White (2). A common characteristic amongst all participants was that they were 'visibly identifiable' as Muslim. For example, some of the female participants wore the jilbab (long dress), hijab (headscarf) and/or niqab (face veil) whilst the male participants had a beard and often wore the traditional Islamic clothing and a cap that identified them as being Muslim.

Individual, in-depth interviews allow for 'rich' data to be collected with detailed descriptions (Hennink et al., 2011). It is an ideal method of data collection when exploring sensitive and/or under-researched topics such as Muslim students' perceptions of Prevent Duty in higher education. This is important to examine as empirical research on this subject remains limited. Capturing Muslim students' perspectives is important as they might be affected by the Prevent strategy.

An inductive approach to thematic analysis was adopted to analyse participants' narratives, and five overarching themes were developed: (1) Prevent hampers freedom of speech; (2) Prevent threatens student activism; (3) Prevent forces practising Muslim students to hide their religious identity; (4) Prevent promotes Islamophobia; (5) Abolishing Prevent. Due to word restrictions, the first three themes are explored and discussed in this paper. In order to ensure participants' anonymity, their real names have been replaced by pseudonyms whilst any information that could identify them has been removed. The following section uses illustrative extracts from the interviews to provide sufficient evidence of the themes within the data.

Findings

Theme 1: Freedom of speech

Throughout interviews, participants pointed out that Prevent creates a 'surveillance' culture on campus. Specifically, participants reported that Prevent hampers freedom of expression for Muslim students in the classroom and online (including university discussion boards). They argued that certain topics were 'off-limits' for Muslim students in case they were seen to be supporting terrorism. For example, some participants said that they would not be comfortable to involve themselves in student discussions/debates around issues such as the Israel/Gaza conflict, UK military operations in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan and criticising Prevent for fear of being seen as 'radical', as indicated in the following quotes.

> Most of the times I don't engage in debates in the classroom because my lecturers might think I'm an extremist. (Bilal)

> Prevent is very much like a surveillance operation. Muslim students are under the microscope. There is no freedom of speech. We are careful of what we say in case it's seen as extreme. (Imran)

> We need to think twice before we speak. We can't really express our views on certain topics like British troops in Syria or campaign for Palestine solidarity on campus in case anything we say is taken out of context. This has happened to other Muslim students, so we need to be careful. (Kamran)

Consequently, participants felt that they had to self-censor their beliefs and opinions out of fear of being reported under Prevent. As such, the securitisation of higher education had led them to disengage from critical discussions and debates in the classroom and online in order to minimise the risk of being referred to Prevent. Furthermore, participants reported that they were careful not to access any 'controversial' material using university computers or their own laptops on campus premises as they could be prosecuted for terrorism. Some participants suggested that Muslim students are prosecuted for 'thought crimes' when it comes to accessing 'extremist' material online, as indicated in the quotes below.

> Young Muslim students who are simply exploring ideas of things are prosecuted for terrorism. How is this fair? Reading a blog at a terrorist website does not make you a terrorist but in the eyes of Prevent, all Muslims students are tarred with the same brush. (Waqas)

> Students are now being prosecuted for terrorism under section 57 [of the 2000 Terrorism Act], just because they're looking at extremist material online. There is a big difference between planning criminal acts of terrorism and visiting terrorist websites but Prevent says we're all guilty. (Hassan)

The case of the four Muslim students from Bradford University, who were sentenced to prison in 2007 as they were found guilty of downloading and sharing extremist terrorism-related material, was discussed in one of the interviews.

