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**The enactment of the counter-terrorism ‘Prevent duty’ in British schools and colleges: Beyond reluctant accommodation or straightforward policy acceptance**

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# **The enactment of the counter-terrorism ‘Prevent duty’ in British schools and colleges: Beyond reluctant accommodation or straightforward policy acceptance**

When Britain imposed the ‘Prevent duty’, a legal duty on education, health and social welfare organisations to report concerns about individuals identified as at-risk of radicalisation, critics argued it would accentuate the stigmatisation of Muslim communities, ‘chill’ free speech, and exacerbate societal securitisation. Based on 70 interviews with educational professionals and a national online survey (n=225), this article examines their perceptions of how the duty has played out in practice. It then provides an explanation for why, contrary to expectations, not only has overt professional opposition been limited, but there has been some evidence of positive acceptance. It is argued that these findings neither simply reflect reluctant policy accommodation nor do they simply reflect straightforward policy acceptance, but rather they comprise the outcome of multi-level processes of policy narration, enactment and adaptation. Three processes are identified as being of particular importance in shaping education professionals’ engagement with the duty: the construction of radicalisation as a significant societal, institutional and personal risk; the construction of continuity between the Prevent duty and existing professional practices; and the responsabilisation of first-line professionals. The conclusion reflects on the wider public and policy implications of these findings.

Keywords: Prevent; counter-terrorism; schools; education; Prevent duty; enactment

## **Introduction**

Programmes for the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) have become central to international, national and local counter terrorism strategies. Within this context, the evolution of the Prevent strategy, the strand of the UK’s Counter-Terrorism Strategy concerned with stopping people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism, has been a particular focus of global attention. Indeed, as one of the first strategies of its kind, Prevent has, since it was first implemented in 2007, provided something of a model for the development and diffusion of national and international level PVE strategies and programmes (Kundnani and Hayes 2018). It has however also attracted sustained

criticism (Thomas 2014). It has been accused of unfairly targeting, and therefore stigmatising, Muslims – a criticism grounded partly in the fact that the initial version of Prevent explicitly focused on Muslim communities (Choudhury 2010); and of ‘securitising’ community relations and carrying out surveillance under the guise of community engagement – accusations that Arun Kundnani’s *Spooked* (2009) report and a highly-critical Parliamentary Select Committee Inquiry (House of Commons 2010) demonstrated were not entirely without foundation. In addition, the scientific underpinnings of Prevent – the concept of a process of ‘radicalisation’ that can be reliably identified and then disrupted – have come under frequent challenge (Coolsaet 2016; Kundnani 2012).

In July 2015, Britain further extended the Prevent strategy, taking the internationally-unprecedented step of imposing a legal duty on ‘specified authorities’, including schools and further education colleges (‘colleges’),<sup>i</sup> universities, health and social services, to show ‘due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism’ [Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015, s.26.], popularly referred to as the ‘Prevent duty’. For schools and colleges, statutory and supplemental guidance sets out two areas of responsibility: ensuring that ‘staff are able to identify children who may be vulnerable to radicalisation and know what to do when they are identified,’ and ‘build[ing] pupils’ resilience to radicalisation by promoting fundamental British values and enabling them to challenge extremist views’ (Department for Education (DfE) 2015, 5).

As expected, the duty quickly became the focus of sustained, often vociferous, criticism from teaching unions, academics and civil society campaigners. Critics argued that the pressure to report terrorism-related concerns would have a ‘chilling effect’ on free speech in the classroom; risked securitising educational spaces; would deepen stigmatisation and suspicion of British Muslims; put further strain on over-stretched educational institutions and professionals by ‘responsibilising’ (Thomas, 2017) educational institutions and individual professionals for the prevention of terrorism; and might even play into the hands of those seeking to recruit young people into terrorism by intensifying antipathy towards the state (Davies 2016; Durodie 2016; Liberty 2015; Muslim Council of Britain 2016;).

The Home Office, the Department for Education (DfE) and civil society supporters of the legislation responded by arguing that the duty ‘doesn’t and shouldn’t stop schools from discussing controversial issues’ (Williams 2015). In keeping with

their wider framing of the Prevent strategy, they presented the duty as a straightforward extension of existing responsibilities to ‘safeguard’ students in relation to issues such as drugs, gangs, neglect and sexual exploitation, and claimed that, since ‘the Prevent duty is entirely consistent with schools’ and childcare providers’ existing responsibilities’ it ‘should not be burdensome’ (DfE 2015, 5). They also emphasized that the duty pertains to all forms of extremism, and put in place training and guidance to support schools, colleges and other specified authorities.

This did little to quell concerns, however. Indeed, criticism intensified as the duty came into force and some high-profile public figures went so far as to describe Prevent as a ‘toxic brand’, calling for it to be scrapped (e.g. Peraudin 2016). Perceptions that Prevent as a whole generates discriminatory structures of surveillance on Muslim communities and that the duty is liable to encourage the securitisation of educational spaces were given further fuel by a dramatic increase in referrals to Channel, the government’s voluntary scheme for anti-radicalisation mentoring – a total of 4,611 people, including more than 2,000 children and teenagers, were identified for possible interventions between July 2015 and June 2016, a 75% year-on-year rise in the first year of the duty’s operation – and by media reports of apparently absurd cases in which students, almost always of Muslim background, had been questioned by the police after staff raised concerns, such as the four-year-old whose picture of a ‘cooker bomb’ turned out to be a picture of a clumsily-pronounced cucumber (Open Society Justice Initiative 2016).

The Prevent-as-safeguarding frame used by government in their presentation of the duty has also continued to be challenged. Social work academics, for example, have argued that the logic of Prevent is not the same as that which has traditionally underpinned safeguarding, since safeguarding is supposed to be about protecting children, not protecting society from what children might do (Coppock and McGovern 2014), and that the concept of vulnerability entailed by the Prevent-as-safeguarding frame ‘risks silencing and even pathologising the person labelled vulnerable’ rather than understanding and engaging with their practices as acts of dissent (O’Donnell 2016, 53). Such arguments have been strengthened by empirical evidence from the duty’s implementation within mental health departments of the National Health Service, which shows healthcare practitioners questioning the assertion that the Prevent duty fits unproblematically within existing safeguarding approaches (Heath-Kelly and Strausz 2018a; 2018b).

Alongside this, criticism has persisted of what has been seen as Prevent's lack of consistent and sustained focus on educational approaches that can actually help young people build the resilience and skills to identify, critique and resist extremist ideologies and attempts to draw them in to extremist activity (Thomas 2016). Here, the assimilationist-tinged promotion of so-called fundamental British values has been a particular focus of criticism due to concerns that it lends itself to the stigmatisation and pathologisation of groups of students or sets of perspectives that are deemed somehow less British (Richardson 2015; Winter and Mills 2018).

