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Counter-radicalisation in UK higher education: a vernacular analysis of 'vulnerability' and the prevent duty

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ABSTRACT

The UK Government defines vulnerability to radicalisation as, 'the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and extremist ideologies associated with terrorist groups'. In 2015 legislation was passed to enhance the national capacity to pre-emptively identify vulnerable people by coopting public sector workers. This responsibility ('the Prevent duty') has mandated the monitoring of citizen's behaviours based on a relationship between vulnerability, radicalisation, and terrorism that is far from concrete. Despite this, the duty is presented as a clear and actionable framework designed to support frontline workers identify vulnerability and report concerns. Within this context our paper adopts a vernacular approach to present findings from focus groups and interviews with university students and staff about their comprehension, experiences, and evaluations of vulnerability and the duty. We approach these insights as valuable (but oft neglected) instances of 'everyday' security knowledge and argue that they are particularly valuable in the context of a duty that coopts those within Higher Education as counter-radicalisation practitioners and subjects. Our paper argues that conceptual, operational, and normative disconnects between policy and insights 'on the ground' mean that the duty assumes an uncertain position within Higher Education to the detriment to of its stated objectives.

KEYWORDS

Prevent; radicalisation; vulnerability; vernacular security studies; terrorism; higher education

Introduction

The UK Government defines vulnerability to radicalisation as, 'the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and extremist ideologies associated with terrorist groups' (Home Office 2021). Disrupting radicalisation involves pre-emptively identifying those who are *vulnerable*, which within the context of the Government's Prevent strategy,[1] 'describes factors and characteristics associated with being susceptible to radicalisation' (Home Office 2021). The relationship between vulnerability, radicalisation, and terrorism has provided the Government with a rationale for further monitoring citizen's behaviours and intervening in their lives on the grounds of national security. Moreover, via the 'Prevent duty' (henceforth 'the duty'), the Government has mandated that frontline workers across the public sector do the monitoring as part of the national effort to pay 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism' (Home Office 2021).

However, the vulnerability-radicalisation-terrorism relationship is far from concrete and radicalisation is a heavily contested term with ambiguity surrounding both the 'end point' of the process

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as well as contextual and normative issues surrounding notions of 'radicalism' (S. Macdonald and Whittaker 2019; Neumann 2013). Furthermore, while radicalisation and terrorism are often linked, what makes someone vulnerable to radicalisation is not necessarily viewed the same as what will make them likely to commit acts of terrorism (Horgan 2005). Despite this, the duty is presented as a clear and actionable framework to support frontline workers identify vulnerability and report cases of concern.

It is in this context we investigate how these concepts are understood and the duty enacted within one of the sectors affected by the duty, UK Higher Education (UKHE). Our study adopts a vernacular approach, speaking with students and staff about their comprehension, experiences, and evaluations and approaching their insights as valuable (but oft neglected) instances of 'everyday' security knowledge. Indeed, we argue that these insights are even more valuable in the context of a duty that directly coopts these populations as practitioners and subjects. In so doing our paper argues that conceptual, operational, and normative disconnects between Government policy and vernacular insights at the frontline mean that the duty assumes an uncertain position within UKHE to the detriment to of its stated objectives.

Our paper makes three main arguments. Firstly, we argue that Governmental efforts to present the duty as a politically neutral instrument based on a stable radicalisation knowledge is inaccurate, (i) on account of a research consensus that recognises vulnerability to radicalisation as a contested and situational phenomenon and, (ii) on account of conceptual, operational, and normative disconnects between Government policy and the 'everyday' experience of those working and studying within the sector. Second, we argue that the disconnects identified in our vernacular analysis emphasises the need for the Government to re-consider what the duty *is* (e.g. safeguarding, counter-terrorism, etc.), how it should be situated and operate within UKHE, and whether it currently represents an effective means of achieving the Government's stated objectives. Finally, we make an overarching theoretical argument about the value of vernacular analysis asserting that, notwithstanding the normative and ethical value, such an approach grants novel insights into the functioning of deputised security initiatives like the duty.

Our paper begins by considering the literature that has investigated what might make an individual vulnerable to radicalisation, explaining how this scholarship has informed risk assessments based on cognitive and behavioural 'signs' and detailing some of the criticisms that have emerged herein. We then focus in on the application of 'countering violent extremism' within the education sector and consider existing research into the duty within UKHE. Having contextualised our study, we outline the commitments of 'vernacular security', explaining how this approach recognises the validity of security knowledge in oft overlooked places and thus has direct application to our study. After charting the mixed methods approach we used to generate our data we then then move onto our findings, organised under the headings 'who is vulnerable?', 'how does vulnerability present?', 'is the duty workable?', 'what are the consequences of the duty for UKHE?' and 'how might this be done differently? Finally, the paper discusses the challenges raised in our findings for the Government's objectives and reflects on how these may be addressed.

Vulnerability to radicalisation, education, and the duty in UKHE

A significant portion of research into what may cause radicalisation or make someone vulnerable to this phenomenon has sought to link (or distance) the likelihood of radicalisation to a range of cognitive, behavioural, or 'psychosocial' traits. Herein, 'psychological vulnerabilities' (Harpviken 2020, 2) may alter an 'individual's mindset and worldview' to foster a 'psychological climate' that exacerbates the risk of extremist violence (Borum 2014, 287). A direct causal link between mental illness and terrorism is widely rejected within this literature (Silke 1998) but mental illness and mental health issues *are* viewed as potential risk factors (O'Driscoll 2018). For instance, conditions such as ADHD and PTSD or symptoms linked to mental illness such as depression, mood disorders

or specific personality traits have been investigated in this context (Al-Attar 2020; Corner and Gill 2015; Misiak et al. 2019).

However, the establishment of an extreme worldview is not viewed as solely psychological and tends to be combined with social (or psychosocial) factors to produce integrative models (Soliman, Bellaj, and Khelifa 2016). Such studies have sought to explore the relationship between radicalisation and factors including but not limited to, group dynamics (Sageman 2004), criminal behaviour (Atran 2010), religion (Silke 2008) and perceived discrimination (Doosje, Loseman, and Bos 2013).