> We are all aware of how justice failed the Bradford students back in 2007. Cases like that, we don't forget. Although they were eventually released from prison, the damage was done. The 'message' was sent to all Muslim students at universities throughout the country. The message was 'We will arrest you if you're downloading and reading extremist material, even if you don't plan a terrorist attack'. Students have lost confidence in Prevent, the police and the courts. As it stands, Muslim students are essentially being arrested for their thoughts. (Imran)

In this quote, Imran referred to the case of the four Muslim students from Bradford University who were sentenced to prison in 2007 for possession of articles for a purpose connected with the commission, preparation or instigation of an act of terrorism, contrary to section 57 of the Terrorism Act 2000. For the purposes of this discussion, it is important to note that the judge had stated that they were 'intoxicated' by radical Islamist propaganda material that they had collected (e.g. songs, images and the language of violent jihad) (BBC, 2007). In this case, it is assumed that if someone accesses 'extremist' material online, they are on a 'conveyor belt' towards engaging in a terrorist act. During their trial at court at the Old Bailey, the four Muslim students from Bradford University argued that they were not terrorists but 'intellectually curious'. In 2008, they were released from prison after a judgement by the Court of Appeal, which determined that there was no proof of terrorist intent (BBC, 2008). Lord Justice said that while the students had downloaded such material, he doubted if there was evidence to suggest that they were planning terrorist acts. He stated that the

prosecution had attempted to use Section 57 of the 2000 Terrorism Act for a purpose for which it was not intended. Imran Khan, the solicitor for one of the students, said they had been prosecuted for a 'thought crime' (BBC, 2008). One of the participants in this study (Imran) argued that such cases whereby Muslim students are prosecuted for 'thought crimes', damage their confidence in the Prevent strategy and the British criminal justice system as a whole.

Theme 2: Student activism

The findings also showed that as a tool of 'surveillance', Prevent constrained Muslim students' activism on campus. Throughout interviews, participants argued that they were reluctant to engage with activism on campus because they were afraid of being accused to be 'radicals' and 'extremists'. This also meant that participants were reluctant to take part in student politics because they feared that they could be arrested by the police on suspicion of supporting terrorism. In the following quotes, participants outline how 'surveillance' prevented them from being involved in student politics and activism.

> Muslim students feel that there is no freedom of expression since Prevent was set up. That's why they stay away from politics and activism on campus. (Amir)

> There are double standards, if you're a student activist who is Muslim or Asian looking, you're labelled as a terrorist sympathiser but if you are a white, non-Muslim student activist then you're seen as progressive. Muslim students don't get involved with activism on campus because they are afraid of this label (Mohammed).

As indicated in the last quote, Mohammed felt that there were 'double standards' whereby Muslim students who were involved with activism on campus were seen with suspicion. As a result, Muslim students were afraid to express themselves through getting involved in student politics and activism because they feared that they might be seen as 'radicals'. Participants also noted how 'surveillance' affected their engagement with the Islamic Society, as the following quotes show.

> Prevent stigmatises us as would-be terrorists. Personally, I have shaved my beard and don't really go to meetings with IS [Islamic Society] anymore. (Asim)

> Prevent has an impact on freedom of expression in our university. Some Muslim students are fearful of going to the prayer room to pray, let alone joining IS [Islamic Society] in case they're branded as 'radicals'. (Jay)

> Prevent inhibits free speech particularly for Muslim students. I know from my work on student campaigns that there is excessive scrutiny and curtailment of activism and free speech when it comes to campaigns organised by the Islamic Society. (Khadija)

Furthermore, participants shared their fears of being unlawfully arrested as 'terrorist suspects' under Prevent and noted that these fears were not unfounded. Participants discussed examples of Muslim students who were referred to Prevent for what emerged as the most mundane of reasons such as reading a particular library book. One of the cases that was discussed in the interviews was Mohammed Umar Farooq, a student in the Terrorism, Crime and Global Security Master's Course at Staffordshire University, who was falsely accused of being a terrorist after a university official had spotted him reading a textbook entitled *Terrorism Studies*

in the university library. Another case that was discussed in the interviews was Rizwaan Sabir, a Muslim PhD student who was arrested on suspicion of terrorism because he downloaded the 'Al Qaeda Training Manual' at the University of Nottingham in May 2008. Sabir had downloaded this material for his PhD study into counter-terrorism; a full version of this material could be downloaded from the university's library or purchased from book shops such as WH Smith, Blackwells and Waterstones (Fitzgerald, 2015). Sabir was held in police custody for a week and then released without charge. Nottinghamshire police stated that there was no evidence to suggest that Sabir was involved in terrorism, and accepted liability for wrongly arresting him as a terror suspect by agreeing to pay him £20,000 (BBC, 2011). Participants noted that such incidents damaged Muslim students' confidence in university staff and the police, as demonstrated in the following quotes.

