

SPECIAL SECTION

Teaching about terrorism in the United Kingdom: how it is done and what problems it causes

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This article presents some of the findings of research on issues surrounding teaching terrorism and political violence at UK higher education institutions. It reports the results of a survey of UK institutions of higher education on their responses to government and other pressures in relation to terrorism. The data show a minority of universities have developed systems, policies or procedures for ‘preventing violent extremism’, while a significant number have developed close cooperation and collaboration with state counterterrorism policies raising potential issues of academic freedom. This article then examines three high-profile cases – incidents where universities, lecturers and students have come under political and legal pressures over the content of terrorism courses or accusations of ‘radicalisation’ on campus. It suggests that these pressures can be and sometimes are resisted, but that they have on occasion effectively narrowed the scope of academic freedom in practise with the danger that a further chilling effect follows in their wake.

Keywords: terrorism; counterterrorism; higher education; academic freedom

Introduction

Terrorism has always been a highly contentious and emotive topic, the teaching of which almost inevitably presents legal, political and ethical challenges for academics and teachers. In recent years, this has been intensified by the political and cultural climate of the ‘war on terror’, in which draconian legislation, wide-ranging police powers and an assertive right-wing and Islamophobic press have put Muslim students, and on occasion lecturers and university staff, under considerable pressure.

This article presents some of the findings of research intended to examine the issues surrounding teaching terrorism and political violence at UK higher education institutions. It begins with a brief account of the issue that focused attention on the question of teaching about terrorism. Following a short discussion of the methods we used in this article, we outline the data we collected using the Freedom of Information (FoI) Act. This details how higher education institutions have responded to such pressures. This is followed by three case studies of high-profile incidents where universities, lecturers and students have come under political and legal pressures over the content of terrorism courses or accusations of ‘radicalisation’ on campus.

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Teaching about terrorism: the issues raised

Teaching about terrorism became a public issue of note with the arrests of Rizwaan Sabir and Hicha Yezza at Nottingham University. However, the arrests, and a number of other incidents, have appeared to support contentions from both government and other sources that the universities are a key problem in terms of their alleged role in radicalisation of young Muslims. To take only one example, Lord Carlile of Berriew – the Coalition Government’s Independent Reviewer of Counterterrorism Law and Policy – has accused universities of being ‘slow or even reluctant to recognise their full responsibilities’ in the face of ‘unambiguous evidence’ of radicalising activities (cited in Cram forthcoming; see also Lord Carlile of Berriew QC 2011). In the face of such pressures university management has adopted various responses including – apparently the extreme case – the vetting of reading lists. The Nottingham case has thus raised serious issues of academic freedom in the United Kingdom and the study here was conceived as investigating how institutions of higher education had responded to the pressures being exerted by government and others.

Methodology

We employed a range of methodologies to assess the extent and nature of teaching about terrorism across the UK universities and the impact of counterterror agendas on teaching. We focused in particular on the impact of counterterror initiatives that target individuals or institutions, as well as collaborative counterterror initiatives in teaching and departmental seminar programmes.

To assess the nature and scope of teaching about terrorism across the UK higher education sector, a list was compiled of all departments where terrorism was taught, including contact details for an administrator or other primary point of contact. This was compiled through the use of the official Graduate Careers Website Prospects and information published on universities’ websites. Departments were then sent an email with an introduction to the project in which copies of relevant course materials provided to students were requested. It was hoped that from the responses received, significant conclusions could be drawn.

Despite some helpful responses from a number of individuals, the response rate was nevertheless deemed to be far too low to draw any useful conclusions. A further concern was the possibility that the responses received might form an unrepresentative sample. Since the project involves a critical examination of the teaching of terrorism, and particularly, a critical examination of the impact of counterterrorism policies, it was thought possible that respondents who view these issues as problematic might be more forthcoming with the information requested.

For both these reasons, the methodology was revised and it was decided that a more fruitful approach would be to submit FoI requests to all higher education institutions in the United Kingdom, guaranteeing a much higher response rate and a far more representative sample. The website AcademicFoI.com – which submits FoI requests anonymously to universities on behalf of applicants – was used for this purpose, and the responses were collated and analysed. The same technique was used to submit another set of FoI requests concerned less directly with pedagogic issues and more with policies or procedures initiated in response to counterterrorism policies.

We found that the use of FoI legislation in the United Kingdom, while not novel, gave rise to a range of interesting discussions. In particular, we can note that our FoI requests for teaching materials resulted in a number of contradictory and, in some cases, surprising

responses from both FoI officers and academic colleagues. As one academic put it: 'The assumption of a recipient of an FoI tends to be that it is a hostile action.' A number of researchers evidently assumed that this was a request intended to undermine the freedom to teach terrorism adequately. On the other hand, it was evident that other recipients were concerned to show how responsibly they were teaching terrorism and indeed cooperating with the authorities.

