

Campaigning against PREVENT on campus as a student officer

Campaigning against PREVENT as a student officer in your Student Union presents opportunities as well as challenges.

As an officer you will have access to more spaces within your institution in which to voice concerns about PREVENT. However, there is often a high level of bureaucracy to manoeuvre through to get things done, and your institution will be actively looking for ways to soften your opposition, or incorporate you into their enactment of the Prevent duty.

This is a short guide on what to look out for when campaigning against PREVENT.

Campaigning as a student officer

- An anti-PREVENT campaign that falls solely on the shoulders of an officer(s) will likely be ineffective and unsustainable – and place a large amount of pressure on them.
- Institutions may try to co-opt your opposition to PREVENT by inviting you to sit on 'working groups' or engaging with PREVENT officers.
- Think about how this could be framed as 'collaboration' with the SU towards the Prevent duty, ultimately undermining your stance and students' trust in you.
- Instead, look for other routes to express your opposition, which draw upon student power.
- **It is important to aim for a dual approach, with a strong student-led campaign 'on the ground' that officers can channel, support and amplify within institutions.**
- A strong campaign against PREVENT relies on a balance between the slow grind of organising, and escalating to the mobilisation of students.
- As an officer in the union you have access to resources and networks that can help spread the 'cost' of organising, and relieve the pressure on student organisers. Consider how to best make use of this to support campaigns, without having the SU 'take over' student-led campaigns.

The Prevent duty on campus

- Given the natural variations between institutions - their size and population, etc - the government's Prevent duty guidance is not individualised nor uniformly applicable.
- Therefore, institutions will vary with the changes they implement towards it.
- **Whilst some of these will be explicitly under PREVENT policy, other changes may be more covert or innocuous, or bolster policies in other areas.**
- These can span from changes to welfare policies, equality & diversity, IT and more.
- Make sure you educate your officer about keeping eyes open for signs of PREVENT.
- Institutions will often claim that they are operating the Prevent duty with a **"soft touch approach"**. Be critical about what this actually means for students on the ground being affected by it.
Why should we settle for the policing of our campuses through PREVENT, in any degree?

Common changes or policies to look out for:

- Changes to external speaker policies
- Changes to ICT and internet usage policies – including monitoring and blocking
- Changes to access or usage of library facilities
- Stricter 'attendance monitoring' policies
- Swipe card access to prayer spaces
- Securitisation of prayer spaces generally (e.g. monitoring)

PREVENT working groups

- Institutions will have convened PREVENT working groups, often chaired by the Student Registry or Student Welfare team.
- *Memorably please They may request to meet with you to discuss aspects of their Prevent duty, training and/or your concerns about PREVENT.
- Other times they may invite you to actually sit on the working group, with the offer of voicing students' perspectives on PREVENT.
- **We would recommend *not* joining your PREVENT working group.**
- If your SU has policy to boycott PREVENT, doing so would most likely break it.
- **Consider whether your position on a PREVENT working group will actually benefit your campaign/students, or serve as tickbox exercises for your institution – as evidence of 'student engagement' with their PREVENT strategy.**
- Many institutional forums such as these are used to rubberstamp policies, rather than meaningfully consider the concerns of students or the perspective of officers.
- Alternative means of voicing discontent with PREVENT may well be more effective in altering your university's policies.
- Make use of a diversity of tactics to channel the concerns of your students and pressure your institutions – direct action and student-staff solidarity action may be a necessary approach.
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In any case, getting 'a seat at the table' should never be the end goal of an anti-PREVENT campaign.

Better to have a strong base of students and organisers ready to break down the boardroom door instead*.

But if you do attend a PREVENT working group meeting:

- Ensure that prior to attending you affirm in writing that this meeting should **not** be taken as compliance, collaboration or consent for their implementation of the Prevent duty.
- Otherwise, such meetings can be reported in Prevent duty annual reports as examples of the SU being 'positively engaged' with the duty.
- The tone of these meetings will vary across institutions.
- Some appear to be very inviting of student unions, others have asked officers to "keep their politics at the door".
- **Officers may be pressured into justifying your SUs speaker approval system or the discussion may focus on certain student groups or activities.**
- The focus of these meetings should be on the institution itself and not about the union, societies or student officers.
- Staff may agree with you on a point or say something that matches the Union's stance. It can be practical to identify possible points of dissatisfaction amongst staff and make use of them.
- For example the Welfare Team may worry "*this will make it difficult for students suffering from poor mental health to trust our team and therefore we can't provide adequate support*"
- It is important to check meeting minutes/notes are being taken and made available to ensure these points are recorded.



Constraints

- The Counter-terrorism and Security Act 2015 obliges 'specified authorities' to implement the Prevent duty. Colleges/universities are among those specified.
- The majority of higher education unions are constituted as charities and would not be required to enact the duty. If you are informed otherwise, seek independent advice.
- Trustee boards are the body responsible for making sure that student unions adhere to the law. They are usually made up largely of unelected non-students. They are informed by Charity Commission guidance and toolkits.
- Student Unions can campaign on issues relating to PREVENT and the Prevent duty that fall within their stated charitable objectives. These objectives usually relate to the education and welfare of students.
- **Due to the adverse impact the Prevent duty will have on students' education and welfare, it is perfectly legitimate for an SU to campaign against it locally, as well as to support NUS' national campaigning against PREVENT.**
- Your Trustee Board may choose (or be pressured to) follow recommendations by the Charity Commission or your institution to implement changes and to comply with the Prevent duty - but you should be able to argue against this.

For more information on tackling the implementation of PREVENT from a legal perspective, see the briefing 'Dealing with PREVENT-related pressure'.

Avoiding complicity

- **Given the often diffuse nature of how PREVENT is implemented, you should be vigilant of attempts by your institutions to secure your complicity 'by the back door'.**

- When asked by your university to take on new or extend duties relating to student 'safety', approach proposals with a healthy caution.
- You may also at times also be offered funding by local government (or even national) for projects for your SU to take part in.

- Before accepting in either case, investigate:

What department or office are they being issued by (if for e.g. externally funded, is it the Home Office?)

What are the aims of the duty or funding (is it anything to do with an 'anti-extremism' agenda)?

What obligations will accepting the duties or funding put on you, and to whom are you responsible for enacting them?

- For example you may be asked to share data with your institution about students involved in certain student societies/union activities.

Ask:

What purposes will this information be used for?

How this might come under Prevent duty recommendations on information sharing?

Who will this information be passed on to outside of the institution?

And: are you legally obliged to share this information – under what power?

What will the impact be on students' willingness to engage with the SU and union activities knowing that the SU is sharing their data for these purposes with the institution?

- **Remember: The role of student unions is to represent and defend students, NOT monitor them or act as an extension of the state!**