'Life-course perspectives' or 'pathway approaches' have also been applied to radicalisation (Corner, Bouhana, and Gill 2019; Moeller, Langer, and Scheithauer 2022). These studies tend to acknowledge the 'structural, groupbased, and individual-level mechanisms' that drive radicalisation (Jensen, Atwell Seate, and James 2020, 1067) but see these as having the most explanatory power when considered as complex and context-dependent relationships that operate over the individual's life course.

This scholarly work provides diverse theoretical reflection and empirical data to try and make sense of what might make someone vulnerable to radicalisation. An important additional step has been developing research of this sort into assessment tools that can help identify vulnerable people. For example, researchers like Hill (2020) have developed an extensive list of behaviours that may be instructive within the prison setting as well as 20 observable risk factors. The Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF) (HM Government, 2012) is the risk assessment tool at the heart of Prevent's operation and is the primary means by which Channel panels[2] look to determine who may require intervention when considering cases forwarded from the public, frontline workers, etc. The 22 factors contained herein are included under the headings 'engagement', 'intent' and 'capability' and demonstrate the influence that the sort of research covered above has had in generating a model of vulnerability that as Kundnani (2012, 5) writes, emphasises the individual psychological journey and (borrowing from Walter Lacquer) a 'culturalpsychological predisposition'.

However, critics have disputed the validity and efficacy of distilling a complex and situational radicalisation knowledge in this manner. A fundamental criticism has been that it is reductive and conveniently recasts 'social and cultural problems as psychological ones' (Furedi 2003, 27). Such approaches are typical within positivistic psychology and hold 'enormous appeal' because they 'offer answers and certainty in a world characterised by uncertainty and, on occasion, chaos' (Coppock and McGovern 2014, 248).. Critics argue that tools such as these claim the ability to predict radicalisation but fail to explain *why* these correlations are valid (Kundnani 2012). Consequently, they risk linking behaviours with vulnerability regardless of their correlation with terrorist violence and 'make visible' (as risky) speech or expression which previously may have gone unnoticed (Martin 2018). In the absence of 'authoritative knowledge about radicalisation' predictive technologies risk stigmatising or pathologising forms of expression such as 'need for excitement, comradeship or adventure' as well as the sort of dissent democratic societies are supposed to protect (Hegemann and Kahl 2018, 571). Such concerns have been compounded in spaces like education where free expression is encouraged.

Indeed, previous work on the duty has expanded knowledge of its relevance to vulnerability, for instance, Heath-Kelly and Gruber (2023) raise a compelling perspective on care, security and mutual appreciations and applications of the concept of vulnerability. As they argue, vulnerability when masked under the guiseof assistance or privilege, transitions the act of caring into the realms of counter-terrorism, while also bringing the repressive nature of counter-terrorism into the realms of care. Busher and Jerome (2020) extend these thoughts with a practitioner-led approach to the 'real-world' challenges of implementing a counter-terrorism policy in environments such as education. Their focus is on teachers and the impacts of Prevent from its early iterations in 2006 to its more expansive repositioning in 2015.

Vincent (2019) in turn extends the focus on education through the role of 'British Values' in schools as a motivating force of alignment, in terms of cultivating cohesion in the face of ethnic

or religious diversity. Much of their argument centres on the response of participants to the challenges of education in the context of new governmental policy and the pressures of nationalism and intolerance. A balancing act hinged on a vocabulary of inclusion and/or integration. Moreover, Winter et al. (2022) question the lack of political engagement with British Values in schools. They highlight its antecedents and the desired outcomes of British Values that serve governmental and political machinations. As they contend, critiquing 'fake news' or conspiracy theories is openly encouraged in schools, but the moral code of complicity instilled by British Values makes examining accusations of racism or bias within the duty a less appealing endeavour. Our paper develops this body of work by drawing on impacts within UKHE and including the voices of students and staff in how they understand, experience, and negotiate the duty in their environs.

Education has been viewed as a critical space for counter-radicalisation (Moffett and Sgro 2016). The education-based initiatives are often spoken of under the umbrella of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), but their form and function differs considerably (Davies 2018). Awan, Spiller, and Whiting (2019, 81–88) explain how a broad distinction can be drawn between curriculum or safeguarding-based initiatives, although the presence of one does not exclude the presence the other. Curriculum-based initiatives involve programmes of education teaching the skills required to avoid becoming drawn into extreme forms of thought/behaviour. As mentioned, mandating the teaching of 'British Values' as part of citizenship at primary, secondary and further education would be one example of this (Revell and Bryan 2018). Safeguarding initiatives are overarching policies that fit in with the institution's duty of care and are designed to identify vulnerability within the student population to prevent harm.

In the UK context, the Government has very little direct influence on what Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) teach and so counter-terrorism has become a formal part of the sector via the duty which has been absorbed within broader safeguarding frameworks. Safeguarding is an established feature of UKHE and this framing helps situate Prevent as an apolitical initiative that utilises a medicalised language of care (Heath-Kelly 2017, 310; M. N. Macdonald and Hunter 2013, 137–138). Safeguarding is far less controversial than counter-terrorism and presenting the duty in this manner was important in the Government's justification for its placement in the sector.

However, both conceptual and practical concerns have been raised with this development. Knudsen argues that a lack of clarity on how we define vulnerability and its apparent links to mental health endangers erroneously connecting these issues with a susceptibility to radicalisation as well as presenting a daunting task to the frontline workers left to adjudge (Augestad Knudsen 2021). More specifically to UKHE the duty threatens to 'other' forms of expression and speech that do not adhere to hegemonic Western/British values (Brown and Saeed 2015, 1953). O'Donnell (2016, 58) points out that pathologising dissent in this manner risks 'silencing students and precluding dialogue about difficult and complex ideas'. Moreover, the duty requires that frontline workers, who are overwhelmingly amateurs in counter-radicalisation, deploy this 'undetermined' knowledge which sees it 'frequently reduced to the profiling of traits' such as bearded men or veiled women (Brown and Saeed 2015, 1953).