Within the context of such polarised and contentious policy debate, there is an urgent requirement for detailed empirical research that examines how this statutory duty has played out on the ground. In this article we respond to this requirement by reporting on a national mixed-methods study of education professionals' perceptions of how the duty played out in schools and colleges during the first 18 months of its operation. The study centred on four questions:

- 1) How has the new Prevent duty been interpreted by staff in schools and colleges in England?
- 2) How confident do school/college staff feel with regards to implementing the Prevent duty and what, if anything, could be done to enhance their confidence?
- 3) What impacts, if any, do school/college staff think the Prevent duty has had on their school or college, and in particular on their interactions with students and parents?
- 4) To what extent, if at all, have school/college staff opposed or questioned the legitimacy of the Prevent duty?

In this article we focus in particular on the description and analysis of an apparent tension within the data, the interpretation of which is likely to have significant implications for debates about PVE, and specifically PVE in education, in the UK and beyond: while some education professionals echoed the critiques of the Prevent duty outlined above, we encountered scant evidence of expressed opposition to the duty. Indeed, there is even some evidence of positive acceptance.

After considering, and setting aside, some of the most straightforward and, arguably, most politically expedient, explanations for these findings, we develop an explanation grounded in analysis of the 'enactment' (Ball, Maguire and Braun 2013) of the duty within the case study schools and colleges and of the intersecting policy and practice narratives that shaped such enactment (Jones 2013). As Ball et al (2013)

demonstrate, educational institutions and their staff do not simply ‘implement’ national policy directives. Rather, they modify and amend policy as they interpret it within their wider, ongoing professional and institutional practices. On this view, if we are to understand how policy translates into practice, it is necessary to analyse the front-line processes of translation and implementation of the government’s educational directives at ground level – by institutions and by individual ‘street level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky 2013) – and their concomitant ‘assemblages’ (Ball et al 2013) of practices, including professional briefing documents, face to face training and day-to-day working norms.

In undertaking this analysis we reveal an intriguing possibility: while the introduction of the legal duty undoubtedly intensified criticism of Prevent among sections of the public, the way it has been integrated into the everyday working practices of schools and colleges might have given rise to a process of detoxification of the ‘Prevent brand’ among education professionals. We reflect on the policy and political implications of this in the conclusion.

## **Methods**

The research combined 70 semi-structured interviews with staff from fourteen schools and colleges in two regions of England: London and West Yorkshire; semi-structured interviews with local Prevent practitioners in eight local authority areas (data not discussed in this article); and an online survey of school and college staff in England (n=225).

## ***Interviews***

Schools and colleges were approached through the researchers’ existing professional networks and local authority channels such as headteachers’ bulletins. Institutions were selected to ensure a balance of primary schools, secondary schools and colleges and, reflecting the prominence of concerns about Prevent’s impact on Muslim students specifically, a range of student demographics in terms of the proportion of white British, black and minority ethnic (BME), and Muslim students.

In each institution, 3-6 staff members across a range of roles and with varying levels of experience and involvement with the implementation of the Prevent duty were interviewed. This included teaching and non-teaching staff, and in each institution included the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL): the individual with primary responsibility for the implementation of the duty (Table 1).

*Table 1: Interview Sample Summary*

<b>Role/Position</b>	<b>No. of Interviewees</b>	<b>% of total no. Interviewees</b>
Senior leaders Heads/deputy heads/ principals/ senior management team members	14	20%
Middle leaders Heads of department/ heads of year-group/service leaders	25	36%
Teachers/lecturers	10	14%
Teaching assistants	5	7%
Support or technical staff e.g. learning mentors, progress coaches, pastoral staff, librarians, IT staff and members of estate teams	16	23%
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	
<b>Of which:</b>		
Designated Safeguarding Leads	16	23%
Non-Designated Safeguarding Leads	54	77%

In the first part of each interview the respondent was asked to describe their experience of the Prevent duty. A narrative interview strategy was used to enable respondents to discuss and emphasise what they considered the most significant elements of their experiences, and to encourage respondents not to reproduce professional scripts or habitual discourses (Wengraf 2001). After probing their initial responses, the interviewers asked more targeted questions pertaining to the core research questions. Informed written consent was obtained prior to each interview. All interviews were confidential, audio-recorded and fully transcribed for analysis. After a first reading of the transcripts, an initial thematic coding frame was developed. All transcripts were then coded by at least two team members, and the coding frame reassessed and updated to reflect analysis.

### ***Online survey***

An online survey, on the Bristol Online Survey platform, was used to explore and test hypotheses emerging from the interview data. The survey was promoted via emails to schools and colleges from universities and local authorities, via the e-bulletins of teaching unions and national college networks, and was advertised at the end of an article by the researchers that appeared in the *Times Educational Supplement* in November 2016.



To maximize access, the survey was accessible via a URL without a password. This created a risk that the survey could be completed by campaigners in favour of or opposed to the duty. To mitigate this risk, we monitored the survey for bursts of activity, whether respondents only completed the questions most likely to generate a headline finding, and identical sets of responses. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

The survey was conducted between 18 October and 23 December 2016. After removal of incomplete responses and duplicates, 203 completed responses remained. A subsequent password protected booster survey was carried out in March 2017,<sup>ii</sup> promoted via email by the National Association of Head Teachers and the Muslim Teachers' Association in order to increase the number of responses from school and college leaders and from Muslim education professionals. The final sample contained 225 completed responses (Table 2).

Survey responses were aggregated and subjected to a series of systematic cross-tabulations to explore simple correlations. Sample size was insufficient to undertake regression analysis.

*Table 2: Survey Sample Summary*

	No. of Interviewees <sup>iii</sup>	% of total question responses
<b>Gender</b>		
Women	69	31%
Men	156	69%
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
White British	173	81%
Black and Minority Ethnic (BME)	41	19%
<b>Religion</b>		
Christian	88	42%
Muslim	25	12%
Religion other than Christian or Muslim	7	3%
No Religion	90	43%
<b>Role in school/college</b>		
Senior leaders	52	23%
Teachers/lecturers	82	36%
Trainee teachers/lecturers, teaching assistants and educational support workers	37	16%
Other <sup>iv</sup>	54	24%
<b>Safeguarding role</b>		
DSL	68	30%
Non-DSL	157	70%
<b>Type of institution</b>		

