



Department  
for Education

# **Prevent duty in higher education: tackling disinformation and managing events**

**Research report**

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Government  
Social Research

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This research report was written before the new UK Government took office on 5 July 2024. As a result, the content may not reflect current Government policy

# Executive Summary

## Background and context

In 2021, the government appointed William Shawcross CVO to conduct an Independent Review of Prevent, a strand of the government's counter-terrorism strategy. The [Independent Review of Prevent's report and government response - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/115212/independent-review-of-prevent-report-and-government-response-2023.pdf) was published in 2023, and included two recommendations for the Department for Education (DfE). The department accepted these recommendations to consider how higher education (HE) providers might be better supported to 1) assess the risk of radicalisation across events with external speakers and 2) address any anti-Prevent sentiment they may come across within their institution.

To inform their practical response to these recommendations, DfE commissioned IFF Research to undertake a study surrounding the implementation of the Prevent duty in HE providers in England. The purpose of this research is to help DfE better understand what further support or guidance might be required to help providers protect students and staff from risks of radicalisation.

## Methodology

The research was qualitative by design and consisted of two phases. The first involved a series of in-depth interviews and group sessions with 16 Prevent Leads at HE institutions, who were responsible for the implementation and delivery of the Prevent agenda. These interviews took place online and lasted for around one hour between 31 July to 18 August 2023. The second phase consisted of interviews and group sessions with 17 student representatives and 28 HE institution and student union staff, across 9 HE providers. The student representative participants included student union presidents and officer, mentors, and wellbeing officers. The HE staff included both academic and non-academic roles, and included a range of responsibilities such as wellbeing, compliance, human resources, and those relating to the student union.

This fieldwork took place between 7 November 2023 and 5 January 2024.

The topics covered in both phases were as follows, and broadly split three ways between providers which covered the first theme, the second theme, or both:

- Addressing anti-Prevent sentiment and disinformation: covering levels of understanding of the duty, radicalisation concerns, anti-Prevent sentiment and disinformation and how HE providers might respond, and training on Prevent.
- Assessing the risk of radicalisation across events with external speakers: these interviews covered event organisation, Prevent-related concerns at events, and

associated training. Conversations naturally covered broader topics, such as general levels of awareness of the Prevent duty as well.

Further detail on the methodology is provided in chapter 1.

## **Key findings**

### **Understanding of the Prevent duty**

Both Prevent Leads and those in more directly relevant roles felt they were well informed about the duty. These included those holding a position on the providers' Prevent steering group as well as general safeguarding and other student facing roles. There was a general consensus that student representatives and staff outside of these roles would typically have a more limited knowledge, particularly as incidents were rare and the duty not being top of mind as a result. Training was also reportedly less detailed among these latter groups.

### **Anti-Prevent sentiment**

Recent occurrences of anti-Prevent sentiment were reportedly rare. Nevertheless, all audiences involved in the research typically reported that staff and students with an awareness of the Prevent duty were accepting of it and understood the role that it plays in safeguarding students at their HE institution. A handful mentioned evidence of potential issues, however, with concerns that the Prevent duty was usually associated with certain racial and religious groups in society, for example. Others also surmised that the prevalence of anti-Prevent sentiment would likely fluctuate over time, depending on what is seen in popular media.

### **Responding to anti-Prevent Sentiment**

Although recent examples of anti-Prevent sentiment were rare, it was generally agreed that any cause for concern would be raised with the Prevent Lead, relevant members of staff and/or the Student Union. Across each of the Prevent Leads interviewed, the most common response to these concerns was to have open and honest conversations with the staff or student representatives raising them. It should be noted that whilst Prevent Leads and staff explained that these types of approaches would be taken, approaches to anti-Prevent sentiment have not been 'stress-tested', given the infrequent nature of these matters in recent years.

### **Prevalence and identification of radicalisation incidents**

All audiences noted that radicalisation concerns were rare, and often ranged in severity when they did occur.

If and when concerns arose, this was typically identified by students, student facing staff or by web-filtering systems put in place by IT departments. Once a concern was identified, it was most often escalated and reported to the Prevent Lead, who would then make a decision about what action was required. However, participants raised some challenges in identifying concerns including the fact that radicalisation was a vast and constantly changing issue, making it difficult to “keep up”.

In the context of such issues, two Prevent Leads noted that they now have a centralised ‘Report and Support’ system in place, where safeguarding and Prevent-related concerns are raised. These Prevent Leads felt that this was an effective way of identifying issues quickly and dealing with them effectively.

## **Responding to incidents of radicalisation**

Support sought to resolve Prevent-related concerns was dependent on the nature of the incident. Less severe cases were dealt with internally by the Prevent Lead and Prevent steering groups, often in liaison with other departments and safeguarding roles, if relevant. In more severe cases, either the DfE Prevent Coordinator was consulted or the police were involved (or both) and a referral was made. At some providers, intervention specialists had been utilised who were asked to discuss the incident with the student in question and to follow Channel guidance, which is to increase theological understanding and challenge extremist ideas or fixated thinking where they are used to legitimise terrorism, or to otherwise understand the extent of concerns relating to ideology.<sup>1</sup>

Most Prevent Leads reported that all staff across their institution should have a basic understanding of Prevent due to the fact it was covered under wider safeguarding policies and procedures. Echoing this, Prevent Leads noted that their HE institutions had been dealing with all safeguarding issues for a long time and had effective procedures in place as a result. In this context, Prevent Leads have confidence that all staff and students were well equipped to identify specific Prevent-related concerns. Among the staff and student representatives interviewed, they also had confidence in their ability to identify a radicalisation concern and escalate this in the appropriate manner. However, it must be noted that whilst HE institutions do their best to ensure procedures are followed, the sheer size of HE providers means it is difficult to get a full grasp of how well people understand Prevent and know exactly how to identify a concern.

## **Processes for booking external speakers**

Staff and student representatives with hands on experience of organising an event were naturally the most knowledgeable about the overall process. Those with more limited

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<sup>1</sup> [Channel and Prevent Multi-Agency Panel \(PMAP\) guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/channel-and-prevent-multi-agency-panel-pmap-guidance)

experience still demonstrated a reasonable understanding of appropriate steps one might look to take, such as screening for high risks of incitement to extremism or terrorism.

Most processes outlined centred on the need for staff and/or students to submit paperwork to the events department. This was the same whether it was an online versus on-campus event or student versus staff-led.

Booking forms tended to cover the event location, the theme and details of the target audience. It was usually through such forms that event organisers would confirm whether any external speakers would be involved, alongside details about said speaker. At some HE providers, this was followed up with a risk assessment, however other HE providers noted that a risk assessment was only completed if a risk was flagged in a booking form.

On the rare occasion a Prevent-related risk is identified, it would usually be added as an agenda item for the Prevent steering group. Following this, some Prevent Leads made use of external sources for advice and support to assess the radicalisation risk of a potential speaker, including speaking to their DfE Regional Prevent Coordinator or the local police. Additionally, others would work collaboratively with the Student Union where appropriate.

### **Reflecting on the process**

Prevent Leads often commented that the number of events with external speakers that could pose a radicalisation risk was low, therefore providers' risk assessment processes for managing such events had rarely been implemented and tested as a result.

