Preventing University Student Radicalisation: A Social Responsibility for Institutions of Higher Education

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Abstract

This chapter discusses University Social Responsibility (USR) when higher education institutions face cases of students' radicalisation leading to violence. The radicalisation process is presented as a result of knowledge accessibility jeopardising democracy. In response, prevention initiatives prove to be challenging for universities striving to safeguard citizens while protecting academic freedom.

Keywords

higher education – social responsibility – student radicalisation

1 Introduction

To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing. (Williams, 1989, p. 118)

Throughout their academic journey, university students may be exposed to knowledge detrimental to their development as responsible citizens. The likelihood of this happening, especially on campus, is of great concern to universities with the social responsibility of knowledge creation and transmission (Ruiz-Lozano & Wigmore-Alvarez, 2011). As a pillar of democratic societies, universities promote sustainable human development by educating students to think critically and creatively, while adhering to fundamental ideals and values. With this in mind, I raise the question of University Social Responsibility (USR) toward students exposed to knowledge deemed radical in nature and their ensuing transformation of perspectives potentially threatening democracy.

This chapter first looks at the concept of knowledge democracy to examine how knowledge accessibility and dissemination can lead to the radicalisation of university students. Then, the social responsibility of universities in reacting to instances of student radicalisation and preventing such occurrences is addressed by reviewing prevailing initiatives put forward globally by institutions of higher education. Finally, specific mitigating measures and research projects from Canadian universities are discussed. This contribution supplements larger discussions on the phenomenon of student radicalisation, with a view of enhancing knowledge of the problem space and enabling higher education institutions to navigate toward a brighter future.

2 The Flip Side of Knowledge Democracy

Fundamental to understanding knowledge democracy is the consideration that “knowledge is a powerful tool for taking action to deepen democracy and to struggle for a fairer and healthier world” (Hall & Tandon, 2017, p. 13). The advancement of human rights and liberties can be contingent upon individuals promulgating knowledge by educating others while voicing legitimate grievances. From a historical standpoint, individuals have generally acted in pacific ways to further their causes, even if their ideologies were considered radical at times. In fact, the differentiation between radical ideas and radical actions is essential, namely that individuals adhering to radicalised ideologies are not all terrorists (Borum, 2011). Nevertheless, the term ‘radical’ has received negative press over the past decade, when used in conjunction with extremists carrying out acts of violence.

In the context of this chapter, the term ‘radicalisation’ will be defined as “the process by which individuals or groups of individuals adopt and (ultimately) use violence to reach political, religious or social objectives” (Stevens & Neumann, 2009, p. 10). Most importantly, radicalisation does not pertain to a single ethnicity, religion or culture, as it is sometimes presumed when Islam finds itself at the centre of discussions on terrorism (Dawson, 2014). For instance, the emergence of domestic groups embracing right-wing ideologies is an example of secular radicalisation. In any case, it has been reported that the enrolment of new recruits by violent terrorist groups targets primarily young adults, through social media, community circles and teaching establishments (UNESCO, 2015). Therefore, I will proceed with the examination of knowledge accessibility and dissemination potentially threatening democracy within these spheres of influence.

2.1 *Knowledge Accessibility*

The internet creates more opportunities for radicalisation by acting as an echo chamber where individuals share ideas with like-minded people. It is possible for an individual to undergo a complete radicalisation process while having only been in contact with others through electronic communications (von Behr et al., 2013). Someone can easily stumble upon terrorist propaganda online, such as white supremacy websites, aimed at recruiting university students from fields of study with unique skills, i.e., engineers with expertise in explosives (Gambetta & Hertog, 2017). Additionally, extremist groups use social media to post propagandist videos or publicly claim responsibility for terrorist attacks, justified by their political and theological positions. Through this medium, followers can gather information on specific causes revendedicated by terrorist groups, while developing a heightened sense of belonging to a community (Stevens & Neumann, 2009). These communities can take various forms in the environment of higher studies where knowledge becomes readily accessible, be it developed through scientific means or not.