Vernacular security and the duty

Our research explores how staff and students in UKHE understand vulnerability, and experience and evaluate the duty. In so doing our paper takes advantage of the duty's status as an instrument that is both 'done by' and 'done to' the public to offer a vernacular analysis of its placement and reception in UKHE.

The 'vernacular turn' (Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2017) in security studies refers to a connected body of work that has sought to adopt a 'bottom up' perspective that emphasises the 'security speak' of those traditionally marginalised. Jarvis (2019, 112–116) argues for the

distinctiveness of vernacular security but acknowledges that this agenda builds upon preceding developments and debates that have emphasised people-centric and 'bottom up' approaches. Nevertheless, the distinctiveness of the agenda stems from a position of ontological 'emptiness':

> Devoid, therefore, of ontological claims and expectations about the linguistic and political 'work' done by (in) security practices or discourses, vernacular security studies should investigate, instead, how (in)security is understood and experienced at all levels of sociopolitical life—especially, perhaps, as lived by non-elite communities (Jarvis 2019, 116)

This approach resonates with our own research objectives and can offer unique insights into the 'richness of localised security imaginaries' (Jarvis 2019, 116) within UKHE that are frequently neglected. We also argue that approaching the subject in this manner builds upon existing research into the duty in at least three distinct ways.

Firstly, there is *normative* value in giving a platform to marginalised stories about security that are typically assumed to be too colloquial or localised to have serious value. This is even more important in the context of the duty given the direct co-option of staff and students. Secondly, there is an *analytical* value to this approach in that it allows for a far more granular examination and evaluation of the duty by two groups who are directly affected and will be well placed to discuss its functioning in UKHE. Finally, there is *theoretical* value because aside from how students and staff think the duty is performing, this approach also allows us to explore fundamental questions of security in the context of Prevent and how it has been formed. For example, how do students understand vulnerability and the threat it represents on campus and where has this knowledge come from?

There are several examples of this sort of work that have helped foster insightful dialogue with nonelite voices across a wide spectrum of security issues in multiple different regionalities. Theoretical contributions have explored everyday conceptualisations of security (Jarvis and Lister 2013), while security threats and counterterrorism specifically have also been the focus of research (Jarvis and Lister 2015, 2016; Oyawale 2022; Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016). While not necessarily employing the specific language of 'vernacular security' there also exists a body of work that has done similar with respect to the duty and demonstrates clear overlaps with this agenda.

Much of this work has sought to explore neglected constructions of (counter)terrorism and (counter)radicalisation by speaking with frontline workers or those who have experience 'going through' these institutions. To date, health and education have been two prominent areas (Busher, Choudhury, and Thomas 2019; Heath-Kelly and Strausz 2019; Moffat and Gerard 2020; Younis and Jadhav 2019). UKHE specifically has also been a focus, with particular attention paid to the lived experiences of Muslim students that has revealed feelings of discrimination, the impact of the duty upon freedom of speech, and the likelihood selfcensorship (Brown and Saeed 2015; Zempi and Tripli 2022). Elsewhere researchers have engaged in discussions with the student population at large to reveal scepticism around a 'grooming' model of radicalisation and the existence (or not in this case) of a 'chilling effect' when discussing any form of 'risky intellectual inquiry' (McGlynn and McDaid 2019, 571). Our study develops this agenda by utilising a vernacular approach to provide hitherto unexplored insights into vulnerability and the duty within UKHE.

Method

This study utilised a mixed methods approach combining interviews with 11 staff at UK HEIs all of whom had teaching responsibilities and 5 focus groups with students who were studying in UKHE (26 students in total). Interviews were drawn from staff across 4 HEIs in England and Wales (2 post-92, 2 research focused non-Russell Group) while focus groups were conducted across 3 (2-post 92, 1 research focused non-Russell Group). We adopted different methods for different populations for a combination of practical and methodological reasons.

Anticipating we would be able to recruit more students than staff the focus group provided a useful means of engaging with multiple students in less time-intensive manner. However, the main attraction of the focus group was its ability to promote interaction between participants and have them exchange experiences and ask questions of their own (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999, 4). Given the ambiguities, uncertainties, and sensitivities surrounding the duty, focus groups also offered an effective means of softening the researcher effect (Wilkinson 1998, 114), flattening power dynamics, and giving students the opportunity to discuss the issues on their own terms in a familiar setting that mimicked the traditional seminar (Seymour et al. 2004, 60). Conversely, with staff we surmised there would likely be more knowledge about the duty given the expectations placed upon them as well as more familiarity and comfort with onetoone discussions with a fellow academic. Consequently, we opted here for a method that allowed for tighter control of the discussion and more in-detail conversation (Morgan 1998, 10).

For both methods we recruited our population using a combination of non-probabilistic sampling techniques. We utilised purposive sampling to target relevant staff networks and connections across the sector in the first instance and then snowballed from here. This approach proved to be effective for the purposes of our study but given this sampling strategy our findings can only ever be illustrative rather than representative of wider perspectives. The study received ethical approval from the corresponding author's HEI ethics committee and each participant gave informed consent prior to partaking.

Expecting there would be a wide variance of knowledge about Prevent among participants we used a poster taken from the 'Let's Talk About It' online campaign as a visual aid to help aid discussion (Let's Talk About it n.d.). This poster includes several signs of radicalisation drawn from the VAF under the heading 'could you spot the signs?' and proved an effective means of stimulating discussions about vulnerability.

After transcribing the audio data we were left with 16 documents totalling 91,462 words that required organising and coding. We used a process of hybrid coding (Lester et al. 2021) in which the broad areas of interest served as overarching deductive codes that were used to direct our first reading of the corpus and extract 'analytically significant features' (O'Connor and Joffe 2020, 2). One member of the research team then went through these coding inductively to devise a more specific coding framework (Hammond and Wellington 2020). The coded data has been organised under 5 headings that reflect the key discussions that emerged.

