

TERROR AND TERTIARY EDUCATION

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With the world still in the wake of what unfolded on the streets of Paris last weekend it is appropriate that tonight’s discussion focuses on the role of universities in protecting civil liberties in an environment increasingly defined by terrorism and greatly heightened security fears within Australia’s borders.

As someone who was once a student, although in decades far gone, and as someone who has, since graduating, involved much of my career in defending basic liberties and rights it is a pleasure to have been invited to contribute tonight to this dialogue. It is a discussion that combines issues I am not only most passionate about, but also most concerned about. Our greatest hurdle in the coming decade is in dealing in a balance manner with the often conflated issue of terrorism and Islam and Australia’s Muslim population.

What we have all witnessed in Paris and even on Sydney streets is challenging and confronting. Terrorism strikes at the core of our most fundamental human emotions and values. But what we will learn in the coming months, and longer, is that our decisions in response both as individuals and as a nation, are just as crucial. Just as terrorism is the enemy of many of our human rights, so too can our responses to terrorism threaten our civil liberties and any chance of maintaining social cohesion and progress. Environments of terror and fear, much like the one we are living in, often elicit instant responses where society forgets to protect the very rights being threatened by the attacks.

This is where you as educators in Australian’s tertiary institutions have an important role. Too often our politicians, community leaders and commentators foster an atmosphere of panic, creating greater divide and marginalisation in our communities than ever before. We have seen already within the space of days vitriol against those wearing burqas in the street and further heightened concern about our refugee intake.

As educators of the next generation your role in avoiding narrow minded commentary of these attacks, their causes and their perpetrators is important. Universities should be spaces where hysteria makes way for discussion and debate however unpopular.

In the wake of 9/11 and the 2005 London bombings academic publication on areas of terrorism and security increased by around 300 percent. A majority of our Australian universities now offer terrorism courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Many institutions also have specialised research centres such as UNSW’s Gilbert and Tobin Centre and teaching staff are increasingly specialised in the area. The study of terrorism specifically but also broader areas of peace and conflict and political science is well developed in Australian universities.

The creation of curriculums and dissemination of research is key and is something I would credit Australian universities with excelling at. Allowing debate is also crucial. Actively encouraging debate is what universities need to promote.

Looking back to the 60s and 70s we saw both staff and students writing about, debating and protesting the Vietnam War. The phenomenon of ‘teach ins’ became commonplace on most campuses with professors and students joining to discuss aspects of US and Australian involvement in that war. That legitimate dialogue was unsurprisingly disregarded for a long time in the wider community. Entangled in the perception of these student protestors was the simplistic approach taken by many who should have known better including the then Victorian Education Minister as to who described protestors as ‘uncouth and unwashed’.

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But Vietnam in hindsight is a strong reminder that so often society has regretted not giving credence to the legitimate concerns raised on campuses. It is crucial we do not repeat the mistakes of the past.

And yet again after 9/11 when we needed debate more than ever before we saw universities struggle to conceptualise their role and their place in a heightened security environment. Faculties in the US in particular began to self-censor. Institutions such as the University of Colorado were condemned for anti-American teaching which was said to disrespect those who had lost lives in the Twin Towers and the later loss of soldiers' lives in Iraq and Afghanistan.

There is a wealth of academic study now admitting US teaching has become far more militarised since 9/11. On a practical level curriculums are now more rigid and surveillance on campuses has arguably become excessive. On a broader level there is also concern for academic independence and the university's autonomy. Often the only discourses being disseminated follow government policy and agenda leaving little room for constructive dissent.

Now with decades of hindsight there is no shortage of pedagogical commentary dedicated to how the Vietnam War should be taught. Schools and universities are still trying to find the perfect curriculum that balances discussion of US involvement and motives, continues to respect of the service of Australian soldiers and still critically discusses the climate of colonisation that motivated the Vietcong.

Universities are now well aware of the need for this neutrality in presenting Vietcong and US perspectives which has been a positive move. However it is arguably far too reactive. Vietnam therefore teaches us another lesson. University courses need to be fluid to allow neutral and varied discussion of current events. We cannot wait for the war on terror to finish to start structuring courses around the grievances of all parties involved. Curriculum regarding the Middle East needs to be proactively neutral and balanced.