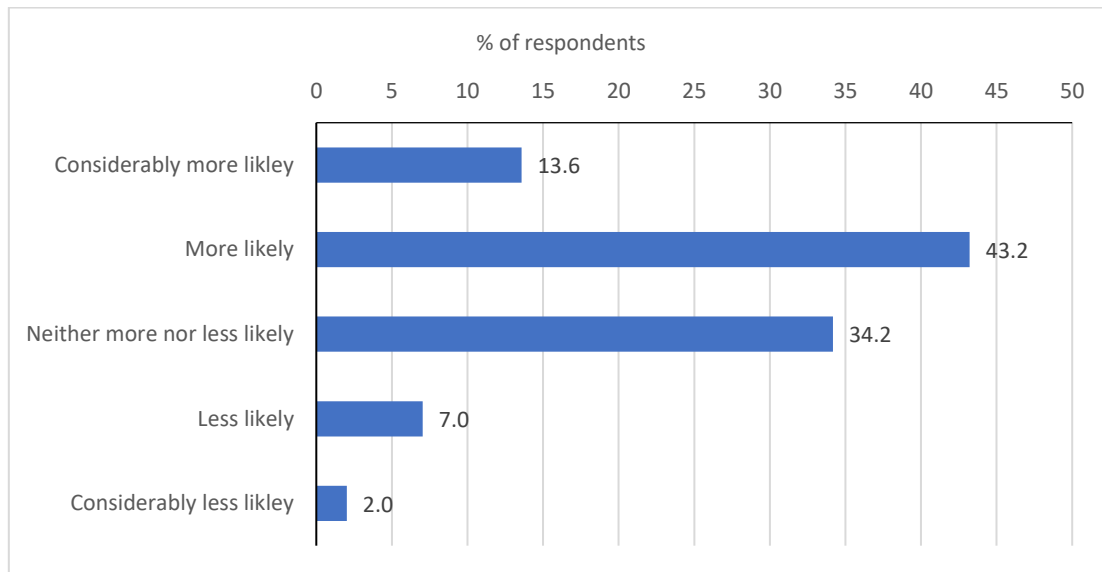
School	118	53%
College	106	47%
<b>Region</b>		
Yorkshire and Humberside	44	20%
East of England	37	17%
North West	36	16%
London	35	16%
East Midlands	26	12%
South East	25	11%
West Midlands	10	5%
South West	5	2%
North East	1	0.5%
<b>Ethnic/religious mix of school/college</b>		
Mainly White British	102	45%
Diverse	98	44%
Mainly from one ethnic/religious background other than White British	24	11%
<b>Estimated proportion of Muslim students in the school/college</b>		
Less than 10%	106	51%
11-15%	29	14%

### **Results: Educationalists' perceptions of the impacts of the Prevent duty**

Given the criticism of the Prevent duty, particularly from some teaching unions, we expected to find widespread professional concern about and expressed opposition to the Prevent duty. These expectations were only partially borne out by the data.

A significant proportion of respondents did express some concerns regarding the Prevent duty. The most prominent of these related to the potential stigmatisation of Muslim students. Even though a significant majority of interview and survey respondents believed the duty is intended to address all forms of extremism (82% of survey respondents agreed or agreed strongly that 'the Prevent duty is about all forms of extremism'), concern that the duty had the potential to exacerbate the stigmatisation of Muslim students was a recurring theme during interviews, and over half the survey respondents said the duty had made Muslim students more likely (43%), or considerably more likely (14%), to feel stigmatised (Figure 1). Such concerns were particularly prevalent among BME respondents, 75% of whom said the Prevent duty had made Muslim students 'more', or 'considerably more', likely to feel stigmatised.

*Figure 1: Has the Prevent duty made it more likely or less likely that Muslim students might feel stigmatised?*



That such concerns were so prevalent alongside broad acceptance that the duty is intended to address all forms of extremism is perhaps surprising. One possible explanation relates to respondents' appreciation that the impacts of the Prevent duty are being shaped by a broader social and political context of significant anti-Muslim sentiment, in which young Muslims already feel they are under special scrutiny (Mythen, Walklate and Khan 2013). For example, one DSL who subscribed to the idea that the duty was intended to address all forms of extremism nonetheless also expressed the view that Muslim students were particularly likely to be affected by it and experience it as 'just another thing that is being put upon them':

It must be really difficult for Muslim kids [...] they feel constantly vilified and that actually in a sense pushes them further into isolation because as Muslims they feel [the Prevent duty] is just another thing that is being put upon them to monitor them and to vilify them. I do think the kids are resentful of that. (R50, DSL, school, London)

Another possible explanation relates to professional anxieties about the challenges of implementing the duty in a way that is genuinely even-handed. Some respondents observed that, regardless of the intention of the government or individual teachers, the monitoring and reporting procedures that Prevent entails might remain disproportionately focused on Muslim students due to the limited confidence of some

white (presumably non-Muslim) teachers to interpret the practices of Muslim students. As one respondent explained:

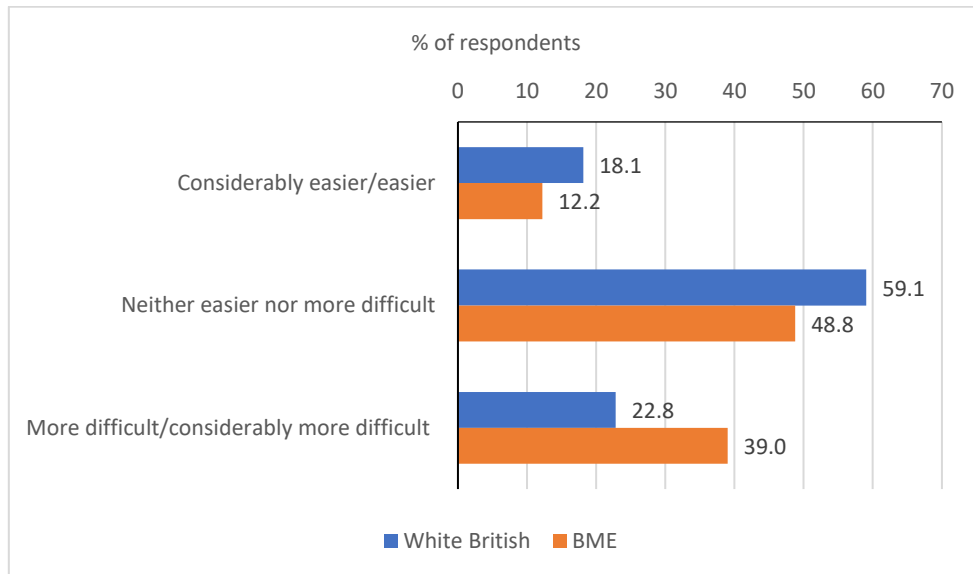
[...] if you're being realistic, the demographic of our teaching staff is white, and so any extremism from the far right, although it might be uncomfortable, it's more within your experience, and you feel better placed to judge how extreme you feel that is and whether you need to report on it. [...] Whereas maybe the Muslim extremism, you would feel like you had to report everything on if you didn't feel you had that. (R5, senior leader, school, Yorkshire)

Alongside concerns about stigmatisation of Muslim students were concerns that the Prevent duty was making it more difficult to foster socially-cohesive educational institutions at a time when racial, ethnic and religious identities were increasingly a source of societal division. As one respondent reflected,

When I first came to this Borough there was quite a divide I would say between Muslims and other communities. As time went on and maybe they started to enmesh together a bit more and there was lots of work within the Borough to get communities to work together and understand each other; to get all the children to actually be together. And then as things have happened within the world and people's reactions to what happens in the world, and I am not saying this is just Prevent, but it is a reaction to things that have happened politically. The children feel like they don't come together like; they retreat back into what they know. (R55, senior leader, school, London)

While the Prevent duty was not seen as the underlying cause of these problems, it was perceived to be exacerbating more general societal disintegration. Such concerns were again particularly prominent among BME respondents, with 39% of BME survey respondents, as compared with 23% of non-BME respondents, stating that the Prevent duty makes it 'more difficult' or 'considerably more difficult' 'for schools/colleges to create an environment in which students from different backgrounds get on well with one another'.

