

Universities must not become part of the security apparatus

Hall, M. (2015). Universities must not become part of the security apparatus. Times Higher Education, 8 January 2015.

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/opinion/universities-must-not-become-part-of-the-security-apparatus/2017752.article>

Imagine this. You're teaching a course on current affairs and decide to have your class debate the merits and demerits of fracking. The debate is passionate and gets out of hand, with students on both sides getting personal. You calm them down, and the session ends. But you've noticed that one student, a passionate environmentalist, is sullen and withdrawn, not engaging with others, and obviously anxious. You are under a standing instruction from your dean to report all such symptoms to the faculty administrator. Next week, the student is absent. You learn that, based on your report, she is now under the supervision of your university's local authority, with a support plan to help correct her radical tendencies.

The government's focus is, of course, on the acute threat posed by the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan. But one of the objectives of extreme and unpredictable violence is to create a syndrome of responses that, in themselves, promote ever more violent reactions. Will this new act achieve its immediate aim of preventing Islamic radicalisation? Or will these new statutory duties of referral push those who are singled out down a path that they may otherwise have rejected? The new law is not directed at Muslims alone, but at anyone with radical views, including views that are non-violent but that might open up a road to violence. Could these new statutory obligations on universities be used against opponents of fracking, or animal rights activists, or anti-nuclear movements, or any radical opposition to the status quo? And where would that leave the principles of academic freedom and freedom of speech in universities, and elsewhere?

AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

Universities must not become part of the security apparatus

8 January 2015

The counter-terrorism bill will co-opt academics into the 'securocrat' and chill debate on campus - it must be fought, says Martin Hall



Source: Miles Cole

What would happen if a university, or a staff member, declined to refer students showing specified personality traits to local authority panels?

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Now consider this. The Counter-Terrorism and Security Bill 2014-15 being considered by Parliament proposes that all university governing bodies have a statutory duty to implement measures that prevent radicalisation that could lead to acts of terrorism. In addition to barring radical advocates from speaking on campuses, the new law will require every local authority to set up a panel to which the police can refer "identified individuals" who are considered to be vulnerable to radicalisation. All universities are identified as "partners" with their local authorities in this process of referral.

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Here is Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws' summation of one of the key issues, in her questioning of James Brokenshire, the minister for security and immigration, on 3 December: "The nature of the university is to develop the mind. It is about the whole business of freedom of speech. Freedom of exchange of ideas is at the heart of the university. By challenging orthodoxies, people grow in ideas. Inevitably, some of those ideas will be bad ones, but the best way to deal with them is in debate and by challenging them in the process of learning. No university has created a fundamentalist who has gone to Syria to take part in what is going on there. Yes, people may have been influenced, probably more by other students. That can happen in a cafe in Birmingham as much as in any university. You are introducing a chilling effect on the whole thing that universities are about, which you and I benefited from, as did most people who went to university – and 40 per cent of our young now go to university. You are doing this when we know that universities up and down the land are already considering these issues and thinking about how they might deal with them and how they might create the debate, without having a statutory duty to do so. That is what concerns people: the statutory duty with a power to give directions from the state. The state will be able to tell universities what they ought to do, and they will be punished in some way if they do not fulfil the requirement set by the state and government...I want you to explain to us why it needs to be a statutory duty."

Universities, then, already work extensively with the police in the context of the existing Home Office policy for countering radicalisation, known as "Prevent". The new law will make Prevent a statutory responsibility rather than a voluntary programme.

But there is a significant counterargument: that Prevent, in itself, angers and radicalises students. This is because of the implication that, simply by virtue of holding Islamic beliefs, a person is more likely to become a terrorist. The same assumption is not made about, say, Catholics. Given that the 2011 census recorded 2.7 million Muslims living in the UK and that the Home Office is currently concerned about 500 individuals, there is a question of effectiveness and proportionality for the Prevent strategy as it is, let alone for the draconian expansion of powers contemplated for the new act.

The draft legislation also proposes processes of referral for students considered at risk of succumbing to radicalisation. Universities will be required to train all staff who have contact with students to recognise what Brokenshire called being "withdrawn and reserved, and perhaps showing other personality traits". Where these traits are identified, the university must refer the student to a panel set up by the police and the local authority. This panel will oversee and administer a safeguarding programme, which may include referral to the health services.

This aspect of the bill has alarmed Sir Peter Fahy, chief constable of the Greater Manchester Police and the national lead for Prevent. "If these issues [defining extremism] are left to securocrats then there is a danger of a drift to a police state," he told a national newspaper last month. "I am a securocrat; it's people like me, in the security services, people with a narrow responsibility for counter-terrorism. It is better for that to be defined by wider society and not securocrats. There is a danger of us being turned into a thought police. This securocrat says we do not want to be in the space of policing thought or police defining what is extremism."

Both the bill and the current government consultation make it clear that these measures will also apply to "non-violent extremism, which can create an atmosphere conducive to terrorism and can popularise views which terrorists exploit". This means that the statutory responsibilities to be introduced in the act could be used by the police and local authorities in circumstances such as those recently faced by Canterbury Christ Church University, which was asked for a list of those attending a debate about and discussion of fracking.

What would happen if a university, or an individual staff member, declined to take part in Prevent or refused to refer students showing specified personality traits to local authority panels? Kennedy pushed Brokenshire repeatedly on this and eventually got her answer: a charge of contempt of court and, perhaps, prison.

The bill was due to have its third reading in Parliament this week and is open for public consultation until 30 January. It raises issues that must be taken seriously.



(URL=http://www.tsishop.co.uk/thedotsl/THEDOA74/?utm_source=THE&utm_medium=Comment&utm_content=THEDOA74&utm_campaign=freetrial)

Print headline:

Article originally published as: *Teacher, tutor, soldier, spy: towards a police state of mind* (8 January 2015)

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Martin Hall was vice-chancellor of the University of Salford from 2009 to 2014.