It is only now with 14 years hindsight that the new Vice-Chancellor of Oxford has been able to, though still bravely, claim the US overacted to 9/11. At a conference on tertiary education in London, Vice Chancellor Richardson, herself a highly commended terrorism scholar, warned radical ideas needed to be canvassed, engaged with and challenged within lecture halls. She felt faculties needed to defend their right to do so fiercely.

Richardson noted the biggest risk the US would face was seeing the world in 'black and white terms.' The role of the university was to ask the hard questions the rest of society was avoiding, to be critical of Western responses and avoid the 'over-simplified' worldview that the terrorists themselves have often succumbed to.

Australian universities need to allow for the most unpopular of discussions. Lecturers must strike a balance between condemning attacks and also questioning our role. But isn't it time we openly discuss the argument that the West's invasion of Iraq and our role in the Middle East broadly over the past decade, may have made the ground more fertile for the growth of ISIL and its counterparts?

The uncertain part of studying, researching and teaching in these fields is that terrorism remains undefined. It is still a complex and morphing notion. With that in mind it is crucial universities allow definitions and therefore the field as a whole to grow in time and for students to think critically

Courses focusing on the Middle East need to take a varied approach, giving time to the complex forces and factors at play in these regions. But those more general terrorism courses also need not conflate the definition of terrorism and Islam. As a society we have already done this.

2011 saw the extreme right wing massacre in Norway yet this event does not feature significantly in terrorism texts or syllabus.

Just this year we saw the politically motivated Charleston massacre. An event that is clearly domestic terrorism but will remain isolated to discussions of gun violence not terrorism.

It is clear that many in Australian society have a tendency to conflate the strategy and act of terrorism with the ideology and religion of Islam alone. This tendency is at risk of becoming embedded habit after this week.

The academic papers being generated out of Australian Universities are making headway. The work of the Gilbert and Tobin Centre consistently reminds us to be cautious of ever expanding anti-terror and security laws. After having spent much of my career warning of excessive police powers and the recent growing reach of Australia Border Force, this expertise is welcomed.

Just this past week we have seen Deakin University announce a new national research centre into radicalisation and extremism headed by Professor Barton and ANU's Dr Jones. Similarly, two academics from the University of Queensland have just yesterday received a significant two year research grant to partner with institutions in Berlin on the threat the Islamic State poses to 'open societies.'

It is evident that in light of recent attacks there will not only be the audience for but indeed funding for greater university commentary on terrorism. It is important universities use this to research and political capital to report on all aspects of the Middle Eastern environment. The goal can not only be preventing terrorist attacks here and abroad but to understanding and addressing the perceived grievances of those using these tactics.

Of course it would be naïve to ignore the arguments from critics of the very debate I am calling to occur on campuses. There are those that believe universities and the attainment of a tertiary qualification in itself fosters extremism.

With Australia having one of the largest populations of international students, with enrolments from Asia and the Middle East in particular rapidly rising, this argument is not only constant but also extremely dangerous.

The media coverage of young Australians travelling overseas to fight for ISIL is shallow and sensationalist. Reports about Adil Fayaz alleged that the young man was radicalised while studying his MBA right here in Brisbane.

Fayaz aged 26 is believed to have joined the civil war in Syria last year. Originally born in Kashmir reports focused heavily on the time he spent studying in Australia between 2009 and 2012.

No attempt was made to prove a causal link, rather resting on the assertion that our universities are breeding radical Jihadists. Similarly, the first facts we heard about the Tunisian beach attacks were that the culprit was a young man – with a university degree.

Research clearly disputes any clear correlation between education and terrorist tendencies. People will cause atrocity whether educated or not and our best tool in combatting and responding to those acts is indeed education itself.

On April 16 the Daily Telegraph published a full list of young Australians fighting in Syria and Iraq. The article warned that 'extremist groups are targeting young Australians in their bedrooms and lounge rooms...urging them to carry-out home-grown terror attacks.'

It cannot be maintained that universities or our Muslim communities are breeding terrorists. Nor is the Telegraph's statement that ISIL are somehow brainwashing students at home in their lounge room convincing.

What is true is that a number of young Australians are questioning the West, and indeed Australia's role and actions. Just as young Australians questioned the US and were concerned for Vietnam's struggle with continual colonisation. It is a reality that young Australia's are taking an interest and some are indeed sympathising with groups like ISIL despite having spent their entire youth surrounded by Australian values.

