

EX-POST PAPER

Free speech, extremism and the prevention of radicalisation in higher education

From ‘wicked problems’ to the educational potential in the fifth ‘P’

There are no walls around universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs). The threats from extremist corners that manifest themselves in wider society also pose challenges for HEIs. How can individual institutions deal with extreme voices and extremist speakers, while protecting core values like academic freedom and freedom of speech within their walls? How can they deal with conflicting core values, such as freedom of speech for radical ideas, and the promotion of democracy? How can they safeguard students from being lured into extremism, without spying on them and losing their trust? While discussing these wicked problems in Manchester, RAN EDU experts stumbled upon an educational potential to be unleashed. And in doing so, RAN EDU identified a fifth ‘P’ for the commonly used ‘4Ps’ of modern counter terrorism.

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The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the RAN Centre of Excellence, the European Commission or any other institution, or of participants from the RAN EDU working group.

Introduction to this paper

RAN EDU believes universities, polytechnics and other HEIs have a unique and indispensable role to play in preventing and countering extremism. In a rapidly globalising world, many are concerned about climate change, the economy and technological developments. Against this background, extremism is challenging democracies and terrorism, and spreading violence and terror. Society at large (including the pillars and institutions of democracy) need to step up to these challenges.

Universities and other HEIs are such pillars of society, helping society understand challenges and potential answers. Academic freedom and ‘freedom of speech’ are core values in which each EU Member States are facing different extremist challenges. A number of countries have recently suffered terrorist attacks – both large and small in nature. Some university students and staff have personally known victims – or attackers. These dynamics, which can change overnight, define the local context for discussions on the prevention and countering of violent extremism (PCVE). The scale and nature of a PCVE approach should be designed to fit with this context. In the RAN EDU meeting, many agreed that HEIs need to be prepared, and should not be naïve.

Two ‘wicked problems’ for HEIs in preventing

This ex post paper defines the two key challenges HEIs face in relation to the prevention of radicalisation:

1. Balancing extremist voices, academic freedom and free speech;
2. Offsetting ‘spying’ on students with seeing them and safeguarding them.

A ‘wicked problem’ is a social or cultural problem that is difficult or impossible to solve for as many as four reasons: incomplete or contradictory knowledge, the number of people and opinions involved, a large economic burden, and the interconnected nature of these problems with other problems ¹.

Every wicked problem is a symptom of another problem. The interconnected nature of the problem means, for example, that a change in educational methods will cause new behaviour in student discussions. It is the aim of this approach to *improve* the situation rather than solve it. There are no right or wrong solutions, only good and bad ones. Most *social* problems can't be "fixed". Nevertheless, as there is an element of design in developing educational structures, HEIs can play a central role in mitigating the negative consequences of the wicked problems, and position the broad trajectory of education in new and more desirable directions.

¹ Rittel, Horst. (1973). Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning. *Policy Sciences*, 155-169

Wicked problem 1: Balancing free speech and extremist voices

Academic freedom and free speech are important values. These values are not only cherished and defended by the academic community, but form the pillars of a healthy democratic and prosperous society. Nonetheless, with extremist voices becoming louder, the question arises as to whether all ideas and ideologies should be presented and shared within a university's walls, or on student websites. Where should HEIs draw the line? Do they need to safeguard students from potentially radicalising messages? If the answer is 'yes', do HEIs need to prepare policies or guidelines to deal with these extremist voices?