The use of FoI gave us enhanced and indeed very comprehensive data, though it is also clear that assumptions about the identity of the person requesting the information coloured the way in which some universities responded. The project made use of snowballing techniques aimed at gathering experiences of academics, researchers and students across the UK higher education sector. This involved the publicising of the project through academic meetings, the launching of a website (www.teachingterrorism.net) and the use of professional association email lists in a range of disciplines.

Following this process of communication, three case studies were selected. The first and most extensive case study concerns the arrests at Nottingham University and the subsequent introduction of a module review procedure at the university. The two further case studies focus on Aberystwyth University and University College London (UCL). They were selected to illustrate the role of private advocacy groups and political activists on the delivery of teaching and on the campus environment more broadly. In the case of Nottingham, this case study was developed in dialogue and consultation with, and between, a number of key actors. This was facilitated by the project and its website provided a forum for debate over these events and their interpretation.

The case studies also used investigative research techniques, drawing on a variety of methodological and data-gathering processes, including the searching of press and publications databases, advanced Internet research, short interviews and the use of FoI legislation. This approach draws on a long tradition of sociological research going back at least as far as the Chicago School associated with Robert Park in the 1930s and the 1940s. Park, who had previously been a journalist, believed that a sociologist was 'a kind of super-reporter, like the men who write for *Fortune* ... reporting on the long-term trends which record what is actually going on rather than what, on the surface, merely seems to be going on' (Park 1950). Park's method has more recently been advocated by Harvey Molotch who in 1994 suggested that sociologists should engage in what he called 'deep journalism' (Molotch 1994, p. 223).

An overview of responses

A broad empirical account of how the UK higher education institutions have dealt with these issues is provided by the data collected from the FoI request filed by the authors. Requests were sent to all 146 colleges and universities in the United Kingdom. The FoI requests comprised four key questions. The questions along with a summary of the universities' responses are detailed below. Nine universities issued refusal notices, mainly on the grounds that answering the requests may have a negative impact on the security of the university.¹

Question 1

Does your institution provide any information or advice to students or staff on any potential liability under terrorism legislation which might result from accessing materials for teaching or research? If so please provide copies of any documents held which detail or refer to such information or advice.

The purpose of this question was to assess what measures were being taken by the UK universities in order to protect research staff and students from potential liability under terrorism legislation. This question received positive responses from 13 separate universities, with four issuing refusal notices and one failing to respond. The University of Nottingham provides this type of advice to their students under their 'research code of conduct' and 'computer code of practice'. The University of Sunderland uses section 3 of their IT regulations and their ethics procedures which contain a section on 'criminality policy'. The University of Ulster issues guidance on the procedures for disclosing information to relevant authorities in order to prevent or detect crime, which was issued to all University of Ulster staff in 2009. The Universities of Cranfield and Huddersfield had no specific guidance, but both referred to their general student handbook. The University of Keele gives advice in the shape of 'IT Conditions of Use', which 'advises compliance with legislation relating to terrorism and other matters'. The University of Loughborough made mention of policies on bullying and harassment.

University College Birmingham provides guidance to staff and students on the 'use of the Internet and restricted sites that may fall under the remit of terrorist legislation'. They also have a policy of web caching software to 'stop access to terrorist-related sites'. The University of Teesside issued guidelines which identify 'the inappropriate transfer of knowledge' as a corporate risk and in addition, staff and students are provided with guidance on research ethics. Kings College London refers generally to the need to use IT systems 'lawfully' and specifically mentions the 'Terrorism Acts.' Heriot-Watt University explained that it 'complies with' a government scheme aimed at 'limiting weapons proliferation'.

In general then, a small number of universities have policies in this area and provide advice. From the advice that we list here, it is clear that the main thrust of such policies is to prohibit certain actions and to note that certain things are against the law. We did not find any significant evidence that universities are providing guidance that might protect staff or students from liability under terrorism legislation.

Question 2

Does your institution have any kind of procedure to review or assess reading lists, module descriptors or other teaching materials which explicitly or in practice considers questions of safety and risk under terrorism legislation as part of its remit? For example does the institution have anything similar or analogous to the 'module review process' established at Nottingham University . . . If so please supply full details of this policy and procedure and advise when and how it was decided upon and implemented.

The purpose of the second question was to establish the extent to which teaching and research materials were monitored by universities in the United Kingdom as a result of counterterrorism policy. A total of 138 universities responded negatively to this question. One university failed to respond and four refused to answer. The University of Salford claimed that answering the FoI could lead to an increased risk of terrorist attack.

Only three UK universities responded positively to this question (the Universities of Chester, Warwick and Nottingham), of which only the University of Nottingham has implemented a module review process that specifically responds to terrorism legislation.

Question 3

Does your institution have any system, policy or procedure in place for dealing with any potential actions taken by the authorities against the institution, its students or staff under terrorism

legislation? If so please supply a copy of the policy and advise the date it was decided upon and implemented.

Only 15 universities responded positively to this question with no response from one and refusals issued by a further nine universities. The University of Warwick referred to a regulation on meetings held on university premises, which states that:

A speaker, for example, who incites an audience to violence or to breach of the peace or to racial hatred transgresses the bounds of lawful speech. Equally, assemblies of persons, even if directed to lawful purposes, cease to be lawful if they cause serious public disorder or breaches of the peace.

