

Presenting Research Evidence from the AHRC Re/presenting Islam on Campus project to the Independent Review of Prevent 2021, led by William Shawcross

Review Terms of Reference: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-terms-of-reference-for-the-independent-review-of-prevent>

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Preamble

This team has been invited to a meeting on 28th April 2021 with William Shawcross, who is leading the 2021 review of Prevent. In this document we set our reasons for engaging with the review and provide an overview of the research findings that we will share with the review.

Our research findings provide a rigorous and robust critique of Prevent and its negative impact on positive inter-religious relations, community cohesion, pluralism and freedom of expression on university campuses in the UK. We are also aware of the significant criticisms that this Prevent review has drawn from various sections of civil society including from over 450 [Islamic organisations](#) and from [human rights groups](#). These groups have decided to boycott the review due to concerns around the objectivity and seriousness of this review.

This team recognises the concerns raised by the group and organisations above as valid. Indeed, concerns expressed around Prevent's curbing of academic freedoms, silencing of dissent and curtailment of individual rights is borne out in the findings of our research project. Our research findings also uncover evidence that Prevent disproportionately impacts British Muslim communities, leading to a strengthening of negative stereotypes of these communities.

Nevertheless, we have chosen to engage with the Shawcross-led review of Prevent. This is because as academic researchers, we have an obligation to those who participated in our research. We have an ethical responsibility to at least attempt to ensure that those who make policies about them hear their voices. We thus bear witness to the stories and experiences that they shared with us.

This is not a unanimous decision and two of our team have decided not to be part of the meeting with William Shawcross, both to make a statement of this team's solidarity with those who call for the boycott and to raise concerns about the neutrality of this review. Three members of the team will attend the meeting, in order to provide policy makers with an evidence-based critique of Prevent. We hope that the participants who contributed to our research are heard.

Below we present a summary of the findings around Prevent that we will discuss with William Shawcross at our meeting.

Summary of Findings: Prevent reinforces negative views of Islam and Muslims

What follows is based on the findings of an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded research project 'Re/presenting Islam on Campus', (undertaken between 2015 and 2018). This research provides the first nationwide picture and hard evidence of how the 230,000 Muslims (8 to 9 % of the student population) experience life at UK universities and how their non-Muslim peers view them.

The project included a national survey of 2,022 students across 132 UK universities. In addition, interviews and focus groups were conducted with 253 staff and students at six higher education institutions, including four universities and two Muslim colleges of Higher Education.

The impact of the UK Government's counter-terrorism Prevent strategy emerged as a major theme because of concerns raised by Muslim staff and students, whose recent experience of higher education has been shaped by it. To summarise, Prevent has reinforced negative stereotypes of Muslims and has encouraged 'a culture of mutual suspicion and surveillance' on university campuses.

The UK government has long maintained that radicalisation is a problem in UK universities and that Prevent is an essential means of tackling it. Our research reveals that students who agree with the government line are more likely to express negative views about Islam and Muslims.

The research shows, for example, that students who see radicalisation as a problem on campus are four times more likely to disagree that Muslims have made a valuable contribution to British life.

Those who support Prevent are almost 3 times more likely to see Islam as intolerant towards non-Muslims than those who believe Prevent damages university life.

Our research is presented in a report entitled 'Islam and Muslims on UK University Campuses: perceptions and challenges'. The research also found that the Government's Prevent initiative appears to have the effect of discouraging free speech within universities. Students and staff self-censor their discussions to avoid becoming the object of suspicion and are sometimes discouraged from exploring, researching, or teaching about Islam. Only a quarter say they feel entirely free to express their views on Islam within university contexts.

While the majority of students expressed generally positive views about Islam and Muslims, 42.6% (and just under 50% of non-Muslim students) agree that Islam is a religion that discriminates against women with a further 34.8% choosing neither to agree nor disagree.

As we state in the report, "This is clearly a contentious issue and suggests there are plenty of non-Muslims who, while positively disposed to Muslims and Islam in general terms, see it in a negative way when it comes to the treatment of women."

More than 50% of students acknowledged having limited, little or no knowledge of Islam.

The report, 'Islam and Muslims on UK University Campuses: perceptions and challenges', led by SOAS University of London working with Lancaster, Durham and Coventry Universities calls for a fresh debate on future models of university citizenship. The researchers make recommendations based on their conversations with students and staff, calling on the HE sector to empower Muslim (and other marginal voices), foster respect and develop knowledge of Islam and Muslims. Stronger links between universities and Muslim colleges should be an important part of this.

Principal Investigator of our research project, Professor Alison Scott-Bauman, of SOAS, said: "The case for evidence-based policy making is urgent. We believe this report will serve as a helpful contribution to this process, not least as it contains positive and practical proposals for building on the considerable strengths represented across the HE sector."

The research reveals harmony and good practice, some excellent Islamic Studies teaching and warm, sincere interfaith contacts.

The research also finds:

- A quarter of all students (25%) of students cited mass media (TV, newspapers, magazines, news websites and social media) as their most important source of information about Islam.
- More than 70% of students agree that Muslims have made a valuable contribution to British life with 85% agreeing that the majority of Muslims are good people.
- Views about Islam as a religion are less positive. Around a fifth of students (Christians, Muslims and the non-religious) believe Islam is incompatible with British values.

Despite widespread positivity towards Islam and interfaith relations, the research finds some clear evidence of unconscious bias, casual racism and discrimination. This evidence is fully explored in our book *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain* (OUP, 2020).

The book of the project recommends three positive approaches:

1. active encouragement of difficult or controversial discussions around faith, identity and politics (which may include discussions about Islam)
2. Improved access to safe spaces for social contact with those who may seem 'different'
3. Enhanced curriculum coverage of Islamic Studies: Islam, Islamic history and religion and Islam in the modern world

Further Readings

The in-depth findings emerging from this project are to be included in

1. The Research Report *Islam and Muslims on UK University Campuses: Perceptions and challenges*
<https://www.soas.ac.uk/representingislamsoncampus/publications/file148310.pdf>
2. The Monograph: *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*, published by Oxford University Press (September 2020).
<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/islam-on-campus-9780198846789?cc=gb&lang=en&>
3. The animation, [Outside the Box: Exploring Islam on University Campuses across the UK](#), highlights the diversity of Muslim identities within UK universities and features the words of research participants. It is produced by [PositiveNegatives](#), artist and illustrator [Sabba Khan](#), and a group of Muslim scholars with deep contextual knowledge and experience of this topic.

AHRC Islam on Campus Team

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