Who is vulnerable?

Given the importance of vulnerability to the rationale and deployment of the duty we began by seeking to understand how staff and students made sense of this concept. Participants spoke about *who* was vulnerable as well as *how* this would typically present.

Young people received particular attention as being vulnerable to radicalisation. They were viewed as being more impressionable, as 'trying to find a place for themselves, trying to make sense of things' (Interviewee 10) and therefore 'more easily manipulated into believing certain things that are said' (Group 3). Lacking a clear sense of 'what is wrong and what is right', young people were thought to be less able to identify extremism and become more easily 'roped into it' (Group 3). Linked to this was their situation within the family unit and their proximity to figures of authority/respect who may normalise (Group 5) extremist views: 'Yeah. But I think as well that adults will push it onto the young and push their views. Like parents, grandparents. Because you idolise those people don't you. So you'll take what they say as fact' (Group 3).

These sorts of accounts stress an enhanced vulnerability stemming from childhood and adolescence as a transitional time as well as a period of ongoing cognitive development. Indeed, when reflecting on the placement of the duty within UKHE two members of staff made distinctions between its appropriateness here compared to Schools based on the age and maturity of the students (Interviewee 2 & 4). As one of these put it:

> I don't see it in the same way with the young adults and I don't know why, I don't know what's different between somebody who's 17 in school or 16–17 in school and somebody who's just 18 in their first year in uni (sic). But I suppose psychologically I do see a difference somehow. (Interviewee 4)

Three of our focus groups raised demographic explanations for vulnerability that included socio-economic and spatial factors such as poverty, class, and location. One focus group participant surmised that deprivation was a factor in vulnerability after relaying how their brother, who taught in a school in a 'poverty stricken' area of Dartford, 'did a lot of Prevent' including 'questionnaires and looking at what groups could potentially radicalise' (Group 1). In response, another member of the same group appeared to verify this correlation based on their contrasting experience in a 'white, middle-class area of the suburbs of Cardiff' where they had 'never heard of any of it' (Group 1). Location was also felt to be a consideration in who was vulnerable with some areas seemingly more susceptible than others. Using the example of Project Champion in Birmingham, one student spoke of 'very radicalised areas' influencing vulnerability (Group 2).

Other considerations included the existence of contextual factors that resonate with some of the research considered earlier. Learning difficulties, having recently left prison, lacking a support network or being in exploitative relationships ('grooming') were all cited as having a strong correlation with vulnerability (Interviewee 9). A member of staff who was a qualified social worker cited a case from their previous practice that highlighted the importance of trauma and grief to the vulnerability of an individual:

> I worked with people who have themselves been groomed by the Far Right . . . there was a particular man and he talked about, you know, his parents died and he was sort of befriended by what then was the National Front really and they supported him and kind of made him feel included and then there was an expectation to do these things. (Interviewee 9)

How does vulnerability present?

When asked to reflect on how they might recognise vulnerability our participants spoke about a wide array of 'signs'. Notable within these accounts was a broad distinction between the sorts of signs offered by students and staff. Students tended to offer up more subtle behavioural signs while staff spoke about those that were either more overt or that amounted to explicitly concerning disclosures.

The most frequently cited manifestation of vulnerability among students was isolation and introversion (Groups 2, 3, 4 & 5). For example, 'people who are vulnerable, people who are lonely, I suppose . . . 'cause you don't necessarily fit in with rest of their peer group' (Group 5) and, '. . .at, say, a university level the one thing that people need to look for is isolation, exclusion' (Group 2). Typically this understanding viewed isolation and exclusion as the consequences of victimisation that left the individual susceptible to radicalisation. This might come because of bullying (Group 3) or having a 'lack of positive influences. . .[being] neglected by the parents, for example, or the teachers' (Group 5).

Where these accounts might stress an individual's naivety (Group 5) or a lack of 'mental strength' that rendered the individual 'easy to manipulate' (Group 3) other students spoke about isolation in more agential and sinister tones. In these accounts isolation is less a sign of victimisation and rather a purposeful decision to remove themselves from the gaze of prying eyes. One student said they would look out for those being 'extra secretive' (Group 3).

Staff tended to talk about signs of vulnerability that were more overt, for example, having students directly contact them to say they were struggling or that they had concerns about their friends (Interviewee 7). Uncharacteristic changes in attendance or performance and concerning behaviour in the classroom (Interviewee 5) were also discussed, such as the espousing of antidemocratic, violent (Interviewee 1), sexist, homophobic or patriarchal (Interviewee 11) points of view.

More concrete signs such as these were also put forth by students that included hateful remarks and particular forms of social media engagement:

> . . . yeah or what they're posting on social media. What pages are they following? The kind of talks that they have with me. If they're very hating and derogative to certain people (sic). It could be not just terrorism, Muslims or whatever, it could be like . . . gay culture . . . far-left. Could be either. (Group 3)

These signs were conveyed in a different manner by another group who spoke of 'ignorance' being an indicator. One student explained that if they had their 'full beard' they could expect to 'see people looking suspiciously' in a way that a white person 'in a three piece suit and a tie and a nice haircut' would not experience (Group 4). Correspondingly, those who viewed radicalisation and terrorism through a racialised lens and ascribed to negative cultural and religious stereotypes could be vulnerable to radicalisation.

Given the vernacular commitments of this research we purposefully asked students and staff about how *they* understood vulnerability and how they would expect it to present. However, students in two focus groups referred to 'risk factors' that they were aware existed in some sort of official or formal capacity that seemed to reflect aspects of the VAF. The below exchange between two students on the same course spoke about one occasion where a guest speaker delivered a session on risk factors as part of a workshop:

> . . . the risk factors, like change in appearance, dress style and everything, there are actual risk factors to pinpoint like in dress, the way they speak, the way they act . . .
>
> We had that workshop, didn't we, and someone came in, where was he from?
>
> I can't remember.
>
> He was part of like, the Police but part of the counter radicalisation, he came in and did a big speech about it. (Group 2)

In another group a participant shared with us the training their sister (a secondary school teacher) had received to help identify things like, 'specific badges that children might have on their bags and stuff, which was to do with alt right things, like a specific symbol, and if they saw that a kid had it they had to report up' (Group 5).