The University of Nottingham stated that it had 'no specific system, policy or procedure in place'. The University of Ulster referred to a 'good practice notice'. The University of Wolverhampton responded that it had 'a system' in place, but 'No policy or procedure', and University College Birmingham stated that it was 'currently working on a strategy, policy and procedures'. Queens University Belfast stated that 'Disciplinary Procedures would be used in such circumstances'; the University of Newport said that it would use their 'Campus and Community Cohesion policy'; and Newcastle and Cardiff Universities referred to their IT policies. Sunderland, Birmingham and Kingston also referred to disciplinary procedures.

Edge Hill University referred to a number of documents, including the university's 'Emergency Management Plan' and its Critical Incident Risk Register. The latter document separately categorises 'terrorism' and the 'threat of terrorism' which it estimates to be 'possible' and 'probable', respectively. The University of Gloucestershire would use either their policy on 'Grievance, Harrassment and Whistleblowing' or their 'Student Code of Conduct'.

In summary, none of the universities stated that they had developed terrorism-specific policies or procedures, but a number referred to policies they deemed to be relevant, the bulk of which concerned staff or student conduct. None were concerned with the question of protecting staff of students from actions by the authorities.

Question 4

Does your institution have any system, policy or procedure in place for 'preventing violent extremism' as recommended for example in the government guidance document 'Promoting Good Campus Relations'. Please indicate what procedures or policy exist and advise when it was decided upon and implemented, and provide copies of any documents held which detail or refer to such policy or procedures.

The University of Wolverhampton described how it had 'a system but no policy or procedure' for implementing the document. Northampton, University College Birmingham and Canterbury Christ Church indicated that they were in the process of considering the 'Promoting Good Campus Relations' document and Birmingham was 'currently working on a strategy'. Nottingham University appears to have implemented the 'Promoting Good Campus Relations' recommendation in full; however, most of the other universities implemented the legislation in a particular fashion, referring to documents on good practice, harassment and disciplinary procedures. Roehampton University referred to its room booking policy, while the University of Southampton commented that the relevant issues

are ‘covered and are available on the University’s website’. The various other responses to Question 4 have been grouped under the various headings below.

‘Be Vigilant’ poster campaigns

Edge Hill University introduced a ‘Be Vigilant’ poster campaign within halls of residence and hosted a theatre production commissioned and developed by the Lancashire Constabulary designed to ‘raise awareness of domestic terrorism’. The University of Central Lancashire joined Edge Hill in promoting the ‘Be Vigilant’ poster campaign. The posters encouraged students who ‘believe someone [they] know or [had] seen behaving suspiciously’ to ‘PLEASE take action and REPORT it’. Possible signs included ‘Extreme views’, ‘Absence from class’ and ‘unusual behaviour’.

Campus community relations

A group of universities incorporated the guidance document into campus community relations policies. These included Essex, Newcastle, Newport and Sunderland. Relevant policy documents, procedures and bodies were also developed by King’s College London, the London School of Economics, the University of Hertfordshire and the University of Derby. Royal Holloway referred to systems in place including ‘checks on external speakers for faith-based groups; monitoring of religious buildings for indicators of recruitments; close liaison with local police and community engagement officers; and regular police liaison with organisers of Islamic Friday prayers and attendance at the prayers’.

Freedom of speech policies

The most common response by universities to the guidance document was to incorporate it into their freedom of speech policies. Thames Valley University referred to their ‘Code of Conduct’, ‘No Platform Policy’ and policy on ‘Freedom of Speech’. Freedom of Speech was also cited by 15 other institutions.

Working with the police on the Prevent programme

Bristol University declared that it works ‘with the police on their “Prevent” initiative’. Birmingham University also claimed to be ‘active as part of’ Prevent ‘working in partnership with police’. The University of Westminster is also working on Prevent activities, although it points out that ‘The information supporting these activities, that is, training materials, literature, etc., have not yet been produced.’ Heriot-Watt University explained that it is ‘currently in liaison with Lothian & Borders police and the National Counter Terrorism Security Office (NaCTSO)’, and the University of Dundee responded in the same way. Plymouth University is also ‘an active member of the Plymouth City “Prevent” delivery group’ and a number of their staff have attended Prevent training.

The University of Liverpool has ‘established channels to the police’ and the University of East Anglia states that it ‘maintains excellent and ongoing communication with the Police and a number of community groupings’. Lincoln University describes having ‘close links with Lincolnshire Police, including their Prevent team’ and Sheffield University described ‘a very strong partnership with South Yorkshire Police that enables early intervention in respect of safeguarding against and preventing extremism’. The University of Central Lancashire and Edge Hill University both liaised with West Lancashire Police force as part of their ‘Prevent’ campaign. The University of the West of Scotland has informal

links with the police divisions close to their four campuses and a Police Liaison Committee, which meets periodically and includes nominees from the relevant police divisions. Cardiff University has engaged with the 'Prevent' agenda to develop an understanding of the risks for universities and start to inform relevant staff of appropriate sources of advice and guidance.