> There is no question about it. Sabir was arrested not because he downloaded this material which was free to the public anyway but because he was a Muslim student downloading this material. If he wasn't Muslim, he wouldn't have been arrested. In the eyes of Prevent, being Muslim is equal to being vulnerable to terrorism. When cases like this happen, they create massive tensions between the police and the student community. (Irfan)

> Our confidence is just gone. How can they expect us to trust university staff or the police when they do this to us? (Ameena)

As these two themes demonstrate, Prevent had made participants fearful in case their views and behaviours, prayer room activities, email/online activity, involvement with Islamic Society, student politics and activism were misinterpreted as 'radical'. This means that participants felt unable to express their views or be themselves because of the securitisation of higher education. To complicate matters further, the following theme shows that as a tool of 'surveillance', Prevent forces practising Muslim students to hide their Muslim identity to avoid being labelled as 'radical' or 'vulnerable' to terrorism. In this regard, aspects such as Muslim appearance help to unpack indicators or symbols of 'suspicion'.

Theme 3: Visibility of Islam

Participants argued that Prevent has created an atmosphere where Muslim students, especially those who practised their religion on campus, were seen as 'suspects' and 'security threats'. In this regard, male Muslim students who wore a topi (Islamic cap), jubbah (Islamic long robe) and/or had a beard, and female Muslim students who wore the jilbab (long dress), hijab (headscarf) and/or niqab (face veil) on campus were treated with suspicion.

> If you're a practising Muslim on campus, you're going to be under Prevent officers' spotlight. (Hassan)

> We're treated as a threat by security staff, which doesn't make us feel welcomed. (Shazana)

> The moment you put on the niqab, you are a suspect. In other people's minds, you're associated with fundamentalism and terrorism just because of wearing this piece of cloth. You are a suspect to your lecturers, to the administration staff, to the porters, to the security people, to the other students. I've had complaints from many Muslim sisters saying that they were being monitored by academic staff since they started wearing it. In some cases, staff and students have asked inappropriate questions like 'How do you feel about the London terrorist attacks?' or 'Do you support terrorism?' Prevent has created this climate of suspicion. (Haniya)

As indicated in the last quote, some Muslim students had received questions by lecturers or fellow students expecting them to condemn acts of terrorism. These questions were based on the assumption that Muslims are 'suspects' and they have to prove their innocence by denouncing terrorism. Participants argued that being a practising Muslim intensified suspicions of guilt. They pointed out that practising their religious identity had become synonymous with religious extremism and consequently, they had to hide it or at least, downplay it in order to 'fit in'. The 'surveillance' of Muslim students as a 'suspect community' had led participants to self-police in terms of their appearance, as the following quotes demonstrate.

> We don't feel safe or comfortable to practise our religion on campus. I shaved my beard to avoid being seen as suspect. (Ahmad)

> International students from countries such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are increasingly taking the veil off when they come to study with us. This is not a genuine choice, it is a forced choice because they don't want to be seen as radicals. (Maryam)

These quotes highlight a security narrative, which is also evident in the justifications of universities that have banned the wearing of the niqab on campus. For example, in 2005 Imperial College London introduced a veil ban (specifically, banning students, staff and visitors from wearing the face covering) over security concerns following the 7/7 terrorist attacks. The umbrella body for Islamic societies, the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS) stated that this ban was unacceptable as the niqab was 'central to the religious beliefs of those who wear it' and that the ban was 'forcing students to choose between their religion and education' (BBC, 2006). Similar concerns were raised by participants in this study who felt pressured to change their appearance in order to 'fit in'. Indeed, some participants modified their appearance in relation to their Muslim identity in order to avoid being seen as a 'suspect'.

Lastly, participants argued that on the face of it, Prevent has been introduced as a proactive response to the terror threat, with the seemingly positive goal of preventing terrorism in the UK; however, in practice, Prevent had created a culture of 'surveillance' and criminalisation of Muslim students as a 'suspect community'. This affected Muslim students' academic success, inclusion and attainment, as they were less likely to engage in their academic learning. This also meant that there was no safe space or forum on campus for Muslim students to discuss issues that affected them. Consequently, they felt isolated, marginalised and alienated. As might be expected, this had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing in addition to their academic progress.