Finally, despite readily sharing with us a multitude of different ways in which they would expect vulnerability to present students also conveyed uncertainty as to whether they felt they could identify a vulnerable person. Students responded to this question with 'sometimes' and 'to some extent' and one student countered our question with one of their own: 'which kind?' (Group 4).

This uncertainty was encapsulated well in the contribution of one student who began outlining to us the need to be wary of those who are isolated and at the fringes of society but in the process of doing so began to qualify and second guess their own assessments:

> I could imagine whilst someone who, sort of, maybe, feels a bit rejected by society who's a bit on his own and has a sort of an axe to grind then, again, I mean, that's obviously just a . . . that's a bit of a stereotype, isn't it? Yeah. So whether that's actually the . . . I don't know. If I see a sort of kid sitting by himself – assuming it's a boy – looking a bit vulnerable because he's by himself [it] probably doesn't make me think immediately 'ah he might become a terrorist'. So I just think 'ah he looks a bit shy or a bit lonely' or so you might identify vulnerability but not necessarily in that. (Group 4)

One member of staff who taught in a Law Department also provided an insightful anecdote from one of their 'mooting sessions' (designed to develop students' advocacy skills) to convey to us the challenges they saw in confidently ascertaining what might be considered 'concerning behaviour':

> The task I gave them was to identify any individual and argue whether they should be hired or fired. Lots of them chose Trump, lots chose Johnson. One, rather controversially admittedly, chose Hitler and argued he should be hired. Now theoretically that could be seen as a sign of indoctrination potentially but would I ever consider it to be a sign that I should get involved? No. We listened, we rebutted, we didn't . . . I don't know

> whether he convinced them, I don't really care, the point was it was about how they presented the information and a lot of the students will, to show off, to stand out, whatever synonym you want to use, they will take extreme positions. Again that's not necessarily a problem because it's showing that they are thinking, that they have the capacity to think about these things. So I think the danger is you're going to catch a lot of people that quite frankly you shouldn't be catching. (Interviewee 2)

The uncertainty and concern highlighted here speaks to further insights our participants had regarding the design and functioning of the duty within UKHE.

Is the duty workable?

Our participants were forthcoming with a wide array of potential signs that might imply someone was vulnerable. However, when asked to reflect on their ability to act on this within UKHE both students and staff highlighted practical impediments that made this difficult and/or potentially detrimental. A common piece of feedback we received was that the observation of vulnerability assumed a proximity and familiarity between staff and students that was often not present. One student spoke of the frequency with which they might expect to see their lecturer and what this would likely mean for evaluating student's behaviour:

> As a lecturer you might only see your students for two hours a week. How would you notice a disengaged student in one of your lectures that you would potentially either make a mental note of, 'I need to have a conversation with this student', or how would you pick that up with another lecturer if there was somebody that you were worried about? (Group 3)

These were sentiments echoed by many staff, some of whom felt 'utterly dependent' (Interviewee 4) upon receiving an explicit disclosure of concern before they felt comfortable intervening:

> I don't actually have an awful lot of contact with students. To the point where, unless it was explicit and they actually were very open about situations going on in their life, I think I would struggle in this setting to actually identify any student that was involved in activities. (Interviewee 10)

Because of this challenge two students in our first focus group concluded that the duty would likely be more valuable in settings where there was a closer and more consistent contact between the different parties:

> The problem with this is that people are only going to see this in someone if they're close to them, and so we're talking about more families and maybe social workers, maybe primary teachers.
>
> Yeah, someone that's like day-to-day with them all the time. (Group 2)

Similar sentiments where shared by staff who felt the situation of the duty within Schools made more sense based on 'clear safeguarding rules as a form teacher', more frequent contact with the same students and the tendency for children to be more open with their teachers (Interviewee 7).

Others acknowledged these sorts of challenges but felt that there were in-between steps they could take to be more confident about the need to escalate via the duty. One member of staff, who had a prior career as a Police Officer, felt comfortable 'probing a little bit more' based their experience in these sorts of environments (Interviewee 5). Another member of staff used a hypothetical situation where a student was 'exhibiting very strong signs of wanting political change' to outline the sorts of questions they might follow up with to ascertain more detail about the student's point of view: 'Well, how would you do that?', 'What do you think the impact of that is going to be?', 'Do you do that on your own or do you link in with groups to try and make that change happen?' and 'What sort of methods would you be using?' (Interviewee 10).

These insights speak to the challenge of being *aware* of a concern based on proximity and familiarity. However, assuming such an observation had been made, a separate consideration was how this could be used to inform a precise judgement about a student. Responding to the 'Let's Talk About It' poster we used as a visual prompt during data collection, one member of staff said, 'I don't

quite know how convincing any of those would be and I don't know, is it the idea that if you see X number of these that you're supposed to report it?' (Interviewee 2).

Students too posed questions about when to report, sometimes directing these at the researcher in the room, 'it's so difficult, isn't it, what do you do? Do you say, "oh, that guy's quite opinionated and quite forthright in his views"?' (Group 1). Another asked whether a student declaring they supported Hezbollah (at the time not a proscribed terrorist organisation in the UK) could warrant reporting (Group 2). With regard to the more serious end of the spectrum where students or staff might actively be trying to radicalise or organise within the university, as was pointed out by one student, such efforts would be clandestine in nature and likely beyond the reach of something like the duty (Group 4).

Finally, there was scepticism among students and staff as to how wide awareness of the duty was and how willing staff would be to operate within its framework (Group 2). A peer followed up that among students they knew they 'guarantee that no one would take much notice' and that while Lecturers would 'have it in their mind', they doubted they would 'actually do anything about it' (Group 2).