Nevertheless, some challenges were noted. These related to too little time between the submission of an events form and the event itself; resourcing issues – which made identifying risks more challenging; and booking form limitations, for example, not all forms were compulsory for students and staff to complete, and not all asked the organiser to consider radicalisation risk.

### **Further support from DfE**

Staff, across a range of roles were generally more likely than student representatives to seek more guidance on how to manage Prevent risks and make sure their policies are fit for purpose. One Prevent Lead specifically mentioned more support from DfE would be welcome on the line between lawful and unlawful speech<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Subsequent to this research being carried out, we are aware that the department announced in February 2024 it will be issuing further guidance and training on managing external speakers and events by the 2024/2025 academic year. See [Independent Review of Prevent: One year on progress report \(accessible\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/121444/Independent_Review_of_Prevent_-_One_year_on_progress_report_accessible.pdf)



In general, but regarding freedom of speech in particular, HE provider staff members would like to see case studies and examples of best practice to help them know how to manage certain situations.

## **Training**

Across HE providers, most explained that Prevent content was typically embedded within wider training programmes or onboarding of new staff and student representatives. This often made it difficult for staff and student representatives to disentangle and reflect on Prevent-specific training. At the same time, more specialised training was often mandatory for Prevent Leads and those in safeguarding or student facing roles, given they are most likely to come across a Prevent-related incident or concern. Also, those who were involved in managing and booking events received specific training to do with managing the events and any Prevent concerns that may arise with that.

Where they were able to comment, respondents explained that provider-led training would typically entail a high-level overview of the Prevent policy as part of broader conversations around safeguarding. More specialised training tended to go into more depth and was usually delivered by an external provider to those in relevant Prevent and/or safeguarding roles.

Overall staff and Prevent Leads thought that the Prevent training they had received was effective, although there were areas for improvement, including being more specific for their own HE institution.

## **Freedom of speech**

Whilst HE institutions did note the delicate balancing act between freedom of speech and the Prevent duty, there seemed to be a general understanding that events and talks go ahead regardless, given they have the appropriate mitigations (such as involving a moderator, offering a counter view and ticketing the event). Staff at HE providers highlighted the benefits of ensuring full freedom of speech be maintained.

Freedom of speech often came up as a challenging area to cover however, with many staff and student representatives describing it as the most difficult area to manage. Prevent Leads called for a central information source, which sits externally and can be used by HE institutions to access and share information, and some sector-wide guidance and examples of best practice in regard to issues relating to freedom of speech and areas of concern.

## Introducing a network of speakers

Respondents were also asked directly about the proposal in Recommendation 33, to introduce a network of speakers to speak to students and staff about counter-radicalisation work and its benefits.

Prevent Leads all felt that this would be beneficial, but there were slightly more mixed views among staff. While some agreed it would be useful, and felt it would be trustworthy, others thought it would be a waste of resource and would not be used. This was because they already had resources and guidance that they relied on and trust such as their DfE Regional Prevent Coordinator and / or because it could duplicate the training they already have in place. There was also a concern that it could potentially be construed as 'watering down' freedom of speech or allowing too much government involvement in the institution.

# 1. Introduction and methodology

## Background and context

In 2021, the government appointed William Shawcross CVO to conduct an Independent Review of Prevent, a strand of the government's counter-terrorism strategy. A report of that review was published in 2023 [Independent Review of Prevent's report and government response - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/reports/2023/independent-review-of-prevent) and included two recommendations for the Department for Education (DfE) which the department accepted. These looked at how Higher Education (HE) providers might be better supported to 1) assess the risk of radicalisation across events with external speakers and 2) address any anti-Prevent sentiment they may come across within their institution. These two recommendations are detailed in full below.

### **Recommendation 28:**

*“Higher education staff responsible for authorising on-campus events with external speakers should be provided with training on how to manage and assess risk. Where necessary this should include conducting effective due diligence checks, and guidance on how to balance statutory obligations under the Prevent duty with the legal requirement to protect freedom of speech.”*

### **Recommendation 33:**

*“Develop specific measures to counter the anti-Prevent campaign at Universities. Higher and further education coordinators should work closely with institutional safeguarding leads to co-ordinate activities for students and staff which directly take-on and challenge disinformation about Prevent. The Department for Education should develop a network of speakers who are able to speak to students and staff about counter-radicalisation work and its benefits.”*

In response, DfE commissioned IFF Research to undertake research surrounding the implementation of the Prevent duty in HE providers in England. The purpose of this research is to help DfE better understand what further support or guidance might be required to help providers protect students and staff from risks of radicalisation. There were two strands to this. These are aligned with the two recommendations outlined above, and look at provider's activities around:

1. Addressing anti-Prevent sentiment and disinformation.
2. Assessing the risk of radicalisation across events with external speakers.

There was a significant overlap in the findings across these strands. As such, this report merges the findings where relevant.

## Research objectives

The objectives considered across both strands of the research were as follows:

- What evidence is there of the extent and nature of misconceptions or anti-Prevent sentiment on-campus?
- Have providers sought information on the Prevent programme, and if so, where did they look for that?
- What is their current approach to tackling concerns and anti-Prevent sentiment on campus?
- What practical steps, guidance and/or support has the most potential to help HE staff and student representatives to advocate for Prevent on campus?
- What current processes and due diligence are undertaken by HE providers in relation to authorising events with external speakers? And whether there are any gaps in their approach?
- How could training be strengthened or what support could be provided to ensure that any risks are managed effectively?

## Methodology

The research was qualitative by design, involving a series of in-depth interviews and group sessions with Prevent Leads (Phase 1) as well as student representatives and university staff (Phase 2).

### Interviews with Prevent Leads: Phase 1

The first phase of the research involved in-depth interviews with 16 Prevent Leads at HE institutions, who were responsible for the implementation and delivery of the Prevent agenda. Of the Prevent Leads included in this research, all had a range of other roles including safeguarding, operational and compliance responsibilities. Once the participating HE providers were identified by DfE and their corresponding Vice Chancellors contacted, the Prevent Leads were identified and their details passed on to IFF Research, who then recontacted them to take part in the research.

These interviews took place online and lasted for around one hour between 31 July to 18 August 2023. The subject areas covered are outlined below:

- Addressing anti-Prevent sentiment and disinformation: these interviews covered levels of understanding of the Prevent duty, radicalisation concerns, anti-Prevent sentiment and disinformation and how HE providers might respond, and training on Prevent.

- Assessing the risk of radicalisation across events with external speakers: these interviews covered event organisation, Prevent-related concerns at events, and associated training. Conversations naturally covered broader topics as well, such as general levels understanding of the Prevent duty.

The 16 Prevent Leads were divided into three groups: Group 1 looked at addressing anti-Prevent sentiment and disinformation (5 providers), Group 2 considered approaches to assessing the risk of radicalisation across events with external speakers (5 providers), and Group 3 looked across both areas (6 providers)

## **Focus groups with student representatives and staff: Phase 2**

The next phase of the research consisted of focus groups with staff and student representatives. Participants were mostly recruited through the Prevent Leads that took part in Phase 1 and through leads generated via desk research. We also took a snowballing approach. This involved recruiting via those who had already agreed to take part in the focus groups.