Bids for funding

The University of East Anglia said it was 'currently progressing a bid for funds to assist in the further development of policies and training' in the area of preventing violent extremism. The University of Westminster, St George's University and the University of Gloucestershire had all won government grants of round £10,000 to undertake Prevent work.

Other responses and measures put in place

London Metropolitan University implemented a 'range of initiatives and policies' which were in place but integrated with other activities. For example, it has a Chaplaincy Service which includes an Imam and which organises prayers held in a multi-faith centre. The university is also a Home Office adviser. The University of Teesside identified 'the inappropriate transfer of knowledge' as a corporate risk and produced a briefing on this risk that was 'incorporated into the training programme for new research supervisors'.

Durham stated that the university developed initiatives to promote good campus relations and enable the university to fulfil its duty to promote tolerance, community cohesion and freedom of expression within the law. It noted that it had created two working groups which predated the guidance document referred to in the survey. The University of Aberystwyth was in the process of amending their information services regulations to show that services 'must not use the university network to create or display information that could give offence to other reasonably minded people, including material calculated to incite hatred of any particular individual(s) or racial or religious groups'. It also established a working group on the 'prevention of terrorism' to consider any wider implications, as well as 'liaising with the local police experts'.

In summary, around one-third of universities stated that they had a policy or procedure in place for 'preventing violent extremism'. The most common response was to deal with this issue under the remit of freedom of expression policies while the creation of policies or bodies concerned with 'community cohesion' on campus was also fairly common. Perhaps most significantly, the responses also evidenced a significant engagement with the police at a number of institutions.

Academic freedom, counterterrorism and counter-subversion

The wider picture given by the FoI survey was complimented by our analysis of three key case studies.

The University of Nottingham

The arrest and detention of the 'Nottingham Two' under anti-terrorism legislation in May 2008 led to widespread criticism of both the police action and the university's alleged failure to protect academic freedom.

The ‘Nottingham Two’ were Rizwaan Sabir, a master’s student at Nottingham’s School of Politics and International Relations, and his friend Hicham Yezza, an administrator at the School of Modern Languages and Cultures. Both men are Muslims and were involved in political activism on the campus. They were arrested on 14 May 2008 under Section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000 – which allows for the arrest and detention of anyone police ‘reasonably suspects to be a terrorist’. The arrests involved dozens of officers, police cars, vans and scientific support agents (Yeza 2008). Both men say they were confused and traumatised by the experience. Sabir said of his detention: ‘I was absolutely broken. I didn’t sleep. I’d close my eyes then hear the keys clanking and I would be up again. As I realised the severity I thought I’d end up in Belmarsh . . . It was psychological torture’ (quoted in *The Guardian* 2008). Yeza has written of ‘the soul-sapping nothingness of the claustrophobic, cold cell . . . Make no mistake: the feeling that one’s fate is in the hands of the very people who are apparently trying to convict you is, without doubt, one of the most devastating horrors a human being can ever be subjected to’ (Yeza 2008). While he was in custody, Sabir’s family’s home was searched and their computer and mobile phones were seized. Both men were detained for six days and then – like the vast majority of people detained under anti-terrorism legislation – were released without charge.

The basis of the arrests, it soon emerged, was that Sabir had accessed research material for his dissertation, which had been taken as evidence of the ‘commission, preparation or instigation’ of an act of terrorism. Months earlier he had downloaded a document known as the ‘Al Qaeda Training Manual’, which he emailed to Yeza to print out for him. Sabir was working on a dissertation on Islamist political violence and had mentioned to a lecturer at Nottingham that he intended to use the document. The lecturer had raised no objections.

The title of the offending document is somewhat misleading since it has no direct link with Al Qaeda. It is a translated version of a handwritten Arabic document found in Manchester in 2000 by British police, which was originally titled the ‘Declaration of Jihad against the Country’s Tyrants’. Its content is largely thought to be drawn from Western military and counterinsurgency manuals (Thornton 2009).

Sabir had emailed Yeza the document in January 2008, and Yeza has stated that he never read the document and by the time of his arrest had completely forgotten about it (Yeza 2008). Yeza, who worked as an administrator at the university as well as editing a student magazine, was also helping Sabir with his PhD application. He worked on a shared university computer and in May 2008 a member of the university’s clerical staff noticed the ‘Al Qaeda Training Manual’ on the computer’s hard drive. The university authorities were informed and without questioning Yeza, Sabir or any of his academic supervisors, they called the police. They arrived within hours, arresting the two men and conducting stop and searches on students on campus. In custody, Sabir says he was read a statement referring to the ‘Al Qaeda Training Manual’ as an ‘illegal document’. When he was released he received no apology for his wrongful detention and was warned against accessing the document in the future. A letter he received suggested that the question of the legality of the document rested on the opinion of the university. It read: ‘The university authorities have now made clear that possession of this material is not required for the purpose of your course of study nor do they consider it legitimate for you to possess it for research purposes’ (quoted in Newman 2008b).