What the telegraph and other popular media outlets and politicians fail to consider is why this is the case. For ISIL to be having any recruitment success there is evidently an environment where young minds are open to being persuaded.

Universities should be doing what academics like Deakin University's counter terror expert Greg Barton has been making valiant efforts to do - refocusing media hysteria about Paris back into considerations of our schools and communities.

There has been great attention given to recent proposals that primary schools are the front line in stopping radicalisation and recruitment of young Australians. Barton has been working to champion that not only does attention need to be paid to curbing radicalisation of or Australian youth but also to build what he calls a stronger 'counter narrative' about Muslim Youth. In his view 'anti radicalisation measures are not where they need to be.'

When most have been focusing on discussion of increased security and strong military responses in the past week, Barton was quick to note just this morning that 'western authorities have largely dropped the ball on community engagement.'

In line with the recent work and comments of Professor Barton I would propose universities have a large role in looking at those early signs of radicalisation. Australians need to understand that the motive to join or at least sympathise with groups like ISIS is often a feeling that their grievances with western policy or their questioning of US and Australian involvement are ignored.

Our policies aimed at reducing home grown terror and radicalisation cannot be guided by political catch-cry and fear. Stopping young Australians suspected of sympathising with ISIS from travelling to those areas is necessary but understanding and addressing the motivation is critical. Universities need to consider the points raised by these Australians and give them a platform for discussion on campuses and within courses in order to minimise the risk that students turn their disenchantment with Australia into something more extreme and radical.

Fears have also been raised that engaging in these debates makes universities targets. Throughout history universities have been the chosen stage for horrific attempts to quell debate and learning. Indeed in the Middle East itself universities are not the havens of safety we enjoy here in Australia where students attend classes without the fear of attack. Just this week, due to the Paris coverage, information has come to light about the April siege on a Kenyan University.

To temper lively debate in fear of attack is to leave universities and therefore society defenceless against challenges posed by terrorism itself. Safe universities are paramount, but just as Parisian journalists vowed to continue writing in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo territorial atrocity, faculties must continue to debate and discuss the complex issues of what motivates young Australians to want to go to ISIS held territories to fight.

Universities must also continue to support (but not uncritically) the dialogue of the Australian Muslim community, its leaders, academics and above all its students.

Asari Nomani, an Islamic author wrote in the London Times recently after a speech where she hoped to argue for a progressive, feminist interpretation of Islam was cancelled by Duke University for fear of excessive protest.

Nomani however made the pertinent point that the cancellation of her speech was akin to the controversy surrounding the cancelled screening of American Sniper at Michigan University.

The ban came after a petition suggested the movie condoned anti-Muslim sentiments. The University was quick to reverse their decision noting 'the initial decision to cancel the movie was not consistent with the high value the University places on freedom of expression and our respect for the right of students to make their own choices in such matters.'

The United Kingdom is no exception. Warwick University reportedly cancelled a speech by Maryam Namazie, an Iranian born human rights campaigner and vocal critic of sharia law, due to fears her comments could be 'inflammatory.'

As noted by Nomani regardless of whether a university event champions new Muslim narratives, anti or pro American views, the importance is that the students can engage with the material and make informed choices. She called for campuses to allow 'critical conversations, especially if they make people feel uncomfortable.'

Earlier this year the University of Sydney cancelled an Islamic Awareness Week event where noted radical Uthman Badar was due to speak. The University of Western Australia was quick to follow the cancellation.

These choices coincided with the controversy that ensued surrounding Zaky Mallah's appearance on TV program Q and A after allegedly pleading guilty to threatening ASIO officers and being known for his violent tweets.

It is true that the cancellation of Badar's appearances is an extreme example. Vice Chancellors were concerned his alleged justification of honour killings and other radical ideology were too disrespectful. Ideology were too disrespectful towards women. They might have been but the views should still have been allowed to be expressed.

But in light of the consequent discussions about censoring the ABC's Q and A and Australian media generally it is more important than ever that Australian universities promote, without endorsing, contrarian views particularly on the often wrongly conflated issue of terrorism and the Islam religion.

But it is a balance hard to find for educational institutions. Top universities such as Yale and Missouri are currently struggling in the grips of controversy surrounding racial hate speech. The Washington Post has acknowledged that 'universities are struggling to strike a balance as they seek to foster a climate that is at once tolerant of racial and cultural differences but also unafraid of a robust clash of viewpoints.'