If an individual agreed to participate, they were asked to complete a short recruitment survey. This looked to establish their role at the HE provider and how confident they would be answering questions on the two topics. Responses to this survey were assessed to identify eligible participants. This included confirming that they were staff or student representatives at one of 16 HE institutions included in this research, and that they would be confident discussing questions on at least one of the two topics areas (anti-Prevent sentiment and disinformation and organisation of events with external speakers). Individuals that were deemed eligible for the focus groups were then contacted to take part.

The focus groups took place online and lasted for around one hour. Fieldwork took place between 7 November 2023 and 5 January 2024.

A total of 21 focus groups were completed across 9 HE providers, with 45 individuals interviewed including with 17 student representatives and 28 HE institution and student union staff. The student representative participants included student union presidents and officer, mentors, and wellbeing officers.

For ease, these sessions are referred to as focus groups throughout the report, however it is important to note that these were split between focus groups (containing 3+ individuals), paired depths and one-to-one interviews.

The groups were also split into three: those focused on anti-Prevent sentiment and disinformation (10 groups), those focused on assessing the risk of radicalisation across events with external speakers (7 groups), and a combined category (4 groups). The topic guides covered similar questions to those covered in Phase 1, giving us a rounded view of each issue across different audiences.

A detailed breakdown of the groups is provided in Table 1 overleaf.

**Table 1. Focus group composition**

Topic	Groups	Total student rep participants	Total staff participants	Total
Assessing the risk of radicalisation across events with external speakers.	2 student rep groups 1 staff group 4 staff depths 3 student rep depths <b>10 total</b>	9	8	17
Addressing anti-Prevent sentiment and disinformation	1 student rep group 4 staff groups 2 student rep depths <b>7 total</b>	4	11	15
Both	2 staff groups 1 mixed group 2 student rep depths <b>4 total</b>	4	9	13
Total	21	17	28	45

## Report outline

Findings from this research are split across the following chapters:

- Chapter 1: Introduction and methodology
- Chapter 2: Understanding, disinformation and anti-Prevent sentiment
- Chapter 3: Radicalisation concerns
- Chapter 4: Events with external speakers
- Chapter 5: Training
- Chapter 6: Summary and conclusions

## 2. Understanding, disinformation and anti-Prevent sentiment

This chapter explores levels of understanding of the Prevent duty across providers, alongside findings related to the disinformation and any anti-Prevent sentiment.

### Understanding of the Prevent duty

As anticipated, both Prevent Leads and the staff involved in their HE institution's Prevent steering group had a good understanding of the Prevent duty. The makeup of these steering groups varied by HE provider, however, all consisted of both academic and non-academic staff. The purpose of these steering groups was to ensure the implementation and delivery of the Prevent agenda, alongside the Prevent Lead. In addition to those with more direct awareness of the Prevent duty, staff in student-facing roles also have a greater level of understanding of the Prevent duty, this included those in roles such as safeguarding, wellbeing, inclusion, human resources, security, facilities, events and the Student Union staff.

There was a general consensus that students and staff outside of these roles would typically have a more limited knowledge, particularly as exposure to Prevent-related incidents were rare. Some of the roles mentioned in this context included those leading student societies, student union representatives in voluntary (not sabbatical or salaried) roles, and those new to their positions.

“I think it's understood, but I think sometimes it's just temporarily forgotten.” – *HE provider staff*

It was also noted that Prevent was not a subject area that often generated interest amongst one provider's student body, in contrast with topics such as the cost-of-living. Others explained that levels of awareness would vary due to the fact that university training around Prevent typically went into different levels of detail depending on the target audience and their role within the institution.<sup>3</sup>

“[There] should be a basic level across all staff, with some who have better understanding including those who are student facing (e.g. security), [and] those on the staff advisory group. Those in student conduct will have a greater understanding, [as] their training goes into more depth.” – *Prevent Lead*

Not all participants felt able to comment, however. A handful explained that it was difficult to pinpoint levels of understanding at larger institutions, for example.

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<sup>3</sup> There is more information regarding Prevent training in Chapter 5.

“Speaking openly and honestly, in an organisation with 6,000 staff and 30,000 students, I think it's impossible to know that everybody is aware of it.” – *HE provider staff*

Nevertheless, most Prevent leads reported that all staff across their institution should have a basic understanding of Prevent given it was covered under wider safeguarding policies and procedures. It is worth noting that some staff reported a lack of clarity about where Prevent sat within this as a result, however.

“We do so much as a HE Institution in terms of safeguarding and welfare and mental health that I think it all gets a little bit mixed up.” - *HE provider staff*

## Anti-Prevent sentiment

Across all audiences it was reported that staff and students with an awareness of the Prevent duty were accepting of it and understood the role that it plays in safeguarding students at their HE institution.

“I think it's become fairly well embedded now and understood and that's partly the experience that people have had both at work and then what happens in the outside world they understand why we need to do this. It started off with quite a lot of suspicion among the academic staff. That was many years ago, when Prevent first came in. But as our safeguarding operations have matured, that's become more and more important and we approach Prevent as an embedded part of safeguarding now and I think that's made us more effective.” – *Prevent Lead*

“From [HE institution's] perspective the anti-Prevent sentiment isn't encountered, I would say it's almost non-existent... We don't have a particularly unionised or politicised student body. It's doesn't come up as an issue” – *Prevent Lead*

A handful of examples of anti-Prevent sentiment and/or disinformation *were* given, however. One Prevent Lead felt that amongst some staff and students at their institution the Prevent duty was exclusively allied to discriminating against Muslim students, for example. To combat this misconception, they did a myth-busting session and put more information about this on the HE institution's website. They also added further information explaining what the Prevent duty was all about and how they are committed to equality, diversity and inclusion.

Some Prevent Leads and staff also raised concerns that the Prevent duty was associated with certain racial and religious groups, and there is less understanding about potentially more common issues, such as misogynistic and extreme political views.

“There is a danger that Prevent is always associated with certain racial and religious groups, and actually the interesting thing for our Prevent agenda is that [HE institution location] and the surrounding area has far more of an issue with the



extreme right-wing. So, I think staff generally understand Prevent well, but when they think about Prevent, they think about the news stories rather than thinking automatically about local context” – *Prevent Lead*

Others also surmised that the prevalence of anti-Prevent sentiment would likely fluctuate, depending on popular media. Some wondered whether there would be a resurgence in anti-Prevent sentiment as a result of increased student interest in freedom of speech and managing protests around the situation in Gaza, for example. Another member of staff raised this in the context of Amnesty International’s November 2023 call for the abolition of the duty. They did not detect a rise in anti-Prevent sentiment as a result however. Going further back, one Prevent Lead talked about the 2015 ‘Preventing Prevent’ campaign from the National Union of Students (NUS), which *did* filter down to their Student Union. The response to this specific example is covered in the next section (“Responding to anti-Prevent Sentiment”).

## Responding to anti-Prevent Sentiment

Although recent examples of anti-Prevent sentiment were rare, it was generally agreed that any cause for concern would be raised with the Prevent Lead, relevant members of staff and/or the Student Union. Across each of the Prevent Leads interviewed, the most common response was to have open and honest conversations with the staff or student representatives who had concerns about the Prevent duty.