The arrests, the response of the university management and the subsequent moves to deport Yeza led to protests on campus and criticism from academics at Nottingham and elsewhere. Students started a petition calling on the university to acknowledge its ‘disproportionate’ response, which was signed by hundreds of students and academics. There was

a protest on campus attended by hundreds of people. The local Labour MP Alan Simpson addressed students and academics at the university and read out parts of the 'Al Qaeda Training Manual'. Later, the students protested, standing in silence for five minutes, many of them using handkerchiefs to create mock gags (*The Guardian* 2008).

The controversy also led to significant tension between academics and the university management at Nottingham. In one leaked exchange, an academic emailed the university's communications director, Jonathan Ray, asking for 'an official statement regarding the preservation of academic freedom and intellectual independence, but, one that avoids the empty platitudes of a public relations exercise'. Ray declined and in response dismissed the email as 'profoundly patronising and self-important' (Newman 2008a). The same day the *Times Higher Education Supplement* published an article by three Nottingham academics calling for universities to 'stand up and defend academic freedom' (Nilsen *et al.* 2008).

Two weeks later Nottingham University's vice-chairman, Sir Colin Campbell, responded in a letter to the *Times Higher Education Supplement*. It called the three academics' article 'careless' and 'entirely false' and dismissed their concerns over academic freedom (Campbell 2008). A number of research students based at Oxford, London, Manchester, Westminster, Kent and the London School of Economics subsequently wrote to Sir Colin expressing their 'profound alarm' at the treatment of Sabir and Yezza and calling on him to give them support and to work with his own academics to ensure academic freedom is protected (Jones 2008).

Despite the pressure, the university offered no such assurances. Sir Colin subsequently released a statement confirming that as far as the university authorities were concerned 'There is no "right" to access and research terrorist materials' and that, 'Those who do so run the risk of being investigated and prosecuted on terrorism charges.' He continued: 'Equally, there is no "prohibition" on accessing terrorist materials for the purpose of research. Those who do so are likely to be able to offer a defence to charges (although they may be held in custody for some time while the matter is investigated). This is the law and applies to all universities' (cited in Newman 2008b).

The arrests affected the teaching of terrorism at the university. In October 2008, the School of Politics made the unprecedented decision that Rod Thornton, who then taught a course on terrorism, would have his reading list reviewed by the School's Ethics Committee. Thornton, who had sent a letter to the *Times Higher Education Supplement* criticising the vice chancellor (Thornton 2008), protested at the decision, and in the event, the committee did not complete the 'review'. Nevertheless, senior staff at the school instead set up what they called a 'module review committee' to monitor the reading lists of all academics at the School of Politics. An internal document explained that the committee's purpose included providing feedback on 'whether any material on reading lists could be illegal or might be deemed to incite people to use violence' (Newman 2009). Steve Fielding, professor of political history at Nottingham, claimed that, 'The policy is there to protect staff from the accusation of promoting illegal acts: it is not an attempt to undermine academic freedom' (Newman 2009).

Thornton has been highly critical of the university's treatment of Sabir and Yezza and presented a paper describing the events at Nottingham at the annual conference of the British International Studies Association (BISA) in April 2011 (Thornton 2011). The paper was subsequently removed from the BISA website after it was claimed that the article was defamatory and on 4 May 2011, Thornton was suspended from his job as lecturer at the university.

Aberystwyth University

If the Nottingham case shows how vague and draconian legislation can impact negatively on the teaching of terrorism, the earlier case of Aberystwyth University demonstrates well the political pressures which can come to bear on teachers in this area.

Only weeks before the arrest of the Nottingham Two, Aberystwyth University was attacked by the right-wing journalist Melanie Phillips over the content of the university's course on terrorism. Aberystwyth's Department of International Politics teaches a Masters in Terrorism and International Relations, the core module on which seeks to challenge the perceived shortcomings and limitations of 'orthodox' terrorism studies. Indeed, the university has in recent years become a hub of 'Critical Terrorism Studies'.

In April 2008, Melanie Phillips was sent an email by a disgruntled student at Aberystwyth, who complained that students were being pressurised to 'tow the line' at the university, and that 'although Islam is quite clearly at the heart of anything to do with terrorism nowadays, it is never mentioned directly except alongside non-Islamic terrorists' (cited in Phillips 2008). The student included a copy of an email sent to students by the convenor of the course, Dr Marie Breen Smyth. In the email, Breen Smyth had sent students a piece of writing by Dr Richard Jackson (the founding editor of *Critical Studies on Terrorism*) in which, having been challenged to do so, he gave an account of incidents of Israeli state terrorism.

Dr Jackson's work was also included on the course's reading list. Phillips complained that the course was 'skewed towards an ultra-left perspective on terrorism'. She wrote to the vice chancellor asking for a response to the 'allegations of gross political bias on this course'. She also demanded to know why Dr Jackson's work was on the reading list, given what she called his 'apparent animus against Israel and his tendentious recycling of hateful propaganda' (Phillips 2008). The vice chancellor replied that the 'module handbook includes a wide variety of sources, written from a variety of perspectives' and noted Richard Jackson and Marie Breen Smyth's academic credentials. Phillips concluded by comparing the university's critical scholarship with Soviet propaganda (Phillips 2008).