During the RAN meeting, we identified several situations that might require a response from the higher education management:

- Students invite an external speaker known for views that are uncomfortable, upsetting or even infuriating for others;
- Students organising an event at a HEI (or outside the institution) want men and women to be seated separately;
- A staff member is organising a thinktank or a group for like-minded people with nationalistic, xenophobic or otherwise intolerant views;
- Activists from outside rally on the premises and hand out leaflets for an extremist group;
- Students voice violent extremist opinions within the HEI during classes.
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Extremism, violent extremism and agents of radicalisation

Most HEI will draw the line when students, staff or others actively promote violent extremism. Arguably, radical or extreme views might be tolerated under the pretext of free speech and academic freedom. Nevertheless, one of the key problems is that some individuals or organisations operate in the twilight zone between extremism and violent extremism. There is no watershed between radical ideas, radicalising narratives or terrorist propaganda. It is not always clear whether their organisation or message is illegal or not and when the next step towards committing violence will be taken. A speaker might not be open about their extremist ambitions or connections; he or she will start with a

*“An **agent of radicalization** is a person who uses extremist rhetoric to attract individuals with different degrees of vulnerability and who may exhibit feelings of victimization or rejection, identity malaise, or certain personal or social vulnerabilities. In response to the questions such individuals may have about their place in society, agents of radicalization offer a simplistic, black-and-white worldview that portrays certain beliefs as irreconcilable and diametrically opposed to one another.*

“Agents of radicalization, whether in the real or the virtual world (i.e. over the Internet), seek to manipulate the thoughts and legitimate perceptions of people in order to further a particular set of ideological concerns or a political agenda. Little by little, they get their audience to draw direct connections between tragedies or personal situations and broader social, economic, cultural or identity issues.”

(Taken from Centre for prevention of radicalisation, Canada)

message that looks acceptable at first, but with hindsight might have led people towards the path of violent extremism. These speakers could therefore be labelled as ‘agents of radicalisation’². These ‘agents of radicalisation’ are spreading a livid, angry or sometimes simply concerned message, without being open about an intent to incite a call to action to commit violence – towards another group or towards specific people. For example, some *dawa* initiatives ‘inviting people to Islam’ in Europe were perceived as organisations inviting people to join the religion, or asking for recognition of grievances and societal injustice. But some represented, in reality, a conveyor belt taking individuals towards joining an extremist group or even committing terrorist attacks. Examples are the British al-Muhajiroun³ and the Sharia4Belgium⁴.

Polarisation

Even if an external speaker is not an agent of radicalisation, there is the risk that external speakers might feed polarisation⁵. Polarisation threatens a healthy pedagogical climate, impacts upon the freedom that students feel they have to speak out, and eats away at willingness to listen to the others. RAN EDU discussed the management of polarisation in a 2017 meeting. In the RAN Polarisation management manual⁶, Bart Brandsma introduced four game changers⁷ that could be beneficial to HEI educators and management:

1. Change the **target audience**. Pushers portray an enemy in the other pusher. Target the middle ground – that is where the actual radicalisation is taking place. So, target the middle ground for depolarisation.
2. Change the **topic**. Move away from the identity construct chosen by the pushers and start a conversation on the common concerns and interests of those in the middle ground.
3. Change **position**. Don’t act from a position above the parties, but move towards the middle ground.
4. Change the **tone**. This is not a question of facts being right or wrong. Use mediating speech, try to engage and connect with the diverse middle ground.

Supporting HEIs with external speakers and events

Allowing or facilitating an event involving controversial or unknown speakers on controversial topics needs proper decision-making and preparation. What is known about the speaker? What is his or her background and what can we expect? Is he or she known for causing unrest? Are opposition and protest expected? Is cooperation with the police needed for security?

HEIs need support and they need to be prepared. In the UK, this support is offered by UK Prevent lead coordinators. Furthermore, there is a statutory duty for HEIs to have policy and protocols in

² A good text on agents of radicalisation can be found at the Canadian center of prevention of radicalisation leading to violence <https://info-radical.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/what-is-an-agent-of-radicalization-cprlv.pdf>.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/aug/16/anjem-choudary-convicted-of-supporting-islamic-state>.

⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31378724>.

⁵ Polarisation being defined as the process where people try to create distance or even hostility between groups by pushing an ‘us-and-them’ rhetoric based on false representations of identity.

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_polarisation_management_manual_amsterdam_06072017_en.pdf.