“If you were to be dismissive, or try and clamp down, I don’t think those things are helpful in the circumstances. Particularly where there is a degree of political and ideological association with Prevent. Actually, creating a forum in which you can talk through different perspectives and explain the HE Institution’s position is likely to be more successful than ignoring it or trying to force it underground.” – *Prevent Lead*

Often Prevent Leads noted that it worked well when student representatives and staff, who had concerns or queries about the Prevent duty, were actively involved in their Prevent steering groups so that they are able to discuss these concerns or queries. This was the approach taken in response to the 2015 ‘Preventing Prevent’ issue noted above, for example. Other HE providers talked about including information on the Prevent duty in newsletters distributed by the HE provider and/or on their intranet, so that staff and students are able to stay up to date on these matters.

“That level of engagement, and them being round that table helps ensure [anti-Prevent sentiment] doesn’t develop and that if it does, they get an early sense of it” – *Prevent Lead*

It should be noted that whilst Prevent Leads and staff explained that these types of approaches would be taken, approaches to anti-Prevent sentiment have not been ‘stress-tested’, given the infrequent nature of these matters.

### 3. Radicalisation concerns

In this chapter we explore the frequency and context surrounding radicalisation concerns and provider's approaches to dealing with them. Most of the detail on this topic was explored exclusively in the Prevent Leads interviews, however, anecdotal findings from the student representative and staff focus groups are included where relevant.

#### Prevalence and identification of radicalisation incidents

Prevent Leads were asked to detail whether there had been any radicalisation concerns at their HE provider, with most able to cite a handful of examples. All audiences noted that this was rare, however, and limited to a few times in a year. Such incidents also ranged in severity and context.

These concerns were typically identified via students, student facing staff and web-filtering systems put in place by IT departments. In most cases, if and when a concern was identified, it would be escalated and reported to the Prevent Lead, who would then make a decision about what action was required. Some challenges in identifying concerns were noted by respondents however, which included:

- The context of different radicalisation incidents is changing constantly, making it difficult to “keep up”.
- Safeguarding and Prevent-related issues are less likely to be identified if they are happening outside of the HE providers' property and grounds (e.g., in privately rented accommodation).
- Staff also mentioned difficulties identifying Prevent-related risks when they manifest as subtle changes in behaviour, such as individuals becoming withdrawn, which could equally be treated as a safeguarding issue.
- A handful of staff at larger HE providers flagged that the points of escalation were likely clearest at institutions with fewer staff and students. This was simply because there would be fewer people to navigate.

HE providers could benefit from further guidance from DfE on how to resolve these challenges.

In the context of such issues, two Prevent Leads noted that they now have a centralised 'Report and Support' system in place, where safeguarding and Prevent-related concerns are raised. Report and Support systems are often online platforms where staff and students can report any safeguarding related concerns either anonymously or with their contact details appended. These Prevent Leads felt that this was an effective way of identifying issues quickly and dealing with them effectively. With regards to the lack of clarity around points of escalation, it was explained that it was vital to have clear internal

processes in place for staff who were more likely to have a concern escalated to them, so that they are able to forward this on to the relevant individual.

## Responding to incidents of radicalisation

Support sought to resolve Prevent-related concerns was dependent on the nature of the incident. Less severe cases were dealt with internally by the Prevent Lead and Prevent steering groups. This was often in liaison with other departments, safeguarding and academic roles, as relevant. In more severe cases, either the DfE Prevent Coordinator was consulted or the police were involved (or both) and a referral was made. At some providers, intervention specialists had been utilised who were asked to discuss the incident with the student concerned and to provide them with information, in an attempt to reduce extremist views used to legitimise terrorism.

Examples of less severe cases included concerns that, after exploration, were not indicative of radicalisation or relevant for Prevent. In one staff focus group it was recalled how a student was flagged, via a web-filtering system, for looking at how to make a gun. However, after further investigation it emerged that they were conducting research as part of their video game design course. Another member of staff from a separate HE provider recalled a similar example whereby a student completed an assignment on Irish rebel songs used by the IRA. However, as it was related to their course, it was not escalated further. Both of these examples highlight the need for pre-emptive communication from academics to Prevent Leads if their students are researching any topics which could be linked to radical behaviour, and guidance for students on what they should and should not search for online should be issued, to avoid unnecessary concern.

“They should be guided by the academic as to which are the best sites to look at... to ensure that obviously they're going on the right type of sites, not ones that are blocked [or get flagged].” – *Staff member*

An example of a more severe case – which occurred within the last few years – included an incident whereby a student brought a ‘BB gun’, a type of air gun, into their accommodation and had been referring to a white supremacist, extreme right-wing terrorist group. This was reported by a student and was escalated immediately to the police, who visited the student and removed the BB gun from their possession. The Prevent Lead spoke to their DfE Prevent Coordinator and made a disclosure to SO15, a Specialist Operations branch within London's Metropolitan Police Service, who they had a good working relationship with. SO15 agreed to speak with the student to establish whether there was a risk of extreme right-wing views and radical activity. It was concluded that the student should be referred to mental health support and the case was not taken any further in terms of criminal proceedings.

As mentioned earlier, most Prevent leads reported that all staff across their institution should have a basic understanding of Prevent due to the fact it was covered under wider safeguarding policies and procedures. Echoing this, Prevent Leads noted that their HE institutions had been dealing with all safeguarding issues for a long time and had effective procedures in place as a result. In this context, there was confidence that all staff and students were well equipped to identify specific Prevent-related concerns.

“It’s a very mature process that we’ve had over a number of years, it’s very well established” – *Prevent Lead*

As such, Prevent Leads did not express a need for further support from DfE beyond what is already provided, to help resolve these incidents.

Among the staff and student representatives interviewed, they also had confidence in their ability to identify a radicalisation concern and escalate this in the appropriate manner.

## 4. Events with external speakers

This chapter looks at how HE providers plan events with external speakers and what they do to anticipate and manage risk. It gives an overview of student representative and staff understanding of these risks and processes and their views on the efficacy of these.

### Processes for booking external speakers

Descriptions of event booking systems were broadly the same across the different audiences involved in this research, albeit to varying levels of detail depending on the role of each respondent and their associated experience.

Most descriptions centred on the need for staff and/or students to submit paperwork to the events department. This was the same whether it was an online versus on-campus event or student versus staff-led.

Not all paperwork/forms were compulsory for students and staff to complete, however. Some explained they were only required to do so if they felt there was indeed a risk. Online events, or those more ad-hoc and informal in nature (e.g., those held by student societies or individuals) were not always made known to providers and therefore not always subject to the same risk assessment processes.

### Booking form contents

Booking forms tended to cover the event location, its content and theme, and details of the target audience. It was usually through such forms that event organisers would confirm whether any external speakers would be involved. Where this was the case, further information was often provided, including a brief overview of the individual and reasons for inviting them. The amount and type of information required on external speakers as part of the booking form varied across HE providers. In some cases they were required before any contact with the potential speaker was made.

Alongside this, some organisers of events with external speakers talked about the need to conduct a risk assessment. This would typically be part of a wider risk assessment for the event looking at fire risk or other health and safety issues.