Melanie Phillips had made similar accusations against Aberystwyth three years earlier when she published on her personal website an email from a student at Aberystwyth, which she claimed was evidence of an 'anti-Jewish witch-hunt going on in our seats of learning'. She had at that stage already launched several attacks on British universities in response to the proposed academic boycott in protest at Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. In one blog entry, Phillips had labelled SOAS the 'School of Orchestrated Anti-Semitism' and wrote that an article she had read in a School magazine 'should surely be brought to the attention of the police' (Phillips 2005a). In another article in the *Jewish Chronicle*, she referred to what she called: 'A virus of anti-Jewish hatred', which she claimed was 'coursing through this country's arteries – and the universities are the swamp in which it breeds' (Phillips 2005b) (Figure 1).

This presumably is why the Aberystwyth student chose to write to Phillips, in particular, to complain that the 'opinion of most of the academic staff [at Aberystwyth is] that all the world's current ills can be attributed to the activities of the US and Israel' (Phillips 2005c). Studying at Aberystwyth, the student argued, was not 'about the pursuit of knowledge and truth', but 'lies, propaganda and the worst sort of prejudice' (Phillips 2005c). Students at Aberystwyth subsequently wrote to Phillips protesting that the impression given was unfounded.

The case of Melanie Phillips provides another good illustration of the fact that the combined attacks on British Muslims and UK higher education form part of longer political

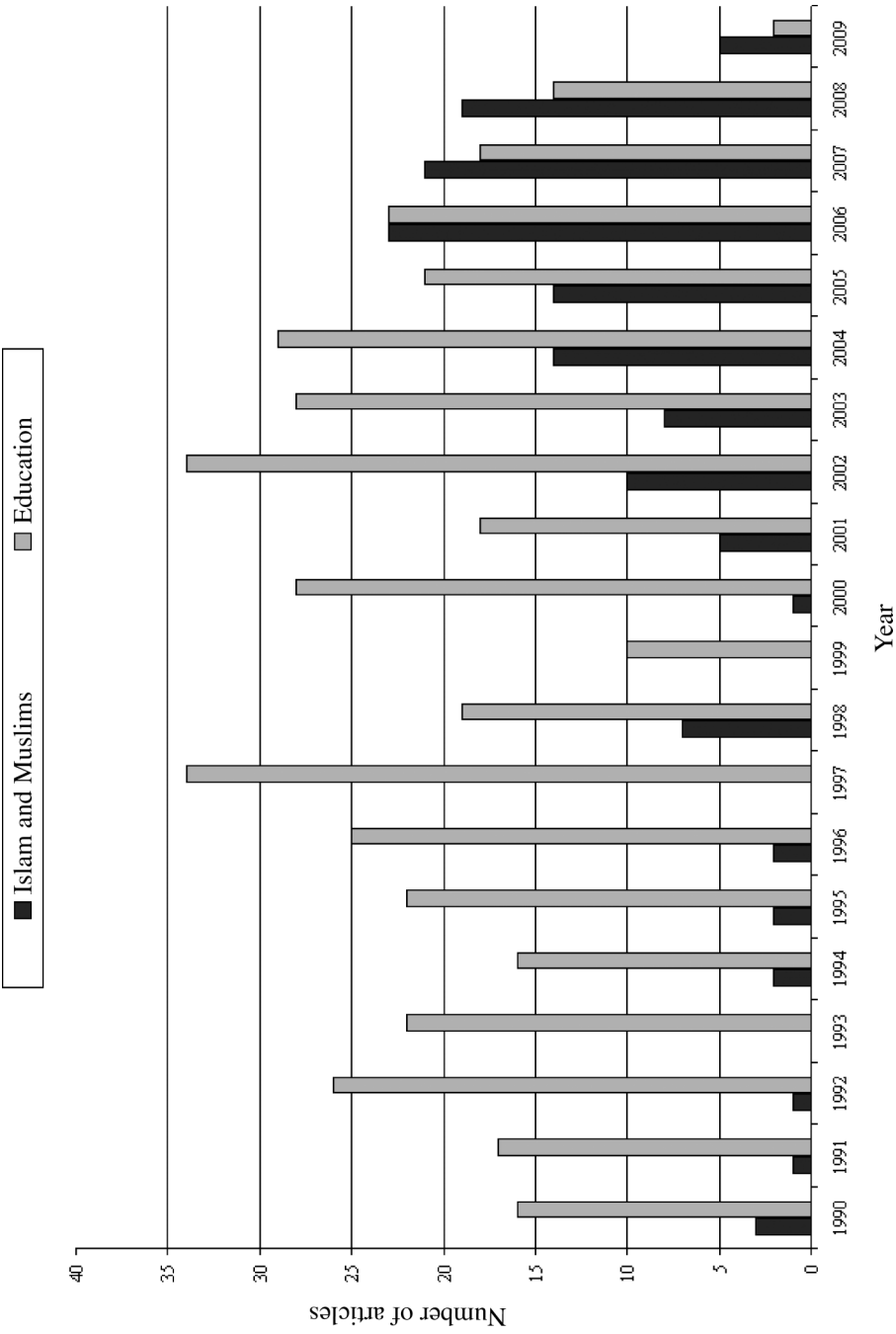


Figure 1. Graph comparing the number of newspaper articles written by Melanie Phillips containing references to 'education' with the number that contain references to 'Islam' or 'Muslims'.