Discussion

Under the Prevent agenda, Muslims constitute a 'suspect community' (Hillyard, 1993; Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009). This means that Muslims are seen as vulnerable to radicalisation and therefore potentially dangerous as terrorists or terrorist sympathisers. To this end, the exercise of 'surveillance' forms an essential feature of Prevent in higher education. An overarching theme present throughout the interviews with participants was the securitisation of universities and construction of Muslim students as a 'suspect community' who should be monitored and policed. When analysing the data, three particular concerns were especially prominent: as a tool of 'surveillance', Prevent hampers freedom of speech, threatens student activism and forces Muslim students to hide their religious identity to avoid being labelled as 'radical' or 'vulnerable' to terrorism.

Throughout interviews, participants outlined the different ways in which 'surveillance' operates in the classroom and online. They argued that they felt reluctant to discuss certain topics such as the Israel/Gaza conflict, UK military operations in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan and criticise Prevent in classroom activities. They were also reluctant to engage with activism on campus because they were afraid of being accused to be 'radicals' and 'extremists'. This has led to participants self-policing and to this end, self-censoring (O'Donnell, 2016; Scott-Baumann, 2017). Guest et al. (2020) argue that Prevent has caused significant harm by curbing freedoms of speech and expression on UK university campuses. Guest et al. (2020) encountered a number of examples in their field research, where Muslim students self-censored to avoid being labelled an extremist and reported to Prevent. In this study (Guest et al., 2020), students and staff often linked the Prevent Duty Guidance with a reduction in freedom of expression through self-censoring and restricted academic choices, which had a chilling effect on campus life. According to Guest et al. (2020: 42) 'such tendencies within university life sit uncomfortably alongside long-standing ideals of intellectual freedom and the popular image of the modern university as a safe context for experimentation, free thinking and social protest'.

This raises the question of where the balance lies between freedom, education and security (Ramsay, 2017). According to Brown and Saeed (2015), Prevent pathologises the university experience. Similarly, Zembylas (2020) notes that Prevent establishes and perpetuates securitised discourses that pathologise Muslims as 'vulnerable' and 'problem' subjects who are drawn to radicalisation. Scott-Baumann and Perfect (2020) argue that attempts to monitor the behaviour of Muslims on UK university campuses have included the banning of particular speakers from university campuses, the modification of teaching content and interventions into the activity of Islamic societies, all on the grounds of the Prevent guidelines.

From this perspective, state 'surveillance' practices such as Prevent facilitate the extension of Foucauldian practices of governance and discipline of young British Muslims (Coppock and McGovern, 2014). To this end, Prevent could be linked the work of Foucault (1977) and universities as 'modern-day panopticons'. Correspondingly, participants' concerns of Prevent hampering freedom of speech and restricting activism on campus can be seen as examples where the 'watchmen' of 'modern day panopticons' can exercise their power (Bi, 2018). In the panopticon model, Foucault (1977) calls this process 'soul training'. The surveillance gaze of Prevent draws the boundaries between the 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' behaviours, thoughts and actions; as such, it identifies the 'unacceptable' behaviours, thoughts and actions that need to be disciplined or punished (Fiske, 1998). Indeed, surveillance entails disciplinary techniques, subjected to a 'normalising gaze' (Foucault, 1977: 184). For example, surveillance forces 'extremist' Muslim students to adopt a 'moderate', normalised Muslim identity. Drawing on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork including interviews, focus groups and participant observations, Qurashi (2018) explored the function of 'surveillance' with respect to the Prevent strategy. Qurashi (2018) concluded that the framing of the terror threat as an 'Islamic threat' has produced a surveillance infrastructure, which restricts Muslim political agency and activism. In the context of higher education, the threat of terrorism allows the state to restrict Muslim student political agency, using the apparatus of social control (Qurashi, 2017, 2018).