“The principal organiser would be asked to complete the online risk assessment, which requires them to do a little bit of research into the speakers that they have invited in order to flag early any sort of concerns they have about whether or not the speaker would adhere to HE Institution expectations.” – *HE provider staff*

“[there is] always a risk form that is sent out letting you know the requirements. If all of these are covered then can you proceed with inviting an external speaker” – *Student representative*

## Overall understanding of the process among staff and students

Staff and student representatives with hands on experience of organising an event were naturally the most knowledgeable about the overall process. Those with more limited experience still demonstrated a reasonable understanding of appropriate steps one might look to take, such as screening for concerning attitudes or sensitive topics. Additionally – linking back to earlier findings – it was often surmised that most colleagues would be capable of identifying concerns if needed, and/or would know where to go for advice.

“Once it’s communicated, I do believe it would be very well understood by everyone and everyone would know straight away what they would need to do. Everything is very well documented and written down... it’s a nice process to follow” – *Student representative*

Staff tended to feel that as long as a risk was identified and passed on to a safeguarding officer, then it would be fully dealt with through the process.

Providing its recognised and it hits a safeguarding person again, it should trajectory into the Prevent review element. I'm fairly confident if they've picked up something, they would do that.” – *HE provider staff*

## Knowledge of risk assessment processes

Risk assessment was often described as the most technical stage in the process. It was again noted, across all audiences, that the need to escalate a risk with an external speaker had been rare, with more general health and safety concerns far more common and that these concerns didn’t need to be considered in a Prevent context.

“I think it's also fair to say that of the 1% [of events flagged] only a small percentage of those are looked at from a Prevent lens. Quite often it's more a health and safety lens than a Prevent lens.” – *Student representative*

As seen earlier, this often made it difficult for staff and students, excluding those with extensive Prevent or events responsibilities, to give a detailed account of the processes involved, particularly in the context of Prevent specifically. As also seen earlier, this was most often the case among those who had less experience with organising events. Many of the student representatives we spoke to did not organise events as part of their role; they were sources of advice, support and advocacy around safeguarding rather than being responsible for event organisation.

“I don't really know the process, but I think you have to send an application probably to the school, to the student union and then student takes it to the other places where it gets checked.” – *Student representative*

There is training for societies on how to fill out risk assessments, but how many do this training or are aware of it is not always tracked. One Student Union salaried staff member suggested roughly half complete the training. Another staff member suggested that smaller, newer societies exerted less diligence with training and understanding Prevent. This sometimes made it difficult for group participants to comment on the efficacy of the training.

"There wasn't really training [that I] could go along to, to... understand how we identify a risk" – *HE provider staff*

Resources, such as guides providing advice, are available beyond training, but there is some indication that student society organisers or staff may not be aware that these resources exist. Particularly in the case of student representatives, there was a feeling that they could easily look up where to go for advice but were unable to specify what they would do in light of a Prevent risk in the interview.

"I already have my CEO around me and I can easily just talk to my CEO and ... have a conversation. Then we have wellbeing staff with a better understanding of how to solve this particular issue, but for everything, your manager is your number one go to point to report a concern like this." – *Student representative*

In contrast, one staff member expressed concern that there is not enough resource to engage or support students.

"I would love to have more staff resource so we can much more regularly check in with groups because I think you know where we get issues. Because committee members have stopped doing their role and not telling everyone and or they're like kind of struggling alone or they're just getting confused about how to do stuff" – *HE provider staff*

## The process of risk assessments

Those who *were* able to elaborate explained that risk assessments for events and external speakers tended to look at issues related to health and safety, publicity and freedom of speech. Initial checks would be made by staff at the HE provider and/or student union, who would assess publicly available material about the individual. For example, they may check social media pages or look to see if the speaker has been reported to be associated with any particular extremist groups.

One example raised in an interview was a speaker who had known connections to an advocacy organisation that had previously attended events that caused tension among attendees because of a radicalisation risk. The HE provider knew they would need to put mitigations in place<sup>4</sup>, having read about events involving speakers from that organisation

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<sup>4</sup> More detail on this can be found in the 'Mitigating Risks' section of the report.

where security was required. They also considered who is likely to attend the event, where it will take place and the wider context of what else is happening on campus or around the HE provider.

## Escalating risk

Once a risk has been identified, it would usually be added as an agenda item for the Prevent steering group, so that risks and mitigations could be covered at the next meeting. On occasion senior roles such as Heads of School were notified as well. Student representatives reported that in the first instance a topic was more likely to be raised as a concern and the speaker subsequently checked if the intended event was likely to be controversial.

Some Prevent Leads made use of external sources for advice and support to assess the risk of a potential speaker. Additionally, others would work collaboratively with the Students Union where appropriate. In terms of external sources, Prevent Leads mentioned:

- Good relationships with their regional DfE Regional Prevent Coordinator, who they will consult about events on a regular basis
- Local police
- An external speaker panel (separate to the Prevent steering group chaired by their general council) that could be contacted for advice. This was raised by one Prevent Lead and consisted of directors of communications and media, security, and one nominated senior academic.

One member of staff at an HE provider noted that if a Prevent-related issue did arise at one of their events, an incidence report would be created by their security team and be shared more widely with the Prevent steering group, students' services and corporate communications teams, and on occasion, the police.

## Mitigating risks

The overriding sense from Prevent Leads was a desire for events to go ahead and for external speakers to attend. While Prevent issues and safeguarding were seen as important, they should – as far as possible – not obstruct the facilitation of discussion and debate from as wide a degree of viewpoints as possible. With this in mind, they will look for mitigations to allow events to go ahead successfully, and for speakers to attend.

“For external speakers...ultimately for my approval or not, we tend to set the bar quite high in terms of seeking to not interfere.” - *Prevent Lead*



Said mitigations were often curated during initial discussions about whether to host an event, as part of Prevent or safeguarding panels or when soliciting advice from DfE Regional Prevent Coordinators or the police. Several examples were given:

- Having a neutral or strong chair
- Facilitating and encouraging events from opposed perspectives to occur on campus to ensure balance. This works on a longer-term basis, diffusing any unrest from groups who feel they will be granted an equal platform and be treated evenly.
- Additional security
- Requesting transcripts of the talk or presentation slides ahead of time, though acknowledge this should be balanced with Freedom of Speech.
- Limiting the circulation of promotional materials from groups that contain extremist narratives
- Ensuring the HE provider had control of online meetings so they could mute or eject participants where necessary and have management of any recordings. Again, this should be balanced with Freedom of Speech.
- Ticketing events, to allow event organisers to keep track of who is attending and monitor numbers to ensure they can be managed and if necessary, there are enough members of security present.
- Disabling comments from an online event

In one focus group, a staff member explained that events on more sensitive and potentially inflammatory subjects would require recommendations for how that event will be run in order to keep it lawful and safe. These recommendations would come from a Prevent steering group, who may inform the recommendations with consultation from DfE Regional Prevent Coordinators or the police.

“We would create an incident record. It would probably come to me in the first instance or my deputy, and then we would fire it straight away to those key people in terms of director, student services, corporate comms, who's the sort of main executive group member for Prevent.” – *HE provider staff*

## Reflecting on the process

When asked whether there were any areas for improvement when it comes to booking and hosting external speakers, the majority reported that there was minimal to none. This was usually because of the perception that the profile of speakers coming to the HE institution did not pose any radicalisation risk and Prevent Leads often commented that their processes had rarely been implemented and tested as a result. Other possible gaps in the process were also noted. We explore these next.