struggles. In 2009, after the death of Irving Kristol (dubbed the ‘godfather of neoconservatism’), Melanie Phillips praised him for being ‘the first public intellectual to understand and articulate a defence of western civilisation against the onslaught mounted by the moral and cultural relativism of the nihilistic left’. She recalled that when she met Kristol he asked her:

Why hasn’t anyone done there what we did here, set up publications and think-tanks and talk radio to break the power of the Left in the universities? I just can’t understand why everyone is just sitting there and letting it happen! What’s wrong with them all? (Phillips 2009)

Though perhaps best known for her inflammatory views on British Muslims, Phillips is a long-standing critic of British schools and universities. Education policy was the focus of her first major book *All Must Have Prizes*, which was published in 1996 while she was still a columnist at the *Observer*. The book describes a decline in literacy and numeracy in British education and attributes this to the prevalence of moral and cultural relativism in British society. Phillips argued that post-modernist thinking and a misconceived commitment to egalitarianism had undermined excellence in education by eroding concepts of authority and truth and by ignoring what she claimed were natural differences in ability between students (hence *All Must Have Prizes*). While the book focuses on education, Phillips treats this as symptomatic of a wider crisis in British society. She wrote in the closing paragraph of the third chapter:

This [relativism] is not some fringe ideology which, although troublesome, has left the majority of people untouched. These attitudes now course through the bloodstream of our culture. They permeate the establishment and govern the running of our institutions . . . Britain is in the grip of a culture war, and the most fundamental aspects of education are now in the front line. (Phillips 1998, p. 65)

Phillips has written a regular column in various British newspapers since 1987. It is therefore possible to track the subject of her articles over a quite extensive time period. The graph above was produced using the newspaper database Nexis. It compares the number of articles year on year between 1990 and 2009 which contain references to ‘education’ with the number that contain references to ‘Islam’ or ‘Muslims’.²

The graph shows that in the years before 2001, Phillips had little interest in Islam, mentioning Islam or Muslims in only a handful of articles a year and in no articles at all in 1993, 1997 and 1999. The exception is 1998 when Phillips wrote seven articles containing these terms. The majority of these, however, make only passing reference to Islam or Muslims. This shows Melanie Phillips’s growing preoccupation with Islam in the post-September 11 period: but while her articles on education decline in the post-September 11 period at the same time as her articles on Islam increase, the latter are only more numerous after 2006 and even then only by a small margin.

University College London

Melanie Phillips was one of a number of right-wing commentators who more recently attacked UCL, and British universities in general, following the disclosure that Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the ‘Christmas Day Bomber’, had studied at UCL and was President of the Student Islamic Society. Phillips claimed in the *Daily Mail* that ‘many British universities have been turned into terrorism recruitment centres’. She cited an August 2005 report by the academic Anthony Glees called *When Students Turn to Terror*:

Terrorist and Extremist Activity on British Campuses. The report, which Glees had written for the conservative think-tank, the Social Affairs Unit, argued that British universities were 'recruiting grounds for those who wish to destroy parliamentary liberal democracy' (Glees 2005). It stated that students can probably be 'turned away from terrorism by effective control, containment and careful teaching', but lamented that

British dons would sooner do anything than say to a student, 'your attitudes are outrageous and they remove us from any obligation to teach you – unless you undertake citizenship and democracy classes and prove you can live in a liberal democracy and abide by its rules'. (Glees and Pope 2005)

Glees himself appeared as a source in a number of articles attacking UCL and British universities in December 2009 and January 2010. He was quoted in the *Daily Telegraph* as saying, 'All British universities must look at their Islamic societies and demand assurances that no radicalisation will be allowed. If they can't give those assurances, they should be disbanded' (*Daily Telegraph* 2009).

Though Phillips and Glees played their part, the leading figure in the attacks was Douglas Murray, the director of the Centre for Social Cohesion and the author of a book called *Neoconservatism: Why We Need It*. Murray wrote an opinion piece for the *Daily Telegraph* claiming that 'British universities have been a hub of the global Islamic terror threat for more than a decade' and that 'they have abandoned the duty of care they owe their students and the duty they owe the British taxpayers who pay their wages' (Murray 2009).