In a statement on the issue President of Yale, Peter Salovey noted 'we renew our commitment to this freedom not as a special exception for unpopular or controversial ideas but for them especially.'

Just as universities must not circulate only the populist mainstream agenda so too must they be careful to not selectively give voice to only those that are deemed publicly popular. It is a risk that universities take excessive caution in an age where most student articles and campus events come with 'trigger warnings.'

I thought the President of Wesleyan College in the US made an important distinction to keep in mind when student safety is often a justification for limiting debates, protests and events;

'...the institution has to protect people against attack that causes harm, but it should never protect people against ideas that are difficult to digest.'

If we cannot have these discussions and presentations on university campuses where can we have them? If anything we should be aiming for greater grass root integration with Muslim academics and leaders into classrooms on a more constant basis.

Dr Ali White, specialist in Middle Eastern Studies and an academic at the University of Western Sydney, the university with the highest enrolment of Muslim Australians warned in the wake of 9/11 and the Bali bombings of the demonization of many of his young students.

The insights that educators such as Dr White and his personal experience and expertise can provide into the experiences of Young Muslim students are crucial. In his view the harmful dichotomy of 'us and them' in relation to Sydney's Muslim population emerged as early as 1998 when Bobb Carr denounced Lebanese gangs. Subsequent media and police frenzy has since lead to a strongly embedded stereotype of 'Middle Eastern Youth Gangs.' White warns of the internal identity war this can cause amongst young Muslims who abandon attempts to fit in with their Australian classmates and unconsciously isolate themselves further. He calls this the vicious circle

whereby marginalisation and stigma by the most powerful sectors of Australian society push these youth to then deny their Australianness and thereby opening them to the accusation they are not participating in our society.

To refer again to Professor Barton's expertise, it will be important to redefine a new Muslim narrative in Australia. In particular Barton noted at Monash University's recent Counter Extremism Summit that relying on Muslim leaders is not enough. This is pertinent given current criticism that some Muslim leaders have been too slow or soft in their responses to Paris. Barton calls for us to engage with young leaders and new organisations in these communities rather than solely with established groups where collaboration is already strong.

It is true that universities may have networks and systems in place to support and engage marginalised students. Outreach to key leaders in the Muslim community does seem to be something faculties like those at UNSW have once again excelled at.

The issue to remember however is that students to be most concerned about, be they Muslim students feeling marginalised by the current environment or Australian born students feeling disenfranchised from Western values. They are the ones the current approaches have not and won't engage with.

Perhaps one point that all can agree on is that there is no one solution. Barton calls therefore for multiple approaches at multiple levels. Australian university educators agree universities are one of those key levels.

Drawing from his personal experience in teaching members of marginalised Muslim communities at UNSW, Dr White called for universities to decide whether they are 'capable of, or willing to play a role in helping reverse the current of dangerous stigmatisation of Muslim Australian Youth.'

As I noted at the outset, Australian universities are more than capable with the curriculum, expertise and research frameworks now well established.

The past decade and a half since 9/11 has seen the emergence of a previously niche and unfunded field of study and research. We have leading academics here in Australia who are already working tirelessly to contribute to public debate that without them will remain uninformed and sensationalist.

Universities are often the first to warn of hysteria, calling for caution instead of knee jerk responses such as excessive counter terrorism measures which risk so many of our civil liberties.

We also do have leading academics who are already warning about excessive counter terrorism measures, the risk of home grown radicalisation and the need to reintegrate our Muslim youth. Tertiary education in Australia must continue to be a key stakeholder in the conversation going forward particularly about home grown terrorism and radicalisation especially to widen and balance the often simplistic public debate in this area.

There is no doubt universities are capable of reversing the stigma and marginalisation I have spoken about. I am also confident Australian universities are willing to. It is time that we realise we are now in the 15th year of this so called war on terror. There is also inevitably at least a decade or more to go before it runs its course. We cannot be having the one-sided discussions we had about Vietnam 10 years from now in relation to terrorism issues. It is true that hindsight is often of great aid and benefit in these situations but we simply cannot rely on it.

The next step for our universities is to see how far they can succeed in teaching students and broader Australian society, through a balanced, neutral and proactive approach that there is indeed a grey that exists between the black and white worldview that Professor Richardson of Oxford warned so strongly against.

So, universities of Australia you are doing it well. But you have got some challenges ahead of you.