## Length of time taken

Best practice was for event submissions to take place in good time to allow a detailed review where necessary, and for the event to happen prior to a Prevent or safeguarding panel meeting so that the speaker could be reviewed as an agenda item prior to being confirmed for the event. This did pose a couple of challenges, however.

Firstly, there could occasionally be cases where applications made to run an event were made without sufficient notice. While examples of this happening were rare, Prevent Leads reported that they would delay an event in order for it to be checked sufficiently.

Secondly, one student representative pointed to the fact that the risk could have changed or evolved since the original form was submitted (due to the time elapsed). They explained that they like to renew risk assessments on the day of an event as a result, but that there was a chance others did not.

“Sometimes in my case, six months in advance and you look at the event at the current climate at the time and things might have changed so that you've just got to revisit it and think about what else might need to be considered on the day.” - *Student Representative*

## Resourcing challenges

A salaried member of Student Union staff expressed concern that the legislation puts them under pressure with the limited resource at their disposal (and another expressed concern at being able to monitor a large organisation with thousands of staff and students). There were also some concerns about events taking place that the HE provider was not aware of and as such could have little control over. This might be a talk or an event that was more informal and not officially submitted, or one taking place off-campus.

“You literally can't have eyes and ears everywhere. So that, if I'm being frank, that would be my worry about the whole thing.” – *Prevent Lead*

While there was confidence that relevant staff, Student Union sabbatical staff and society presidents knew the importance of officially registering all events and speakers, there was a feeling that perhaps other students might not. One Prevent Lead gave an example where an unofficial event took place as a result. It was only noticed after the event had taken place, when a member of staff noticed a poster detailing the event, which included a guest speaker. Although it was an event that would have easily passed a risk assessment, it hadn't gone through the official channels.

Some also talked about a desire for more joined up working across different university departments. Indeed, others felt there was an overreliance on event organisers conducting due diligence, which risked issues going unreported.

“Maybe it's around developing a better system for the future where we're kind of working a bit more jointly rather than customer services and buildings doing it all.” – *Prevent Lead*

## Booking form limitations

As mentioned, not all event booking forms were compulsory for students and staff to complete. Some staff involved in the Prevent duty were concerned that this could allow risks to go unnoticed. Additionally, some staff members felt that booking forms did not always directly address Prevent concerns and would rely on the individual to correctly flag concerns to be escalated for a risk assessment. Relatedly, one student suggested that forms only addressed profanities and sensitive topics rather than Prevent risks.

Other HE providers and student unions adopted a referral system which left the responsibility to identify Prevent concerns with the event organisers themselves, without this necessarily being noted by the Prevent panel as a result. Some again felt this risked issues going undetected.

“I mean you trust colleagues when they're completing the risk assessment that they are doing what it is they're supposed to be doing and we trust them to sort of flag and any sort of queries they might have in order for us to look a little bit deeper into it.” – *HE provider staff*

Some HE providers explained that they did check all forms on a case-by-case basis however, irrespective of the judgement of the event organisers (though still relying on all information, such as a list of speakers, being disclosed).

## Further support from DfE

A few Prevent Leads felt that they didn't need anything further from DfE in terms of additional support in managing external speakers at events, feeling that the onus is on them to be diligent and seek help where needed.

“I would say be vigilant. I think that's key, and to do the research, and if you're in any doubt, or you've got any concerns, then absolutely seek support from either within your own organisation, within the safeguarding team or even externally.” – *Prevent Lead*

Of those who would like more support, generally speaking, staff were more likely than students to report that they would like to see more guidance on how to manage Prevent risks and make sure their policies are fit for purpose.

“We've got academic freedom, but we've got guidance on certain [academic] research that shouldn't take place because of Prevent concerns and sometimes it feels like everything's disjointed... we've never been able to get useful case studies to share” – *HE provider staff*

One Prevent lead specifically mentioned support from DfE and how they would like more guidance on the line between lawful and unlawful speech because they found it hard to balance freedom of speech against an individual's right not to be harassed.

"It is important that we are seen to be impartial, to support freedom of speech; but, ethically, is it something that we would either want to support or not want to support? That's important for a lot of institutions, then it's about, are there commercial considerations or geopolitical type considerations about. Do we actually want to be connected with this, or is it something we should definitely be connected with? So, there's lots of considerations there." - *HE provider staff*

In general, but regarding freedom of speech in particular, HE provider staff members would like to see case studies and examples of best practice to help them know how to manage certain situations.

“I think maybe what would be good is to have like a database that then when we're having an event, we can just go to this database and we can see like the protocols for Prevent, the protocols for terrorism” – *HE provider staff*

## 5. Training

This section looks at the way training is used at HE providers for Prevent, as well as views on its effectiveness.

### Format

Across HE providers, most explained that Prevent content was typically embedded within wider training programmes or onboarding of new staff. At the same time, more specialised training was often mandatory for Prevent Leads and those in safeguarding or student facing roles, given they are most likely to come across a Prevent-related incident or concern.

Training was either delivered face-to-face or via online training modules. The latter was mentioned in the context of staff inductions, for example. In addition to training, some Prevent Leads talked about having access to information sources such as newsletters, that helped them to keep up to date on latest developments and ensure their Prevent policies continued to be relevant and fit for purpose. These newsletters were often internal and created by senior management and Prevent working groups, but there were also instances of HE institutions receiving newsletters from their regional Prevent leads. Two Prevent Leads, and one other member of HE staff also praised the resources made available by DfE, both in terms of liaising with the DfE Regional Prevent Coordinators and the resources they were signposted to.

“I think that all their [DfE] training is really good... they're really on board with it and they're proactive, they're easy to get hold of, you know, and I think it's about making sure that we remember that they're there because they're such a good, good resource.” – *Prevent Lead*.

Other examples of wider resources included the Local Authority Prevent Coordinator, information provided by the police and networks with experts in the field either in their local area or beyond. A few Prevent Leads also reported local authority-run meetings that presented local research and insight that has proven helpful.

### Content

The fact that Prevent was usually covered under a wider training programme often made it difficult for staff and student representatives to disentangle and reflect on Prevent-specific training. This didn't necessarily mean that they did not seek such training however, with many expressing a clear interest in this area.

Where they were able to comment, respondents explained that provider-led training would typically entail a high-level overview of the Prevent policy as part of broader conversations around safeguarding. Those involved in discussions around events with

external speakers often had training that covered their institution's end-to-end process for booking external speakers for events, including when and how risks might be identified and reported, with those far removed from events training had not received this training.

“We all have to attend training and an induction. Induction will give information on the kind of events, data protection, these things.” – *Student representative*

More specialised training tended to go into more depth and was usually delivered by an external provider, to staff and student representatives in relevant Prevent and/or safeguarding roles. Trusted examples included the DfE Regional Prevent Coordinator, the Home Office, an accredited training board or organisations such as the NSPCC. Training topics mentioned include the Human Rights Act and the European Convention on Human Rights as well as issues related to freedom of speech, access and equality. Those involved in discussions around events with external speakers talked specifically about external training that advised on suitable checks/screening processes and general tips about things to consider.

Prevent Leads reported that Student Unions were responsible for managing their own training but that both sides often worked closely together to share information and resources. Prevent Leads would also offer training to student representatives.