Such attacks on universities have notable precedents in Cold War-era counter-subversion, exemplified in works such as a 1975 report called 'Rape of Reason' by Caroline Cox and John Marks, both of whom were appointed directors of the Centre for Social Cohesion in January 2009. A recent investigation of the funding behind the Centre for Social Cohesion by two of the current authors found that it receives significant support from Stanley Kalms, a hardline UK Zionist and an outspoken supporter of Israel, as well as other right-wing foundations which also provide funding to organisations like the UK Friends of the IDF, UK Friends of the Association for the Wellbeing of Israel's Soldiers, the Israel-Diaspora Trust and the Anglo-Israel Association (Mills *et al.* 2011).

Conclusions

There is little evidence from our research to suggest that other universities apart from Nottingham have developed administrative systems to monitor teaching materials used in courses and modules on terrorism and political violence. Here, our findings are consistent with research undertaken by Lewis Herrington, a doctoral researcher at the University of Warwick, who through the use of interviews and FoI legislation has also investigated the impact of counterterrorism policy on universities in the United Kingdom. He concludes, however, that 'anti-terrorism legislation has had little or no impact on the teaching, supervision or research of terrorism related studies in the UK' (Herrington 2011). While our survey similarly discovered no evidence of any direct formal impact on teaching, there was clear evidence of a broader impact on the campus environment. While the majority of institutions have either not developed any system, policy or procedure for 'preventing violent extremism', or dealt with this issue within the remit of existing policies, our research suggests that 'preventing violent extremism' has become an important agenda at

a significant number of institutions and that a number have developed close cooperation and collaboration with the authorities.

A relevant comparison on this latter point is research undertaken by the vice chancellors' umbrella group, Universities UK (UUK), which represents 133 universities and colleges in the United Kingdom. This was undertaken for UUK's report, *Freedom of Speech on Campus*, which was drafted in the wake of the public criticisms of UCL described above. UUK conducted an online survey of all its members in 2010. The results suggest an 'increased engagement by and with universities as part of the Prevent agenda' and found that as many as 'two-thirds of universities indicated that their institution had engaged, and several expressed a wish to do more'. It found that:

Nearly all respondents had regular contact with the police, just over half had regular contact with the Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU), and around half with Special Branch. Around a quarter had regular contact with the security services. (Universities UK 2011)

These figures represent a far greater engagement with government counterterrorism policy than was evidenced in the responses to our survey. It suggests that while the majority of universities have not developed an official internal policy for 'preventing violent extremism', the great majority have nevertheless collaborated closely with the state agencies responsible for enforcing government counterterrorism policies. It would also appear that this trend is likely to increase under the coalition government. The new Prevent policy published in June 2011 deals extensively with universities and colleges. The government notes with concern 'that some universities and colleges have failed to engage in Prevent' and states that the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills will 'help universities and colleges better understand the risk of radicalisation on and off campus and secure wider and more consistent support from institutions of most concern' (HM Government 2011).

Herrington (2011) notes that the UK Government's Prevent strategy with respect to universities has focused almost exclusively on Muslim students. It is also of note that there has been an explicit shift towards bringing non-violent 'extremism' under the remit of government counterterrorism. The government states that 'terrorist ideologies draw on and make use of extremist ideas which are espoused by apparently non-violent organisations very often operating within the law' (HM Government 2011). This broadening of counterterrorism policy to encompass allegedly 'extreme' ideology has long been advocated by the private advocacy groups we point to here in our case studies and in other recent work (Mills *et al.* 2011). In practice, such an approach is likely to lead to the political monitoring and intimidation of Muslim students, and while this may not present an immediate threat to the delivery of teaching and research on terrorism, it can only impact negatively on the learning environment. Questions on the general orientation and content of terrorism courses in the United Kingdom and the effect of these pressures on the teaching of terrorism in the United Kingdom remain open. They could be answered more fully by a closer examination of the content of courses on terrorism and by accessing the views and experience of those engaged in teaching terrorism in the universities of the United Kingdom.

The case studies showed that when we move beyond an examination of university policies and consider the practical politics of teaching about terrorism, there is evidence of impact on the learning environment as well as on the ability of academics and students to learn, teach and research terrorism. The contending pressures from the state, the market and right-wing commentators and think-tanks are sometimes resisted as seems to have been the case to some extent at Aberystwyth and UCL. However, the significant effects on the University of Nottingham are not limited to that institution. They send out a message to

all who would listen of the dangers of trying to engage in research about terrorism or in trying to teach properly about it. The power to constrain what is taught and how research is conducted is not simply a question of specific major effects on particular researchers or students, but of the more general lessons across the sectors about what it is safe or wise to do.

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Notes

1. For reasons of space, we have not provided full reference details of each response. We have, however, posted all of the data from the survey online. It is accessible from the Teaching About Terrorism page on Powerbase: http://powerbase.info/index.php/Teaching_About_Terrorism.
2. Details of the search terms used are as follows: (BYLINE(melanie phillips) and Islam or Muslim*) and DATE(>=1990-01-01 and <=2009-12-31) [All English Language News] and (BYLINE(melanie phillips) and education) and DATE(>=1990-01-01 and <=2009-12-31) [All English Language News].

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