We had no instances where staff explicitly said they would disregard the duty. Rather, reservations tended to be tied up with aforementioned practical challenges and concerns based on harmful unintended consequences (which we cover below). However, when we asked staff about their knowledge of the duty and what was in place within their own institution the responses tended reflect uncertainty about aspects such as training, points of contact, processes, etc. This lack of awareness, whether stemming from individual uptake, the competing demands of academic work, or institutional communication, could suggest a diminished utility given the onus placed on staff via the duty.

What are the consequences of the duty for UKHE?

Staff felt conflicted about how to navigate the requirements of the duty while still encouraging students to be critically minded and treat in-class discussions as places to express their ideas. One member of staff characterised this as the 'dilemma of freedom of speech' where they were 'trying to get students to be very critical but share their ideas' while also having to make judgements about the 'boundary between what's acceptable and what's not acceptable or what's acceptable and what's a cause for concern' (Interviewee 10). Another member of staff provided a hypothetical example to illustrate this dilemma:

> We encourage them to be creative thinkers. If a student came to me and wanted to talk, for example, about the Nazi regime and the potential merits or problems of it I'd probably encourage that as a discussion because it would show they're opening up their minds. (Interviewee 2)

Students shared these concerns and reflected on the potential impact from a teaching and learning perspective. For example, students spoke about having to consider the possible consequences of making statements in class on controversial and sensitive issues, 'If I was to say I understand why people join ISIS – we try to think about that as well – which I do, you have to think, is "so and so" going to report me?' (Group 2). Commonly referred to as the 'chilling effect', staff also shared concerns that if students felt targeted it may 'discourage freedom of expression' so to avoid negative associations with particular points of view (Interviewee 6).

A pair of students in one focus group who were studying together on a module that covered terrorism shared a fascinating insight into how anxiety among staff teaching on the module had impacted upon delivery:

> I think also there's an issue on the other side of things with the teaching, that it can impede teaching a bit, because one frustration I've had on this course – I shouldn't say bad things about the course – but is the teachers being so worried about showing anything to do with terrorism, doing a big speech before it, then showing it [and saying] 'don't get your phones out', and it's taking up so much of the class time. Like, and I'm

> talking from my perspective as a white woman, so it's probably not so much of an issue to me, but it does frustrate me a lot that I just feel like it's very unnecessary red tape. (Group 2)

The insight shared here could either speak to guidance offered within the Department as to how to address these issues in class or, more likely, individual members of staff adopting a conservative approach in class to 'cover their bases' in light of the duty. Also, of note here is the implicit suggestion from the student that they are aware of their own privileged position as a 'white woman' in the classroom, presumably as someone who has less to fear should there be any subsequent issues stemming from how they were to interact with the taught content.

This reflection on race and gender resonated with a concern that the duty would be inconsistently applied across the student population based on visual cues associated with race, faith, or gender and preconceived notions of 'what terrorism looks like'. It was noted by students and staff that the discourse around radicalisation is inescapably racialised and, despite an increased focus on the far-right in recent years, still frequently linked to the Islamic faith. As one student put it: 'I think that we, you know, the staff, the people, the institution itself is going to be more blinded naturally to a kind of 'rightist', white threat than they are to any other threat which involves another ethnic group and another religion that is outside of Christianity' (Group 2).

Interestingly, one member of staff also thought this was a possibility but referred back to the 'Let's Talk About It' poster to highlight how they felt the breadth of risk factors outlined here might be a positive to help people from reverting to 'subconscious racist tropes', '. . . you know, someone's got a long beard, therefore they're a potential Islamic terrorist etc' (Interviewee 1).

Where these sorts of evaluations spoke of a tension that needed resolving, other evaluations were more critical. Students likened the duty in UKHE to an inappropriate surveillance of teaching spaces where profiling (stemming either from individual biases or 'subconsciously') would be likely (Group 4). Another student put it differently, 'it just seems a bit like Gestapo'y with everyone reporting on each other' (Group 5).

Linked to this was the question of whether staff were sufficiently qualified to make judgements on an individual's vulnerability to radicalisation and the potential harm of inaccurate assessments. In one interview a member of staff asked: 'how do we differentiate between provocative conversation and real intent?' (Interviewee 11). Elsewhere staff referred to the duty as 'misguided' on account of the danger associated with 'asking amateurs to do something that a professional needs to do' (Interviewee 2). Another member of staff with prior experience in the Police shared these concerns and the potential for a detrimental effect on student-staff trust should underqualified staff be 'lumped with the obligation to do something which could in itself be harmful if you've not had the appropriate training' (Interviewee 4).

Students were also cognisant of this issue and spoke of the possibility of erroneous reporting when staff lacked the requisite expertise, 'I think there's an issue there. They're putting a legal obligation on people who are first trained in a completely different profession, they do not know anything about radicalisation' (Group 2). When combined with the possibility of overzealous scrutiny this led to concerns staff may start, 'accusing someone of something they haven't actually done' (Group 3).

How might this be done differently?

The previous two sections demonstrated how those working and studying in UKHE were sceptical about the ability of the duty to function effectively and had concerns about its placement within the sector. As some of these insights suggest this was *not* tantamount to respondents believing the duty was broken beyond repair, or that there was no place for a counter-radicalisation initiative within UKHE:

> It's important to stop radicalisation, terrorism, in its tracks before its actually happened. It's all well and good to charge terrorists after they've killed twenty people, but obviously, you don't want them to kill people so you need to enforce the idea of looking out for potential terrorists and people being radicalised to stop those things from happening. (Group 1)

Staff sometimes felt concerns surrounding the duty were based on misunderstandings and stressed the importance of these initiatives to respond to the threat of terrorism:

> The universities aren't saying their duty means monitoring their social media and start watching their phone calls and recording it and going back over CCTV and seeing how they're meeting. It is balanced with human rights [. . .] and whilst there remains a threat level in the country we've all got to be vigilant. Again it sounds quite dramatic but wasn't it exactly the same in World War 2 in this country to be aware of a threat. And it is a war. It is a war on terrorism and it is a war and we've got to be vigilant. It is a serious threat. (Interviewee 5)

These sorts of excerpts provide examples of quite stringent support for either counterradicalisation initiatives in general or the duty within UKHE specifically. Nevertheless, while support for the duty as it was currently designed and implemented tended to be uncommon, we did observe participants (usually staff) suggesting ways in which it could be re-designed, or its objectives more effectively achieved.