Some staff described the training as 'dry', particularly for those who are not regularly involved in the topic. Additionally, a few mentioned that incorporating it under online induction training could lead to it feeling like a chore or tick box exercise. Indeed, there was some suggestion that improving how engaging the training was would mean it was needed less frequently, with staff taking it more seriously.

In this context, it is worth noting that there was a general feeling amongst Prevent Leads that external training was more engaging. Some explained that it often involved more interactive elements, for example.

Others mentioned that training that was more tailored to their institution would be more impactful, rather than more general Prevent training that covers the wider breadth of the education system. They noted that HE providers exist in a very different space to primary or secondary schools, for example, and as such, different challenges needed addressing. Some talked about there being more scope at [HE Provider] for open debate in the name of research, and a stronger imperative to adhere to freedom of speech as a result.

“Quite often we'll be compared to secondary education, further education and because of the sort of disparate nature of a HE Institution and it doesn't quite work like that. And we've never been able to get useful case studies to share or Prevent training or examples of, you know, this is an external speaker where it got a little bit controversial, or it got out of hand from a Prevent perspective and this is how it was brought back in line. I think that that training and support would be useful.” – *HE provider staff*

Some also expressed a desire for more detailed sessions, potentially to be run by DfE in some capacity, again with examples of best practice, ideally on event risk assessments.

“I think there's a bit of a paucity of training in this space actually. There is general Prevent sort of awareness EDI [Equality, Diversity & Inclusion] thing, but I don't think I've seen proper sort of Prevent threat risk assessment training.” – *Prevent Lead*

Staff who were engaged with organising events reported that the training around events was effective and they were familiar with those processes but there was a sense that wider awareness of Prevent was less well understood. Staff and student representatives in the focus groups felt there was more focus around putting on and running events, rather than training around more general knowledge of the Prevent duty.

A small proportion of Prevent Leads interviewed also flagged that they have a challenge in terms of striking the balance between giving people enough information to be able to recognise and refer concerns, and not overwhelming them with information or trying to make everyone an ‘expert’.

## **Efficacy**

Some Prevent Leads cited difficulties assessing the impact of the training and the extent to which it had been successfully embedded, given Prevent-related incidents were rare and the training therefore not put into practice. Nevertheless, most described their processes and training surrounding Prevent as effective and comprehensive. While the majority pointed to possible areas of improvement, as described below, a small proportion felt there were no gaps in their approach at all. Of these, one explained that their Prevent advisory group would do the Home Office training whenever it was updated and believed this to be enough. That said, they were open to making changes if a need was identified. Additionally, some suggestions were made across all audiences in terms of possible improvements.

## **Keeping up**

One Prevent Lead thought that their training was effective but that it was difficult to keep it up to date. They felt that risks were changing all the time and while they could be happy with their training provision one month, it was necessary to review and change it for the next. For this reason, they delivered updated training as part of their Prevent board every month.

Another challenge was the scale of the required training. One Prevent Lead discussed the challenges of accurately conveying the message and necessary practices of Prevent across a large audience, for example, particularly where there may be some contextual

nuances for different roles or backgrounds in some instances. For example, the issues raised in Politics essays or discourse may be very different from an Engineering school.

“It's about continuing to get out that message and it's hard because we've got such a huge audience, and a multicultural audience, so that's where the challenge is, within staff and students, and we have to kind of tailor that [training] to individual needs on occasion.” – *Prevent Lead*

A couple felt that some communication across the sector had faltered since the COVID-19 pandemic and felt that support networks and coordination across HE providers needed some rebuilding.

“I think, a little bit of a road map of what the resources and guidance currently are and how to contact and access them would be really helpful.” – *Prevent Lead*

Others raised challenges around training student representatives given the temporary nature of their post, similarly with temporary or freelance staff.

“I just mentioned we do have quite a lot of freelancers and so I'm wondering about, you know, if that's a gap.” – *Prevent Lead*

## Freedom of speech

Whilst HE providers did note the delicate balancing act between freedom of speech and the Prevent duty, there seemed to be a general understanding that events and talks go ahead even if there are some concerns. Given they have the appropriate mitigations<sup>5</sup>, staff at HE providers highlighted the benefits of ensuring full freedom of speech be maintained.

“I think it's probably fair to say our primary concern would be allowing the event to happen with our freedom of speech obligations but maintaining student and colleague safety at all times.” – *Staff member*

Freedom of speech often came up as a challenging area to cover however, with many staff and student representatives describing it as the most difficult area to manage. Prevent Leads called for a central information source and some sector-wide guidance and examples of best practice in this context. One Prevent Lead felt this was especially relevant in the case of having external speakers who may be going to more than one venue and there should be a standard set of practices, so the speaker is treated consistently across institutions. However, it must be noted that this could be problematic as institutions would also need to assess the wider context of each event on a case-by-

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<sup>5</sup> More can be found on this in Chapter 6 under the ‘Mitigating Risks’ section.



case basis (e.g., the chosen topic, the host institution and its specific staff and student body, the audience etc.).

## Introducing a network of speakers

Respondents were also asked directly about the proposed Recommendation 33, where a network of speakers would be introduced to speak to students and staff about counter-radicalisation work and its benefits. Prevent Leads all felt that this would be beneficial. There was little detail in terms of who this might be effective for, rather a feeling that personal stories would provide engagement and insight that would help staff and students alike understand and appreciate the importance of Prevent.

“If you talk about something because you’re an expert, it doesn’t always land, but if you talk about personal experience in a very compelling and compassionate way, that’s what people remember. So yeah, it potentially could be effective.” – *Prevent Lead*

When it came to staff, there were slightly more mixed views. Some staff thought it would be a helpful resource and could plug a gap that was currently faced. There were also calls for more centralised points of information which would sit external to the institution so multiple universities can access this. However, other staff were less interested. Some thought it would be a waste of resource and would not be used, as they had internal systems that already did this. Whilst others raised concern that it could potentially be construed as ‘watering down’ freedom of speech or allowing too much government involvement in the institution.

“The danger is then if you're sort of being strongly encouraged to use this particular resource each and every time, that it gets a bit more problematic, but the more options we have, the better it is for everyone.” – *HE provider staff*

In terms of currently trusted sources, respondents generally found information from the DfE as their most trusted or credible source, as well as the Home Office.

## 6. Conclusions and policy considerations

### General levels of awareness and engagement with Prevent

Prevent Leads, staff and student representatives in directly relevant roles<sup>6</sup> felt they were well informed about the Prevent duty, but others typically less so: Prevent Leads talked confidently about the duty and demonstrated a detailed understanding of the processes and support in place at their provider to help protect students and staff from risks of radicalisation. Other student representatives participating in the research were less able to talk about Prevent in detail, as were staff in less relevant roles.<sup>7</sup>

Lower levels of awareness amongst staff in less relevant roles and the wider student body was exacerbated by the fact that Prevent concerns were rare. Others also speculated that awareness specifically related to Prevent was sometimes low due to the fact that it is often not unpacked from wider safeguarding policies. The sheer size of some HE providers means it can be difficult to get a full grasp of how well people understand Prevent.

All demonstrated faith in the safeguarding and wellbeing programmes at their respective institutions, within which the detail about Prevent can be found, though feedback suggests awareness levels could be improved by making it more specific to individual HE institutions and for particular audiences.