*Figure 2: Do you think the Prevent duty makes it easier or more difficult for schools/colleges to create an environment in which students from different backgrounds get on well with one another? By White British / BME respondents*



Such concerns were often associated with expressed misgivings about the requirement to promote fundamental British values. Almost all the respondents observed that teaching values had long been part of their professional practice. The concern however was that framing them specifically as *British* values might, whatever the intention, play into the hands of the far right by propagating notions of fixed and definable cultural boundaries that could be used to mark out and marginalize those deemed un-British or less-British, echoing discussions elsewhere in the critical literature on the promotion of fundamental British values (Elton-Chalcroft et al. 2017).

I suppose it's a little bit like the late 70s and the early 80s when the mod thing was going on and the N[ational] F[ront] jumped on the British flags, you know? There is this thought that, if we label it as *British* values is somebody else going to pick this up and do that with it? Also, are they just values for Britain? You know, we are trying to produce global citizens, we are trying to produce people that can work, learn, be, citizens of the world and also we don't want people misunderstanding and thinking that only British people can have these values. (R49, senior leader, school, London)

Indeed, in some institutions staff and governors continued to talk about school/college values or universal values instead of fundamental British values even though they believed that Inspectors would expect and prefer the latter:

We don't say 'these are British values', no we don't. We don't. That would feel fake. 'These are our values', we don't say 'these are British values', we say 'these are our values'. (R38, DSL, school, London)

A further set of concerns were related to the effectiveness of the duty. The interview and survey data indicate fairly high levels of confidence about meeting the duty's requirements, particularly among senior and more experienced staff – 76% of survey respondents described themselves as 'very confident' or 'fairly confident' about implementing the duty, as compared with only 9% who described themselves as 'not very confident' or 'not very confident at all'; a finding that broadly coincides with a 2015 DfE omnibus survey (Straw, Tattersall and Sims 2016). Nonetheless, the interview data also revealed a strong undertow of anxiety about whether the duty would work in practice. Such concerns centred primarily on the perceived difficulty of identifying so-called 'genuine' cases – i.e. students seriously engaged with extremism rather than, for example, those who were testing boundaries or who didn't realise the potential gravity of their actions – a product of widespread scepticism about whether such students would do things that would give themselves away.

If someone is *genuinely* involved, you wouldn't know. You wouldn't know. And that is very hard for us as lecturers to police, and that's what our, as lecturers, our main concern was... They're not going to walk around with something to give you indicators, are they? If they're doing researching they're most probably doing it at home, if they're being radicalised they're most probably doing it in their personal space or time. (R69, middle manager, college, London)

Such concerns were fuelled by high profile cases in which students had become involved with extremism but where, respondents believed, there had not been any 'warning signs' that this was happening. A case in which three female students from a school in Bethnal Green, London, travelled to Syria was referenced with particular frequency. Here, respondents exemplified such challenges with observations about how the three students had been 'good students' or 'top students':

I have a group of 22 girls who I feel as though I know every one of them well, but do I? Enough? As a teacher to stop that happening? If that were to happen, I just, I think I would go over and over it again thinking 'what did I miss, what did I miss?' I just don't think you can always know. They [the students from Bethnal Green]

were top students, well behaved, they never did anything out of the ordinary. And then they disappeared. [...] How do you spot that? I don't know if you can. (R48, teacher, school, London)

Anxiety about missing genuine cases was magnified by fears about the possible consequences of doing so for the students, themselves and their colleagues. Respondents expressed concerns that the institution could be 'dragged over the coals' (R43, teacher, school, London) or 'pilloried' (R1, DSL, college, Yorkshire) if they did miss something: fears sometimes grounded in their understandings of what had happened in other, in some cases nearby, institutions. The emotional costs of feeling that they had failed to do everything they could also loomed large.

I think there is an element that means that, it's not about what might happen to me or what might happen to a colleague so much as what I might *feel like* or what a colleague might *feel like* if we had been party to a piece of information that we then haven't acted on. Then we find out that something has happened with that child. That, I don't think it bears thinking about. (R49, senior leader, school, London)

This left some staff navigating their way through competing fears – on the one hand 'terrified to miss something' that could be a sign of vulnerability to radicalisation; on the other worrying about stereotyping minority students.

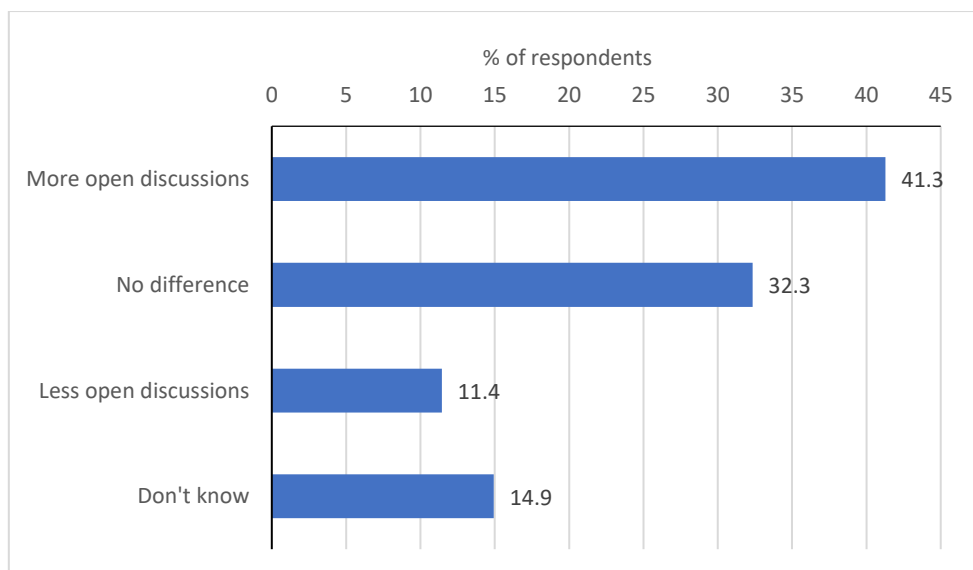
In your head, you're always wondering whether a behaviour might be typical of that [radicalisation], because you're terrified to miss something. But by the same token, you're also not wanting to be, in a white-staffed, predominantly white, working-class school, putting on your Prevent helmet every single time you're talking to a student from an ethnic minority. (R11, lecturer, college, Yorkshire)

Among staff with responsibilities for managing the implementation of the duty within their institution, such anxieties intersected with concerns about the associated additional workload and budgetary pressures. While government guidance asserts that the duty should not be 'burdensome' (DfE 2015, 5), respondents described significant resource allocation to meet the perceived requirements of the duty, particularly during the first year. Over half of the senior leaders who completed the survey (54%) reported that the duty had increased their workload 'a moderate amount' or 'a lot', and 35% said it had

increased budgetary and resource pressure ‘a moderate amount’ or ‘a lot’. Particularly prominent in the interview data are comments about the costs of purchasing adequate software to monitor students’ online activity and the human resource and opportunity costs of meeting the government’s requirement that 100% of staff in schools and colleges should have received Prevent training – a particularly onerous task in larger or split-site institutions.