This reflects criticisms of Prevent as form of institutionalised and state-sponsored Islamophobia (Busher et al., 2017; Sabir, 2017). Correspondingly, there have been various anti-Prevent campaigns by Muslim organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain, CAGE and Prevent Watch as well as organised campaigns like 'Students Not Suspects' and 'Preventing Prevent' which have been promoted by the National Union of Students (Guest et al., 2020). Relatedly, participants in the present study argued that Prevent had created an atmosphere where Muslim students, especially those who practise their religion on campus, were treated as a 'security threat'. In light of

the government's definition of extremism as 'vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values' (HM Government, 2021), performing Islam on campus risks conflation with extremism. Brown and Saeed (2015) argue that certain 'types' of Muslims, namely, young bearded Muslim men and veiled Muslim women, are perceived as particularly 'vulnerable' to radicalisation. Thus, under the Prevent agenda, religious characteristics indicate a source of 'danger'. Brown and Saeed (2015) and Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor (2016) demonstrate how female Muslim students on campus are labelled as 'radicals'. In particular, Muslim students who wear the niqab are accused of being a 'security threat' on campus; they are also seen as an 'ideological threat' on the basis that their face is covered and this hinders face-to-face communication. Abbas (2019) notes how visual markers and religious activities are no longer interpreted through religious frameworks, but political categories of moderate/extremist. In the words of Abbas (2019: 5), 'dominance of the moderate/extremist binary means visibly Muslim students face heightened securitisation'. This embodied sense of being monitored led to some participants in the present study to hide or downplay their Muslim identity. This reflects Awan's (2012) argument that as a form of 'surveillance', Prevent not only regulates Muslim thoughts and minds but also their bodies. As might be expected, the 'surveillance' function of Prevent has significant consequences for Muslim students. 'Surveillance' is experienced as an oppressive practice, which monitors and records Muslim students' performance of 'Britishness' (Qurashi, 2018). 'Surveillance' identifies Muslim students as 'suspects' resulting in their alienation, disaffection and disengagement. Thus, as a tool of 'surveillance', Prevent jeopardises safe and supportive learning environments not only for Muslim students, but for all students.

Conclusion

There is limited empirical research exploring Muslim students' perceptions of the Prevent Duty in UK universities. Drawing from qualitative interviews with 25 university students who self-identified as 'British Muslims', the study attempted to address this gap by exploring their perceptions of Prevent in higher education. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The paper drew on Pantazis and Pemberton's (2009) use of the 'new suspect community' thesis in order to examine participants' views and experiences. An overarching theme present throughout the paper was the securitisation of education and 'policing' of Muslim students. Accordingly, participants highlighted the problematic function of 'surveillance' in Prevent in higher education. Specifically, the findings showed that Prevent hampers freedom of speech and threatens student activism. The findings also showed that Prevent stigmatises Muslim students (especially those who are 'visibly' Muslim) as 'would-be terrorists'. Consequently, participants felt unable to be themselves whether in terms of sharing their views, being involved with student politics/activism and practising Islam on campus.

Overall, the study provided a rich insight into Muslim students' perceptions of the Prevent Duty in British universities. Listening to the voices of those who are subject to counter-terrorism measures is important. Moreover, in light of the covid-19 pandemic, and its disproportionate impact on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, along with the structural racism highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement, the injustices experienced by minority groups have become even more apparent (Guest et al., 2020). Correspondingly, the paper has contributed to the literature by highlighting the different ways in which 'surveillance' operates in the classroom and online, drawing on the perspective of Muslim students themselves. In this context, the securitisation of higher education has been linked to the work of Foucault (1977) and universities as 'modern-day panopticons'. Existing research pays little attention to theoretical issues related to the 'surveillance' function of Prevent and the conceptualisation of universities as 'modern-day panopticons'. Although

this was considered in the present study, future research should examine further the applicability of Foucault's (1977) theory on this topic. Moreover, the paper's premise rests on Muslim students. Future research should examine the perspectives of non-Muslim students who may feel Prevent is targeting them. Ultimately, this will help to inform policy makers in terms of improving Prevent in its current form or creating alternative preventative strategies for tackling radicalisation and extremism in HE.

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