⁷ <https://www.polarisatie.nl/eng-home-1/>.

place to deal with external speakers. More information and practical suggestions can be found on the 'Safe campus communities' website ⁸.

Educational potential unleashed: values revived and information bubbles crushed

There is not one solution for the free speech dilemma, but in the RAN EDU discussions that took place in Manchester, three potential answers were put forward. Educational answers which open the door to positive potentials:

1. Opportunities to highlight the importance of academic freedom should be grabbed and used to start a public discussion on the challenges it embodies, including the limitations to free speech and academic freedom. A highly controversial event is the best opportunity to communicate about core values and involve staff, students and the outside world in a debate. This is living democracy in action.
2. Such situations provide an opportunity to open up echo chambers or information bubbles, by, for example, introducing counter speech at the same time and in the same place, and making sure the conditions for democratic and academic debate are met. In the Manchester meeting the UK Prevent lead coordinator explained that the police or HEIs have been reluctant to allow a speaker to visit on several occasions, but that Prevent had pleaded for the event to go ahead under certain – well organised – conditions. These could involve adding a counter speech speaker to the list of speakers. Offering opposing speakers their own event in a different place or at a different time will only feed the echo chambers of likeminded audiences.
3. The risk of potential polarisation provides an excellent opportunity to invest in the democratic potential of the middle ground. When polarising speakers visit, there is a risk that attention is focused on these polarising individuals. This is exactly the kind of attention they want. They want to be seen and they love opposition, because it will build the case for their supporters. The RAN Polarisation management manual recommends not balancing a polarising speaker with the opposing polarising pusher, but to invest in the middle ground. What do non-polarised students and staff members care about? What are their concerns and values? This external threat of polarisation is an opportunity to boost the shared democratic values of the people in the middle ground.

Defend democracy? Expand the 4Ps of counter terrorism to P5

Modern counter terrorism is often built upon four pillars, all starting with the letter 'P':

1. Protect the public;
2. Prepare to mitigate the damage caused by an attack;
3. Pursue the perpetrators;
4. Prevent people from being lured into violent extremism.

The 4 Ps can be recognised in many EU and national policies. Prevent is the 'softest' approach, but is nonetheless cast under a dark cloud because it involves preventing something terrible – the eating

⁸ <http://www.safecampuscommunities.ac.uk/guidance/external-speakers>.

away of fundamental rights and freedom, and, ultimately, fear and death. These are also efforts to prevent the manipulation and exploitation of susceptible and vulnerable individuals.

In the discussions in Manchester, seeking answers from education to the challenges of extremism led to a call for the expansion of the four Ps to include a fifth 'P'⁹. This additional, positive 'P' stands for promoting a positive and constructive range of activities to boost the public domain and the promotion of fundamental values.

Formal and informal education have the unique potential to boost democracy with activities under the fifth P. Teachers are trained and positioned to give a positive boost to democracy and fundamental values, and to enhancing societal resilience.

For radicalisation processes, a sense of not belonging is a crucial risk factor. This can be mitigated by investing in a healthy, democratic culture at universities, based on inclusion and diversion. These themes are not new for those who care about HEIs. The recent push for HEIs to contribute more to PCVE could offer a window of opportunity to invest more attention, time and other resources in democracy, inclusion and diversion. This investment could be expected to result in a lower drop-out rate and higher educational results and outcomes.

Activate students: peer-to-peer

A democratic attitude is better acquired by doing than when it is taught as an abstract concept. A sense of belonging to a community – and of having agency to deal with one's challenges and those of society – will result in democracy being embraced.

Terrorism, attacks and controversial societal developments are all topics of concern and interest for students. It is easier to engage with them on these topics than on democratic institutions and rules. There is enormous democratic potential in students engaging in PCVE, with other students as their target audience. The sheer power of peer-to-peer approaches lies in the fact that students know how their friends feel, communicate and stay informed.

Wicked problem 2: are we spying on students or seeing them? Prevent or student-welfare?