This series of concerns corresponds broadly with the critiques of the Prevent duty outlined in the introduction. There were however two findings that fit less well with the criticism of the duty. First, we did not find evidence of widespread concern that the duty was having a ‘chilling effect’ on classrooms. Indeed, 41% of survey respondents said the Prevent duty had led to *more open* discussions ‘about issues such as extremism, intolerance and inequality’.

*Figure 3: Perceived impact of the Prevent duty on openness of discussions with students about issues such as extremism, intolerance and inequality*



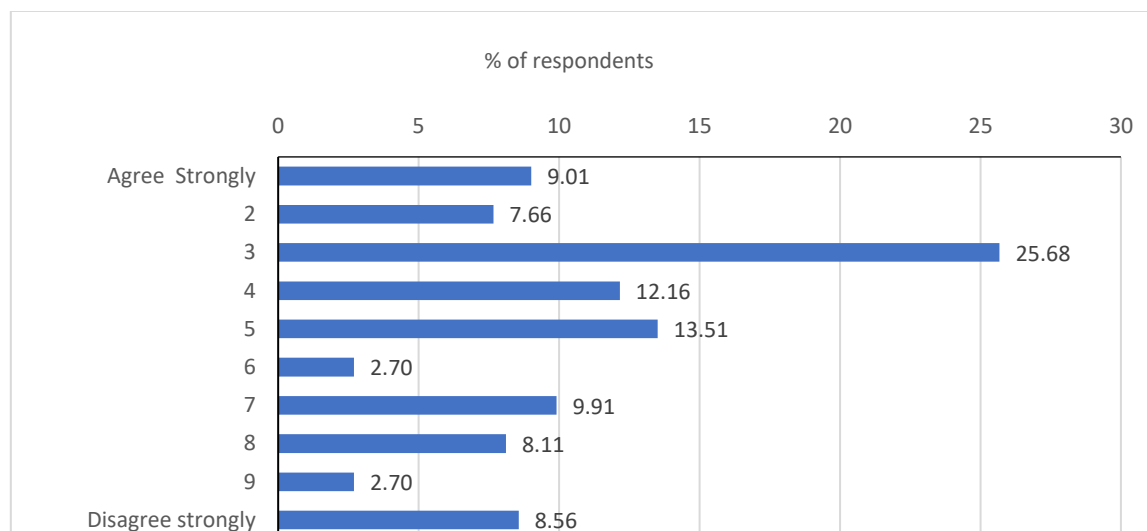
This was supported by the interview data where, far from a chilling effect, respondents across the fieldsites described how they had used the duty to re-invigorate discussion and debate around such topics through a number of democratic engagement projects, a point we return to below.

Second, and supporting Bryan’s (2017) findings, we also did not find evidence of widespread overt opposition to the duty. Within the survey data, 54.5% of respondents agreed or agreed strongly (1-4 on a scale of 1-10) with the statement that the Prevent duty is ‘a proportionate response to a clearly identified problem’, as



compared with 29.3% of respondents who disagreed or disagreed strongly (7-10 on the same scale).

*Figure 4: How strongly do you agree or disagree that the Prevent duty on schools and colleges is a proportionate response to a clearly identified problem?*



The interview data support this finding. While most respondents expressed concern about what could happen if the Prevent duty was ‘done badly’ (see below), very few expressed more general opposition to the duty and there were scant reports of conversations with colleagues in which such views were expressed, even in private. Indeed, more common were expressions of positive acceptance. For example, there were multiple comments about how the duty helped to enhance student safety – ‘this is a really good thing and lets us help our children learn how to be safe online and not get groomed’ (R24, teacher, school, Yorkshire) – or, as described above, provided opportunities to reinvigorate work around citizenship, democracy, and equality. How then might we explain why while respondents described several concerns that reflect established critiques of Prevent and the Prevent duty, we found little evidence of expressed opposition to the duty?

### **Discussion: Explaining the relative absence of professional opposition to the Prevent duty**

One possible explanation for the relative absence of expressed opposition to the duty despite concerns about its potential impacts is that these results reflect a form of reluctant accommodation by education professionals. After all, as a legal duty and a

central focus of inspection regimes, by the time the policy reached schools and colleges there were limited opportunities for dissent. As one DSL explained,

They [other members of staff] haven't challenged me on the duty because this is a duty, okay? 'This is a duty and we have to implement it, and if we don't implement it the college could be closed down. So there's your facts, okay?' (R1, DSL, college, Yorkshire)

In some institutions at least, respondents reported that such arguments had been reinforced by invoking the experiences of other educational institutions that had been downgraded by the inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED), for what were seen as failings in this area.

Some of the Muslim respondents reported having been particularly cautious about challenging or voicing opposition to the duty due to concerns about stereotyping by their colleagues:

Me personally, I mean I didn't speak much [during the Prevent training] because obviously me being, as you can see my image, I'm a Muslim, I've got a beard. You know, if you speak, sometimes people can stereotype what you're trying to say and take it in the wrong context, so I didn't speak much to be honest. (R69, lecturer, college, London)

Yet the instances of broadly positive engagement with the duty indicate that reluctant accommodation is likely only to be part of the story.

Conversely, it might be argued that these data tell a fairly straightforward story of broad policy acceptance: that on balance, while some school and college staff were apprehensive about the duty, most broadly saw the duty as a reasonable response to an identified problem. Yet such an interpretation would also sit uncomfortably with some of our findings, in particular those that relate to the practices of adaptation, interpretation and sometimes subtle forms of resistance observed at the ground-level.

We propose that a fuller and more convincing explanation of the findings can be developed if we pay close attention to the everyday enactment of the Prevent duty in schools and colleges. Three processes evident within the data appear to be of particular relevance.

### ***The construction of radicalisation as a significant societal, institutional and personal risk***

My own personal values in life is that I think that a seventeen-year-old British-born male wanting to go to Syria to blow themselves up, whatever your political views, is really tragic, and if there's anything that we can do as an organisation to stop that from happening, the same way we'd want to safeguard in any other way, then I can only see it as a good thing. (R2, middle manager, college, Yorkshire)

The first of these three processes relates to the construction of risk narratives. While a significant proportion of respondents expressed concern about the unintended consequences of the duty, this did not preclude similar if not more widespread acceptance of the idea that extremism and radicalisation comprise genuine and salient risks. Of the survey respondents, 22.8% described radicalisation as a 'significant' or 'very significant' problem in their institution. This rose to 39.2% when asked about the local area and 52.1% when asked about Britain, compared with just 16.6% who stated that in Britain today the problem of radicalisation is 'not significant' or 'not significant at all'. As might be expected, we find a strong positive correlation between perceived significance of radicalisation as a problem and belief that the Prevent duty represents a proportionate response to a clearly identified issue.