Staff often raised what they thought was a tension between the duty purporting to be safeguarding while also existing as a part of the UK's counter-terrorism agenda. Staff were often comfortable with the idea of radicalisation being a safeguarding issue but felt conflicted about the presence of Prevent herein as the following illustrates:

> When you think of Prevent, the commonly held view is that it's part of an anti-terrorist agenda, so I think sometimes then if people perceive it to be that sort of concept, it almost puts them in the role of a police officer. But then you also have a safeguarding role, those two roles are not always, I think, mutually beneficial, there can be a conflict between the two. (Interviewee 1)

How staff felt about the relationship between radicalisation, Prevent, and safeguarding provided some of the most mixed results. Some staff felt the framing of the duty as safeguarding was unconvincing (Interviewee 3), and others that 'it fits under safeguarding definitely' (Interviewee 10). For some staff it was helpful to think of radicalisation as part of their everyday safeguarding duties as it softened their negative sentiments towards Prevent (Interviewee 9) and yet, despite being 'so important' others felt it required separating from the sorts of issues typically addressed by safeguarding (Interviewee 8). We also heard from one participant about the need to make the Prevent/safeguarding link even more explicit to help resolve concerns (Interviewee 1).

Safeguarding issues are often sensitive and rarely unambiguous. Nevertheless, the level of uncertainty and disagreement we found among staff here suggests the Government needs to do more to clarify how the duty operates alongside staff's duty of care. More fundamentally still, it could also reflect on the presence of the duty as a help or hinderance to the safeguarding of those vulnerable to radicalisation. Indeed, there were instances where students and staff felt the objectives of Prevent could be achieved by developing existing policies and guidance already in place within HEIs and forgoing the extra complications added by the presence of the duty (Interviewee 1 & Group 4).

Finally, away from the issue of safeguarding, staff also spoke about using the opportunities afforded within UKHE to address some of the sensitivity and tension that may allow radicalisation to foster or stereotypes to persist. Allowing for an 'open dialogue' on challenging topics such as 'ethnicity and race' (Interviewee 10) where stereotypes and misinformation often prevail was one suggestion for how UKHE could positively address the danger of extremism fostering:

> . . . if people are genuinely thinking that you know, our Muslim students are you know, more likely to be involved in terrorism then I mean, whilst that is an awful thing to think, if people can discuss that in a safe and supportive way you know, hopefully we can challenge that and say they are just one group amongst many who may be, you know, vulnerable and talk about it being radicalisation across the board. But if people are scared to sort of say that then that reinforces the stereotypes doesn't it? (Interviewee 9)

Discussion

The Prevent duty has been controversial and the Government has been outspoken in its efforts to reassure the public and defend it from what it believes have been inaccurate and unfair criticism (HM Government 2023; Home Office News Team 2017). These reassurances are premised on the duty operating as a politically neutral and objective safeguarding initiative that can be deployed across the public sector with precision. The relationship between vulnerability and radicalisation and the ability to accurately identify vulnerability is what is said to allow frontline workers to make good judgements.

However, our research reveals a more complex and contested picture 'on the ground'. The Government's definition of vulnerability to radicalisation as describing, 'factors and characteristics associated with being susceptible to radicalisation' (Home Office 2021) is broad (if not circular) and frameworks like the VAF that seek to distil this into a more actionable form still contain many open and ambiguous categories. Given this lack of direction and because the duty deputises public sector workers into Prevent work we asked our participants about their understandings of vulnerability and heard about a range of different factors that made people vulnerable to radicalisation.

However, the most frequently cited factor, of which there was also broad agreement between students and staff, was that younger people were most vulnerable. 'Young' is a relative term but the responses we received tended to either imply or explicitly state that participants were talking about *children* and consequently on occasions took this as an opportunity to question the placement of the duty in a space that consists of *adults* (UKHE). To be clear, staff were aware of their duty of care towards students and likewise students recognised this as being part of their educators' roles. However, the understanding of vulnerability as being most relevant to those younger than were attending University speaks to a particular conceptualisation of vulnerability being in operation here and something of a disconnect between the relevance the Government places on the duty in UKHE and how staff and students viewed it.

Tied up with this issue were further findings relating to how vulnerability presented and the practicalities of, and concerns with, the duty. Isolation stood out among student responses as being a relevant indicator and the majority of focus groups agreed that this could signal the victimisation of an individual at the hands of a radicaliser. These sorts of accounts broadly reflect how the Government views radicalisation operating, namely that vulnerable individuals who come to support or engage in terrorism are 'drawn into' it than doing so via their own agency.

However, there was a noticeable drop off in confidence when we moved from discussing this and other signs of vulnerability to the process of (confidently) assessing an individual's vulnerability. Notably at this juncture staff mentioned how they would require something quite overt such as a direct disclosure or request for support before they would be willing to act. Acting on more subtle behavioural indicators was deemed to be challenging or dangerous on account of a range of factors present in UKHE. For example, the structure of many courses meant it could be typical for staff to see particular students that they taught infrequently over the course of a term. Staff felt this would make it difficult to pick up on any behavioural signs and even more difficult to confidently assess vulnerability. Moreover, staff gave us actual and hypothetical scenarios where, for example, outspoken students might express controversial points of view but explained to us how they would be more likely to view this as someone exercising their academic freedom or simply wanting to 'show off' or 'stand out' as one participant put it (Interviewee 2). These findings speak to practical hurdles implementing the duty as well as further disconnects between how the Government feels the duty should be enacted and how those 'on the ground' are likely to do so.