In many countries, training educators and others so they are able to recognise the signs of radicalisation and know where to refer vulnerable or radicalised students are cornerstones of approaches to preventing and countering violent extremism. Governments want educators to pay attention and pick up on potential or existing radicalisation. Educators often don't feel comfortable with this type of monitoring, which they perceive as spying on students. They are afraid it will damage the trust that is essential for their student-teacher relationship. Furthermore, educators are

⁹ More on the fifth P will be published in 'Freedom of speech in universities'. Chapter 8 - The fifth P. Higher education institutions' role in fostering democratic agency. Author: Stijn Sieckelink, Institute for Societal Resilience, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

there to educate and share knowledge. They may therefore reject the notion that radical ideas and challenging the system can be harmful.

At the same time, teachers and other education staff care about the students wellbeing, and feel a responsibility to look after their general welfare. The question therefore arises, how can a balance be found between monitoring for the sake of student welfare and the transfer of knowledge that could safeguard students from being groomed and exploited by extremist recruiters?

Seeing students, student-welfare

The problem is not that students or even educators have radical and/or challenging opinions. It is healthy to be critical and even desired in higher education. The concern lies in vulnerable students being lured into adopting intolerant and even violent ideas and behaviour. Students are vulnerable in many different ways. For this reason, it is important to perceive when students are potentially more vulnerable and in need of assistance in their personal life or education trajectory. The key lies in caring for the wellbeing of a student by seeing them as human beings besides the student identity. It lies in being aware of the risk of dropping out, becoming isolated or developing other socio-psychological issues. It is helpful to know, for example, that first-in-family students have higher drop-out rates. Likewise, students with an mostly non-western background tend to have a relative higher drop-out rate. It is in the interests of the student and the HEIs to monitor student welfare and act accordingly.

The life-event or transitional phase that students tend to be in – starting new studies, leaving their parents' home, changing town – can also make students vulnerable. It is not uncommon for students to experience new socio-psychological challenges during this period. Some examples include:

- Depression;
- Burn-out;
- Feelings of failure or loneliness;
- Substance abuse;
- Suicide and the surfacing of other, perhaps even pre-existing (identified or otherwise) mental health problems.

It is therefore in the interests of the student to have a system in place to monitor student welfare and provide support when needed. In one way, this is a matter of computer systems and data, but most importantly a human systems which requires human interaction. Student welfare requires professional monitoring as well as chaplains and other welfare staff with enough care capacity to follow up when worrying signals are spotted. Consequently, proper training for educators and staff is needed, so that they are aware of which signals could indicate a problem or a vulnerability, as well as what signals *do not*. It is in the interests of the student that educators and staff are well trained to do this.

Safeguarding students from the risk of being radicalised or recruited has a large overlap with existing student welfare. Many of the risk factors and signs of changing or worrying behaviour can be

indications of a process of radicalisation, but could also be outward signs of other problems. In this sense, mainstreaming the safeguarding of vulnerable and susceptible students and staff is the only professional response.

Salford University (UK) has successfully merged the statutory duty of training staff on the prevention of radicalisation with student welfare. The university complies with its obligations and trains its staff accordingly, but has fully integrated this with student welfare. The student and academic communities are natural partners for HEI management when it comes to putting the welfare of students first. The 'prevent' approach – so often challenged and rejected – is not even mentioned, and the UK government has no requirement for it to be so. The HEIs should be able to show that it has invested in safeguarding expertise, protocols and capacity. How it complies is up to each institution.

Key messages

Higher education contributes to prevention of violent extremism by unleashing the democratic potential for education that is inheritably grounded in its institutions.

Awareness of the risk of recruitment and exploitation of vulnerable students by extremists is best integrated into existing student welfare capacities.

Higher education provides a strong foundation for an expansion of the 4Ps of CVE to include P5. The additional 'P' promotes a positive and constructive range of activities to boost the *public* domain and the promotion of fundamental values.