We also found broad, although far from unanimous, acceptance of the idea that radicalisation comprised a genuine risk within the interview data. High profile, and in some instances relatively local, cases of young people engaging with terrorist groups or travelling to Syria played an important role in shaping these perceptions. Cases such as the 'Bethnal Green girls' in London and, in West Yorkshire, Talha Asmal, the 'UK's youngest ever suicide bomber' (BBC 2015), were particularly prominent. Among senior leaders and DSLs, such interpretations of risk were also traced back to conversations with local Prevent practitioners:

We all sat in the meeting [with the local authority Prevent coordinator] and we are told that actually in the previous twelve months there have been four or five people from [London Borough] that, you know, that have tried to go to Syria to join the fighting. Yes, at that point it becomes kind of real doesn't it, because it could be kids that you taught. Or it could be, you know, the family down the road. It does become really real. (R49, DSL, school, London)

The much-repeated claim that radicalisation ‘can happen to anyone’ (R24, teacher, school, Yorkshire) – an idea often discussed during Prevent-related training, seemingly with the intention of emphasising that Prevent is not focused only on AQ/ISIS-related radicalisation, also served to intensify the perception of the risk of radicalisation. It is also likely, given that high levels of anxiety about the effects of a particular hazard are associated with increased risk perception (Sjöberg 2000), that perception of the risk of radicalisation was accentuated by the acute fears described above about the consequences of a student becoming involved in extremism or terrorism.

Such perceptions of the risk of radicalisation meant that even where respondents described the duty as potentially having negative unintended consequences, concerns could largely be bracketed with notions of proportionality and the idea that it is, to paraphrase a recurring theme within the data, better to be safe than sorry. Missing the one genuine case was consistently situated as the apex risk, and a focus for intense personal reflection:

If I can stop one kid breaking his mother’s heart or getting killed or being put in a position where the police are after them because they’re attacking animal laboratories or he’s going to get beaten up at some far-right rally then I think that’s worth what we’re doing. It’s absolutely worth what we’re doing. (R20, DSL, college, Yorkshire)

The construction of such imagined hierarchies of risk, we argue, is likely to have played a significant role in undermining opposition to the duty. They do not however explain why respondents by and large appear to have accepted, or at least not overtly opposed, this particular approach to managing the risk of radicalisation. Why, after all, should school and college staff potentially be expected to accept considerable responsibility for something over which they might, as many respondents observed, have very little control? Two further processes help to provide us with an explanation.

### ***The construction of continuity with existing professional practices***

While there were frequent comments about increased workload and budgetary pressures, and while respondents in each of the institutions where fieldwork took place were able to point to new initiatives undertaken in response to the duty, there were also repeated observations about how little had changed in practice. Indeed, far from leading

to ‘vast changes’, most respondents described the Prevent duty as simply ‘confirming’ (R59, teacher, school, London) or providing a subtle refocusing of what they had already been doing.

These narratives of professional continuity were most prominent in relation to the referral practices that the Prevent duty entailed. A very large majority of survey respondents (86%) ‘agreed’ or ‘agreed strongly’ that ‘The Prevent duty in schools/colleges is a continuation of existing safeguarding responsibilities’, and the interviews are peppered with examples of respondents drawing parallels between Prevent-related issues and what were already understood as ‘safeguarding issues’, whether in terms of institutional processes or the ‘signs’ that they might be looking for.

When you look at the action [required in the case of concerns about vulnerability to radicalisation] it’s exactly the same as the actions we’d take against FGM [female genital mutilation] and against child sexual exploitation... It is a safeguarding issue. It’s the same, it’s about keeping children safe from predators. If you look at, well when I look at a profile of a radicaliser ... and a groomer it’s the same tactics and they’re targeting the same sorts of vulnerabilities in children. (R61, DSL, school, London)

We already, you know, thought a lot about students’ safety, about students’ wellbeing. So, it wasn’t like we were trying to shoehorn something in that didn’t exist anyway. We had the structure and the mechanisms to enable us to sort of implement the duty. (R11, senior leader, college, Yorkshire)

It is likely that this identification, and acceptance, of the Prevent duty as a continuation of existing safeguarding understandings and practices among education professionals goes a long way to explaining why a large majority of the national referrals to the Channel process come from the formal education sector and from schools and colleges in particular. In contrast with the health sector, where requirements to report concerns relating to individual ‘vulnerability’ to radicalisation have been interpreted as a deviation from previous safeguarding practices (Heath-Kelly and Strausz 2018a; 2018b), in educational settings, particularly where students are generally under 18 years of age, Prevent’s understanding of individual student ‘vulnerability’ and its systems for further investigating this were seen by our respondents at least as being broadly

congruent with established educational safeguarding systems and institutional cultures characterised by mundane, ongoing professional monitoring and surveillance.

Such congruence with pre-existing safeguarding and other professional procedures might also help to explain why so many respondents perceived the duty to be a broadly proportionate response in spite of the very small numbers of young people who ever go on to become involved in activities proscribed under counter-terrorism legislation. Once a social harm is identified by education professionals as a ‘safeguarding’ issue, it is broadly accepted that they need to and do respond, whatever the national scale of the problem. Even the very high attrition rate of Prevent referrals from the education sector – approximately 95% of formal Prevent referrals do not result in a Channel intervention (Home Office 2017, 2018) – was seen by respondents as simply being consistent with wider safeguarding procedures and a reflection of their high threshold for further interventions, and therefore was not viewed as problematic.

Such narratives of continuity were also evident with regards to the curriculum dimension of the duty. In every institution, senior staff described how, after ‘mapping’ existing curriculum content and teaching practices, they had felt reassured and relieved that they were already doing much of what they believed was required of them under the duty. As one school leader explained:

Mapping is probably the best tool the school uses in terms of Prevent. I think there is a lot of Prevent goes on inside the school, but not all of it is explicit. So I think a lot of staff *do* Prevent but it’s trying to make them *see* that they do Prevent [...] I was really surprised by how much Prevent we did cover inside the school. It was much more prevalent than I thought it was. (R47, senior leader, school, London)

These narratives of continuity undermined opposition to the Prevent duty in a number of ways. Perhaps most basically, once staff believed that the duty would not entail significant changes in their professional practice, Prevent ceased to be a focus for extensive reflection and debate. As one respondent explained:

I think perhaps when the conversation about Prevent first began it sounded like something which was a little bit obscure perhaps for some people, but I think as soon as people said ‘it’s a type of safeguarding’ then it kind of clicked into place in terms of what our response should be. (R4, middle manager, college, Yorkshire)

Narratives of continuity also engendered acceptance of the responsibilities entailed by the duty and gave rise to feelings of individual and collective confidence in their ability to assume and manage the responsibilities associated with it, while acknowledging that it represented a challenging area of policy and practice. As one respondent explained, even though there was a sense of ‘nervousness’ about ‘making the right judgement’ and wondering whether the police are ‘going to swoop down and sort of sirens wailing and arrest them’, they felt confident because,

we talk here about the fact that we’ve got a team of experts in our own college under safeguarding. They refer people normally through that, so if they’re worried about a student self-harming or being unsafe in any other way they’d refer that way. And we promote Prevent as being the same thing but just with a different focus. (R2, senior leader, college, Yorkshire)

Procedural confidence in turn engendered moral confidence by assuaging concerns about the possible negative consequences of the Prevent duty. Here the Prevent-as-safeguarding policy frame promoted by national and local policy practitioners was particularly important, in part because it enabled some respondents to bracket out occasional expressions of parental concern about the Prevent duty by situating them within a longer history of parental anxieties about safeguarding. As one respondent observed, ‘you find that concern about safeguarding as well; people have attitudes to social services involvement’ (R31, support staff, school, Yorkshire), while in another school staff drew comparisons between parental concern about the Prevent duty and parental concern expressed when they first employed a dedicated social worker.

