Research Question: What is the reality of how the Prevent Duty is operating in secondary schools and colleges?

Policy context
The Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 ‘Prevent Duty’
Schools and colleges are now under a statutory duty to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.

Schools and colleges are now on the ‘front-lines’ of counter-terrorism:
Institutions are expected to promote ‘British Values’ as an antidote to ‘extremism’, and know how to identify students ‘at risk’ of being radicalised, and where appropriate, refer them to the Channel programme.

The Duty is central to an important debate
Several aspects of the Duty have proven controversial, including:
• Restrictions it may place on ‘free speech’;
• Potentially undermining principles of trust and safeguarding;
• Identifying ‘vulnerable’ pupils using potentially flawed indicators;
• Potentially stigmatising Muslim pupils.

Yet, education can play a key role if channelled correctly:
• There is growing international consensus on the important role of education in ‘preventing violent extremism’;
• Educationalists have long spoken of ‘Educating against Extremism’.

Educators are a key voice in this debate
Institutions and staff placed under pressure by counter-terrorism:
• Penalties for non-compliance with the Duty are high.
• The 2012 Teachers Standards requirement not to ‘undermine’ British Values means counter-extremism is influencing how teachers are expected to conduct themselves as individuals.

Understanding the lived experience of the policy is key:
• Studies have provided some evidence on how institutions are responding.
• However, further research is required to understand these experiences — not only uncovering responses, but investigating why they are adopted.

The study will address three central questions

Question 1: How are institutions practically implementing the Prevent Duty?
Research highlights that legislation is having an impact:
• Channel referrals from education sector have risen dramatically.
• 2016 Ofsted monitoring report into further education and skills providers found majority had implemented the Duty ‘well’.
• Studies show some acceptance amongst educators that they have a role to play and some level of confidence in ability to implement the Duty.

However, appears to be a level of uncertainty in how to respond:
• Ofsted report found significant variation in forms of response,
• Several surveys highlight concern about training and guidance,
• Teachers have regularly expressed concerns and ‘fear’ at being asked to prevent radicalisation and counter extremism,
• Evidence of over-zealous reporting to Channel.

Question 2: How is Prevent ‘translated’ and ‘enacted’ by educators?
There are clear issues with the ‘Prevent Duty’ as written:
• However, discussions of Prevent often focus on policy texts rather than the reality on the ground – policy does not always operate as written.
• Teachers are ‘agents’ of policy; practice is a result of interaction between policy and existing practices and knowledge.

Processes behind the enactment of the Duty are unclear:
• Is educational knowledge harnessed or subjugated by the new Duty?
• How do practice-based and policy-based knowledges interact?
• Are responses adopted to demonstrate compliance or ‘performativity’ or are responses being driven by existing knowledge and practices?

Question 3: What are the theories of change behind such approaches?

Giving teachers a voice:
• Teachers already play an important role by promoting positive outcomes such as critical thinking outside of counter-terrorism.
• The Duty risks securitising the curriculum and safeguarding procedures by placing teachers under pressure to avoid a negative outcome.
• Whilst the policy speaks of teachers’ central role, the importance of their existing ‘craft knowledge’ is often overlooked.
• Is there a better way that this knowledge can be utilised?

In answering these questions, the study will:
• Further our knowledge of how Prevent operates in practice;
• Develop a theoretically-grounded understanding of how security and educational knowledge interact ‘on-the-ground’;
• Investigate how policy is both enacted by educators, and potentially impacts on their sense of ‘self’;
• Make visible important educational insights into tackling extremism that could better inform policy.

James Lewis is an ESRC-funded PhD student at Lancaster University and an Associate Researcher at CREST. Supervisors: Dr Sarah Marsden and Prof. Kim Knott.