While these practical hurdles reflect ways in which the duty may struggle to function as intended (even with best effort of those involved) there were also reservations we heard that spoke to reasons students and staff had to be anxious about 'doing Prevent' in UKHE. Linked to the level of confidence assessing vulnerability were concerns from both students and staff about how qualified staff were to be

doing this. There was a sentiment that while a duty of care clearly existed for staff in UKHE, the requirements of the duty went further and likely needed more specialised knowledge/expertise.

Concerns that the presence of the duty could emphasise surveillance with the effect of impeding academic freedom and, furthermore, that this would likely be felt disproportionately along lines of gender, race and faith were also present in our findings and reflect the findings of earlier research (Brown and Saeed 2015). Interestingly, we also heard of instances where students were aware of staff adopting more conservative approaches in the classroom to avoid risks associated with covering material related to terrorism.

While our participants often demonstrated varying degrees of critique concerning the presence and design of the duty within UKHE there were also those who accepted the need for preventative initiatives to address the severity of the threat posed by radicalisation. Here, we witnessed efforts to reimagine the duty and mitigate against the sorts of issues highlighted above. Nowhere was this more apparent than when staff grappled with the idea of the duty as safeguarding.

Staff perspectives varied from accepting the Government's line that the duty *was* safeguarding, viewing it as *adjacent to safeguarding* but currently 'something else', and *rejecting* it as safeguarding altogether. While this disparity of assessments does not provide a clear route forward it does strongly imply that the Government needs to re-assess or more convincingly communicate the framing of Prevent within the public sector and how something like the duty sits alongside an existing duty of care or safeguarding policies. As it stands, our findings suggest staff in particular feel the duty is not always a comfortable fit with safeguarding and further clarity around what the duty is would likely be valuable. As mentioned by some of our participants, we also argue that taking this point seriously should entail the possibility that a statutory Prevent duty may not be the most effective means of achieving the sorts of objectives sought by the Government.

Despite all of the above, we are not arguing that the duty is unique in having a gap between policy design and implementation. Rather, we argue that the Government's justifications and reassurances that are premised on there being a clear and consistent application appear less than certain when you speak with those co-opted into its delivery and gaze. This sort of feedback is significant and the consequences further compounded because the duty represents an unprecedented expansion of counter-terrorism into the public sector. The ramifications of bad or ineffectual policy in this domain is very significant whether you view the duty as a necessary part of UK counter-terrorism, a dangerous infringement of civil liberties, or somewhere in between. The duty represents a significant securitisation of public life and, notwithstanding the normative and ethical value, an exclusively 'top down' approach to 'deputised' security initiatives such as this neglects the unique and necessary insights and evaluations the public can offer. A policy that requires this of its citizens needs to engage and take seriously their perspectives.

The vernacular approach we have adopted also reminds us of the need to ask who, or what, security should be for, which may be taken for granted when approached at the national level. Students feeding back that they have experienced Lecturers and Tutors modify their delivery when teaching topics like terrorism, or that they might modify their own speech on controversial subject matter, provides further insight into the impact the duty has on UKHE. National security is the aspiration, but we should not lose sight of the effect such instruments can have on the 'everyday' insecurity that is felt by those who find their freedom of expression curtailed or their right to education limited.

Conclusion

This article has involved an analysis of focus groups and interviews with students and staff within UKHE. These conversations provided insights into localised understandings of vulnerability as well as evaluations of the duty from those at the frontline of its operation within UKHE. In so doing we put forward three arguments. First, we argued that Governmental efforts to present the duty as a politically neutral instrument based on a stable radicalisation knowledge

is inaccurate, failing to reflect current research into the phenomenon and lacking an appreciation of disconnects at the conceptual, operational, and normative levels between Government policy and frontline workers. Second, we stress that the disconnects identified in our vernacular analysis present serious impediments to the functioning of the duty within UKHE and emphasises the need for the Government to re-consider what the duty *is* (e.g. safeguarding, counter-terrorism, etc.), its situation within the sector, and its operation when considered against the Government's stated objectives. Finally, we argued that our findings and conclusions were made possible on account of the vernacular approach we adopted. Not only are there normative and ethical reasons for adopting this approach but also analytical and practical ones in providing novel insights into the everyday functioning of deputised security initiatives like the duty. In the development of these arguments our article makes the following wider contributions to knowledge.

First, this article contributes to knowledge of Prevent and the duty by providing a granular analysis of its operation in one 'specified authority'. By eschewing a purely theoretical approach or one that engages solely at the level of policy we have been able to demonstrate how the duty operates as well as the significant tensions and ambiguities that exist once it is translated to UKHE. Research into Prevent has been diverse in form and this variety has delivered robust critique. However, with Prevent extending into the daily lives of millions of UK citizens our article has sought to respond to this and contribute further to examining the everyday experiences of those tasked with operating or living with the duty.

Second, the article also contributes to the critical scholarship on vernacular security by further demonstrating the value of exploring everyday security speak and taking seriously the assessments of those co-opted into nationwide security initiatives. Governments are increasingly asking that their citizenry take on security responsibilities and oversee the increased securitisation of public life. These developments necessitate a need to recognise the importance and value of 'everyday' assessments rather than relying on elite knowledge that often operates from the limited perspective of national security.

Finally, there is scope to build on our research both within the UKHE setting and beyond. Research into the duty has typically focused within health and education and while there is much still to be understood here there are also important questions to consider about the duty in other affected spaces such as the prison, local government, and the police, etc. Within UKHE it would also be valuable to discuss the duty with those in administrative and leadership roles, for example, Prevent working groups or risk assessment panels. Away from the duty entirely, we hope our research can further demonstrate the value of taking a vernacular approach to deputised security initiatives and can be replicated in diverse and international contexts.

Notes

1. Prevent is one part of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy CONTEST. Prevent works 'upstream' and aims to prevent people coming to support terrorism.
2. Channel Panels are multi-agency partnerships that assess referrals via Prevent and ascertain what action, if any, is required.

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