The above observations reveal the complexity of the processes through which these narratives of continuity have become established. While the interview data indicate that the framing of Prevent as an extension of existing safeguarding practices – a frame accepted by a large majority of respondents – was central to the construction of these narratives of continuity, this framing of the Prevent duty and wider narratives of professional continuity were not just produced and transmitted top-down through official policy documentation and the work of national and local Prevent practitioners. Such policy understandings were also generated through institutional processes of policy interpretation and enactment, such as the way Prevent training was delivered through existing programmes of safeguarding training and the way compliance with the

duty was managed through existing, albeit in some cases expanded or modified, institutional safeguarding policies and governance structures.

What also contributed to these narratives of continuity was the way other existing practices came to be interpreted as commensurate with, or even as mechanisms through which the school or college was able to meet, perceived Prevent-related requirements. For example, staff in some of the London schools described their adoption of the Philosophy4Children (P4C) programme as part of their fulfilment of the requirements of the Prevent duty. This had pre-dated the Prevent duty and was understood by staff as part of a wider focus in the school on developing critical thinking and active enquiry among the students and staff, but was also seen as providing a clear avenue through which to bolster students' resilience to the binaries often put forward by extremist groups and ideologies. Similarly, responses to the Prevent duty in other institutions had built directly on, and in some cases comprised a partial relabelling of, existing and long-established programmes of work around citizenship and equality, including dialogical approaches to education and initiatives such as debate clubs. We return to the implications of this below.

### ***The responsibilisation of first-line professionals***

The third process relates to emergent professional interpretations of negative policy outcomes and the causes of such outcomes. As described above, respondents within both the interview and survey samples described fairly high levels of confidence with regards to their ability and that of their institution in relation to the Prevent duty. This professional confidence served to mitigate anxieties related to the duty. Concerns about the difficulties of identifying 'genuine cases' and how this might undermine the effectiveness of the duty were offset by, for example, institution-wide efforts to promote a culture in which staff were vigilant and felt supported to report concerns 'however small' – with senior staff in most of the schools and colleges describing how they had developed 'a good supportive ethos around this' (R1, DSL, college, Yorkshire).

Similarly, and perhaps even more importantly given the dominant critiques of the duty, while there were clear concerns among respondents that the duty might increase the risk that Muslim students experience stigmatisation, they at the same time spoke about how they and their colleagues managed such risks within their professional practice. Respondents held up as absurd the idea that they would make referrals as a result of a student growing a beard or starting to wear a hijab; they spoke about how



their experience of working with young people meant that they were well aware that some of the supposed indicators of ‘vulnerability’ – a student becoming withdrawn, a sudden change of friendship group – were far from atypical behaviours for young people, and how therefore the referral process would always entail triangulation of information with other staff and assessment of other possible indicators; and almost all respondents described how they, as a professional, would always start by having a discreet conversation with the student in question.

Measures taken to mitigate the risks of stigmatising Muslim students also included foregrounding democracy, active citizenship and equality in any activities designed to address the duty; seeking out materials that foster a balanced understanding of the threats posed by extremism, terrorism and radicalisation; emphasising to students that AQ/ISIS-inspired terrorism should not be seen as representative of Islam or Muslims; introducing students to some of the Prevent training materials that they believed conveyed that the duty was not ‘targeting’ Muslims; and even asking some of the post-16 students to review material before it was delivered to the rest of the school to check whether there was anything that could cause offence or concern among Muslim students. Meanwhile, DSLs described working with colleagues to help them to feel confident in their own professional judgement in order to reduce the number of unnecessary referrals. As one respondent recalled:

...a lot of the Prevent materials, just by default, do refer to case studies that are linked into terrorist activities that are linked into people that are Muslim. So we have to work really hard in the organisation to make sure that staff understand that that’s not what it’s about... We use like far-right case studies when we do the training and we make those kinds of emphasis. I think the majority of our teaching staff understand that, and I think they’re very sensitive to the fact that if they’ve got mixed students in their group that they’ve got a responsibility to manage cohesion among their students. (R2, lecturer, college, Yorkshire)

In all of the institutions, respondents expressed confidence that the sort of ‘knee-jerk reaction’ that gave rise to incidents such as the cucumber-cooker-bomb tragi-farce were unlikely to happen in their institution:

I don’t think, we’re not the kind of school who would have these major knee-jerk reactions, we’d certainly talk about it as a staff and have those discussions, and decide what we need to do. (R29, DSL, school, Yorkshire)

Indeed, not only did respondents describe risk mitigation strategies but, as intimated above, they also identified ways in which the duty had created opportunities to reinvigorate areas of work that were perceived to have suffered a significant policy de-prioritisation in recent years. This included work on active citizenship, human rights, democracy and equality, whether within the curriculum or during additional activities such as debating clubs. As one respondent observed,

I'm kind of inclined to be suspicious towards [the Prevent duty] for various reasons, because it's part of a broader agenda, so I continually am suspicious of it in that regard. However, I think that the lessons that we've done around some of the things that I was talking about earlier, you know, gender equality and all of that, are kind of valid and interesting and its provided a kind of, you know, a reason for that to come to the fore. And that's kind of a good thing, and that's, so the practical implementation of it has been fine, the terms in which it's introduced is problematic (R42, teacher, school, London)

As Ball, Maguire and Braun (2013) identify, individual and collective confidence in core professional practices play an important role in how new policies are interpreted and enacted within educational institutions. In this case, such confidence not only informed respondents' perceptions of their abilities to manage the risks associated with the Prevent duty, but also underpinned active identification of what they saw as the opportunities associated with the duty.