*Policy consideration: Consider whether Prevent specific points could be more clearly differentiated within the wider safeguarding frameworks and be branded more distinctively.*

*Policy consideration: Consider making training more tailored to the provider and to the intended audience, perhaps with case study examples specific to the type of incident or situation which they may be more likely to encounter. Consider awareness-raising activities targeted specifically at students and those in less relevant roles.*

### Evidence of the extent and nature of anti-Prevent sentiment within HE providers

Because radicalisation events in HE providers are rare, the Prevent duty does not appear to be at the forefront of many staff or student minds outside of those in directly relevant

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<sup>6</sup> Alongside the Prevent steering group, such roles covered safeguarding, wellbeing, inclusion and human resources. Other departments, often with more student-facing roles, were also mentioned. Examples include security, facilities, events and the Student Union staff.

<sup>7</sup> Less relevant roles among students included those leading student societies and student union representatives in voluntary positions (not sabbatical or salaried). Less relevant staff roles included those that were not student facing and/or with remit for the Prevent duty e.g., accounting and administration staff.

roles. Alongside this, there was limited evidence of any recent anti-Prevent sentiment.<sup>8</sup> Some did surmise that the prevalence of anti-Prevent sentiment would likely fluctuate, depending on what is seen in popular media, however.

There was a general consensus that staff and students with an awareness of the Prevent duty were accepting of it and understood the role that it plays in safeguarding students at their HE institution.

## Seeking information on the Prevent programme

Prevent Leads felt very confident that they were sufficiently informed about Prevent, and had access to useful information through the Home Office, DfE, accredited organisations like NSPCC and strong relationships with their DfE Regional Prevent Coordinators or the police. In addition to training, some Prevent Leads also talked about having access to information sources such as newsletters and staff and student intranet pages. These newsletters were often internal and created by senior management or Prevent working groups. There were also instances of HE institutions receiving newsletters from their DfE Regional Prevent Coordinators.

Staff and student representatives often had not sought external information, instead reporting feeling confident that they could get sufficient advice from within the HE institution if needed.

## Current approach to tackling Prevent concerns

Broadly, there was a general confidence across all audiences in their ability to identify Prevent-related concerns and manage risk. However, feedback from these providers indicated further support could help address particular challenges.

Challenges related to identifying general concerns included:

- Monitoring for issues happening outside of HE property and grounds
- Points of escalation being less clear in very large institutions
- The fact that incidences were rare and also the vast and constantly changing nature of different threats and risks could make it difficult to “keep up”
- Difficulties identifying subtle changes, such as individuals becoming quiet and withdrawn, pointing to a need to utilise a wider range of staff e.g., cleaners or security to staff to notice warning signs in halls of residence.

With regards to events with external speakers, the main risk discussed was events taking place under the provider’s name, but without them being aware it was happening. As with

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<sup>8</sup> Where a handful incidents *were* mentioned, they had happened many years ago and were managed at the time, through a simple conversation where misconceptions were corrected.

wider Prevent concerns, others also talked about difficulties with events happening outside of university grounds.

Across all these issues, worked examples in the form of case studies was most often mentioned as a possible solution. These could be used, for example, to make staff and students more aware about the type of signs to look out for when looking to identify more surreptitious signs of risk. Prevent leads also explained that it was vital to have internal processes in place which made points of escalation clear. Indeed, two Prevent Leads explained that they now have a centralised 'Report and Support' system in place, where safeguarding and Prevent-related concerns are raised, which they felt worked effectively.

*Policy consideration: Provide information and case studies regarding the management/oversight of off-campus events, the identification of more surreptitious signs of extremist behaviour linked to terrorism, and the mitigation of events taking place without providers' knowledge.*

*Policy consideration: Provide information about ensuring clear points of escalation. This might involve considering the role of 'Report and Support' systems.*

## **Practical steps, guidance and/or support that has the most potential to help HE staff and student representatives to advocate for Prevent on campus**

Although there has not been a great need to tackle anti-Prevent sentiment due to its lack of recent prevalence in the providers we spoke to, open communication across engaged audiences and 'myth busting' resources were most often described as potentially helpful if needed. One provider also mentioned they supplemented myth-busting resources with further information about what the Prevent duty is all about and where it sits within a wider commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.

*Policy consideration: Consider the role of myth busting exercises, and how DfE may support in the creation of these.*

There were also calls for more centralised points of information which sit outside of individual providers and is accessible to all providers. This would include a roadmap of what the resources and guidance currently are, alongside the best means of accessing them.

*Policy consideration: Consider the option of a universal offer to HE providers, and how DfE teams could support this.*

Overall, it would appear there is appetite for a network of speakers, particularly among Prevent Leads to support engagement with staff and students on counter radicalisation work and its benefits. While some staff were less interested in such interventions, others could see the value. Those less interested considered that they already had internal

systems in place. Others raised concern that it could potentially be construed as ‘watering down’ freedom of speech or allowing too much government involvement in the institution.

*Policy consideration: Any ongoing development of a network of speakers should address concerns around the ‘watering down’ of freedom of speech or allowing too much government involvement in the institution.*

## **Current processes and due diligence undertaken by HE providers in relation to authorising events with external speakers<sup>9</sup>**

Broadly, in these providers, they have developed effective, fairly standardised ways to manage risk. Processes are centred on the need for staff and/or students to submit paperwork to the relevant events department. Should a risk be identified, these are assessed through the Prevent team. Checks on external speakers are undertaken through internet searches and easily sourced public information. Steering groups and other networks, sometimes including the police, have also been helpful.

However, there are inconsistencies in implementation and potential gaps in risk mitigation where clearer good practice and case studies could help ensure a more reliable response. For instance, at some providers a formal risk assessment only takes place when event organisers raise concerns during the booking process. Also, not all paperwork/forms were compulsory for students and staff to complete. For example, they were not always required for online events held by student societies, which in some cases were considered to be outside of the direct remit of HE providers and student unions.<sup>10</sup>

*Policy consideration: Provide a central resource with guidance about how best to undertake due diligence on potential speakers. As elsewhere, case studies or examples to help anchor the points made would also be useful. This could be addressed through further advice or guidance on the Freedom of Speech Act 2023 and its regulation.*

## **How training and support could be strengthened to ensure that any risks are managed effectively**

Training appeared to work well for engaged parties, i.e., those who have Prevent as part of their role. Some found it difficult to disentangle it from wider safeguarding training,

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<sup>9</sup> Subsequent to this research being carried out, we are aware that the department announced in February 2024 it will be issuing further guidance and training on managing external speakers and events by the 2024/2025 academic year. See [Independent Review of Prevent: One year on progress report \(accessible\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>10</sup> As noted in Chapter 4, these might be slightly more informal events more ad hoc in nature that would typically not involve an external speaker. Although no specific examples were given of such an event having a speaker, a couple of Prevent Leads identified this as a potential risk.

however. Others described it as dry, or a chore, with external training noted as more engaging.

Prevent Leads also asked for case studies and specific examples of best practice to help them know how to manage certain situations, both in terms of managing external speakers at events and how to identify and manage different types of radicalisation concerns.

*Policy consideration: Consider producing such case studies and examples of good practice.*



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