Of relevance to our analysis, such articulations of professional confidence also entailed implicit comparisons with other institutions and professionals. The fact that they are not 'the type of school' in which 'knee-jerk reactions' happen means that other schools are that 'type of school', and several respondents drew distinctions between what the duty looks like 'at its best' and when it is 'done badly'. For example:

How would I evaluate it? Well I think when it's at its best then I'd explain it as an attempt to stop vulnerable young people from being exploited by organisations which are not good for them, not healthy for them, and that's a good thing [...] But I totally, totally accept that if done badly and where done badly, that there's a risk that the wrong people could be spoken to in the wrong way and that that could, far from leading to a more cohesive community could lead to a less cohesive one. (R59, middle manager, school, London)

Such comparisons ‘responsibilise’ individual professionals for policy failings by focusing professional attention on questions of policy implementation rather than policy design: a process characteristic of neo-liberal systems of governance (Thomas 2017). One of the implications of this was that respondents typically framed the most egregious incidents, such as the cucumber-cooker-bomb, as instances of specific institutions or individuals getting it wrong – problems that could be addressed through further training and/or better management – rather than evidence of problems with the duty per se.

This framing of such incidents would appear to have put the discourse of some education professionals out-of-step with public discourse about the Prevent duty in an important way. While public discourse about Prevent, particularly within those sections of the population that are more sceptical about the strategy, is dominated by references to high profile false-positives that act as evidence of underlying problems with Prevent and the Prevent duty, such cases were conspicuous by their relative absence in the accounts presented by our respondents, bracketed out for the most part as individual or institutional errors.

### ***Beyond reluctant accommodation or straightforward policy acceptance***

What is revealed when we trace these three processes is that the relative absence of expressed opposition to the Prevent duty among education professionals is neither simply a story of reluctant accommodation of the Prevent duty nor, as some supporters of Prevent might hope, one of straightforward policy acceptance. Rather, and consonant with previous research on how social and education policies are put into practice (Jones 2013) or enacted (Ball, Maguire and Braun 2013) by front-line professionals, it can be seen as the product of a complex set of interactions between high-level policy narratives and the ways in which the duty has been ‘translated’ and integrated into other, pre-existing policy and practice regimes, including pre-existing safeguarding approaches and pre-existing institutional practices concerned with promoting positive values, inclusive citizenship and anti-prejudice norms.

Policy practitioners at all points within the policy process ‘make sense of the world using the powerful persuasive tools of narrative’ (Jones, 2013: 19). The initial positioning of the Prevent duty by high-level policy actors as an extension of existing safeguarding responsibilities created an opportunity for policy practitioners, including local Prevent co-ordinators and DSLs, to construct the narratives of professional continuity that have been central to inhibiting professional opposition to the duty. Yet

such narratives were also forged through the way that the duty was enacted in schools and colleges. This was partly about how DSLs and institutional safeguarding teams took a lead in ensuring compliance with the duty. It was also however about how existing professional practices came to be reinterpreted and adapted as ‘part of’ or being relevant to compliance with the Prevent duty – practices partly grounded in educationalists’ confidence in their core professional competencies to adapt to and make the most of, the latest of many new policies emanating from government. Indeed, in some cases this folding of ‘Prevent’ into existing educational practices resulted in considerable distance emerging between interpretations of ‘Prevent’ on the ground and understandings of ‘Prevent’ among high-level policy actors.

This has placed education professionals in a ‘liminal position’ (Ball et al. 2011, 616) with regards to wider public discourses about terrorism, extremism, radicalisation, Prevent and community relations. On the one hand, their interpretation and enactment of the Prevent duty reflected their engagement with public discourses, both about the risks of radicalisation, and about Prevent and potential problems associated with Prevent. On the other hand however their professional identities, and their concomitant self-identification as having a privileged understanding of, in particular, safeguarding processes, placed them outside of, and sometimes as critics of, more general public debates about Prevent and the Prevent duty. Specifically, it made them less likely to attribute negative outcomes to policy failure and diminished the extent to which, unlike the general public, their interpretations and evaluations of the duty were based on the most egregious examples of Prevent-related practices resulting in harm and distress. It is this liminality, we argue, that enables us to understand the ‘tension’ in our data that we identified in the Introduction, between professional concerns about some of the potential impacts of the Prevent duty and the relative absence of overt opposition to, and even positive acceptance of, the duty.

## **Conclusions**

The introduction of the Prevent duty initially intensified the fierce debates already surrounding the Prevent strategy. Given the strength of the expressed opposition to the duty by some of Britain’s teaching unions and civil society organisations, we might have expected to find widespread and broadly hostile views regarding the duty among education professionals. Yet such expectations were only partially borne out by the data. While we found evidence to support a number of well-known critiques of Prevent

and the Prevent duty, we encountered scant expressed opposition to the duty or challenges to its legitimacy.

We have argued that if we are to provide a satisfactory explanation for these findings it is necessary to go beyond conceiving of them either as a product of reluctant accommodation or as a product of straightforward policy acceptance. Rather, we propose that these findings emerge out of a complex interplay between effective policy messaging and processes of policy enactment that have served to allay or at least bracket-out professional anxieties about the possible negative impacts of the duty. Here, three processes have been particularly important: the construction of radicalisation as a significant societal, institutional and personal risk; the construction of continuity with existing professional practices; and the responsabilisation of first-line professionals for policy outcomes.

There are important limitations to acknowledge with regards to this research. First, fieldwork was undertaken in urban regions with significant ethnic diversity and considerable long-term investment under the Prevent strategy. Research in other areas might have rendered different findings. Second, the study represents professional perceptions only, and there is an urgent need for research into student experiences of the duty's implementation. There are also indications within the results that there are important ethnic and religious dimensions to how the Prevent duty is being perceived and experienced by education professionals. These too require further research and analysis, not least because they raise the disquieting prospect that some education professionals from ethnic and religious minorities may feel for a number of reasons that they are unable to express concerns they might have regarding this area of policy and procedure.

Nevertheless, the findings and discussion presented above raise an analytically intriguing possibility: while the introduction of the duty initially intensified public criticism of Prevent, the way the duty has been enacted and incorporated within existing professional practices might in fact have given rise to significant processes of softening criticism of Prevent and the 'Prevent brand'. Since plans for the duty were announced, Prevent-related training has been rolled out on a massive scale across the caring professions. In excess of 500,000 educationalists have been trained in England alone. There is a possibility that emergent interpretations and broad acceptance of Prevent and the Prevent duty within a substantial proportion of this large and culturally influential population could dramatically affect the balance of current public debates around

counter-terrorism and Prevent in particular. Whether that is good or bad news will depend on what one thinks of PVE programmes. Based on the authors' experience, what is certain is that policymakers in European, Australasian and North American countries are watching with interest as they consider the next steps in their efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism.

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- <sup>i</sup> Further education colleges in the UK are distinct from universities. They provide a range of usually post-16 academic, technical and professional training and education courses that enable progress into higher education or to begin a specific career path
- <sup>ii</sup> Minor adjustments were made to the survey prior to the booster. We removed 4 questions relating to school/college profiles that, due to sample size and distribution, were superfluous. We also inserted a question about perceptions of possible stigmatisation of 'white working class' students. We do not believe these adjustments are likely to have impacted on the responses to other questions in the survey.
- <sup>iii</sup> Where totals do not add up to 225, this is because some respondents either chose the 'prefer not to respond' option or skipped the question.
- <sup>iv</sup> Including estate managers, IT managers, librarians, dedicated pastoral roles, dedicated safeguarding or child protection roles.