In a similar fashion, the participation in extracurricular activities occurring outside of the classroom can represent sources of influence for university students through relationships forming with group leaders or other members. For example, the United Kingdom, United States and Canada confirmed that several individuals, either suspected of extremism or recognised as terrorists, were involved with the Muslim Students' Association (Daly, 2015; Streitwieser, Allen, & Duffy-Jaeger, 2019). The association was established in the 1960s with a goal of raising awareness on the Muslim culture to minimise prejudice and is comprised of several branches on university campuses across the world. In some instances, it served as a recruitment platform to attract new recruits by sharing views opposed to secular western ideologies (Helmer & Dimmock, 2016). Evidently, the leaders of Muslim Students' Associations are not always malevolent and individuals joining these groups do not systematically develop radicalised perspectives. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that university students will access information from various places outside of their study programmes and that associations of all sorts can represent one of these sources of knowledge.

2.2 *Knowledge Dissemination*

The road toward radicalisation is not only envisaged by individuals based on their personal world views, but also due to consideration for a network of peers with whom they have developed trust (Stevens & Neumann, 2009). Young adults often seek the endorsement of others in the form of support, trust or friendship,

as a reassurance that they are on the right path (Sands & Tennant, 2010). According to Amarasingam (2016), individuals who migrated toward the territory controlled by the Islamic State were using code words in their electronic communications with others who were financing and facilitating their movements. In this case, the implementation of an action plan was largely dependent on a network formed of members possessing knowledge and resources enabling the migration process to unfold. In fact, contemporary terrorist groups are often composed of cells constituted from existing friendships radiating through the network (Hafez & Mullins, 2015). These pre-existing affiliations facilitate the enrolment of new recruits, embracing a solution responding to community grievances, all the while strengthening the network against potential attacks.

Through the radicalisation process, individuals may share their new perspectives with their entourage, which does not always result in an upsurge of solidarity. Frictions can develop with family members and friends who do not adhere to similar beliefs. The stigmatisation resulting from individuals adopting extremist ideologies can impact their social structure, either by radicalised individuals distancing themselves or others dissociating themselves by objection. Sands and Tennant (2010) examined the reactions of loved ones after someone commits suicide and how new existential meaning is created by survivors. A parallel could be established with the phenomenon of radicalisation representing, for many young adults, a social suicide having a detrimental impact on existing relationships. The resulting isolation forces students in the process of radicalising to look for new allies, coveting perspectives aligning with the ones they are looking to adopt. In order to avoid such a divide, the collective identity of a community must rest on a unicity of beliefs, values and ideals that is well defined (Duchesne, 2017) and, for this reason, universities play a crucial role in the social development of students.

3 University Social Responsibility toward Student Radicalisation

In 2015, UNESCO indicated that recruiters from radicalised groups were targeting postsecondary institutions. Consequently, member nations implemented prevention programmes aimed at deterring young adults from developing radicalised perspectives. Yet, in 2016, the World Bank reported alarming statistics, showing that 25.4% of recruits who had joined the Islamic State received university-level education. Considering the global massification of higher education enrolments, one could argue that a growing number of university students are at risk of radicalised influences world-wide.

Given that universities represent an environment where the radicalisation of young adults can occur, these institutions have a societal duty to address this growing phenomenon. The University Social Responsibility (USR) framework is recognised as a philosophy whereby universities engage with local and global communities to sustain social, environmental and economic development (Chen, 2015). According to the model proposed by Reiser (2008), in Figure 17.1, socially responsible universities can affect change on four different axes: education, organisation, knowledge and participation. In this section, each of these axes will be discussed by also providing examples of initiatives from institutions of higher education to prevent, react and reverse student radicalisation.

FIGURE 17.1 Four axes of socially responsible university change (from Reiser, 2008)

3.1 *Education Axis: Student Preparation for Citizenship*

Globally, it is recognised that education represents a tool to prevent terrorism and violent extremism (UNESCO, 2015). Over the past decade, several western countries have integrated citizenship education in their curricula of elementary and high schools. As for universities, the debate is ongoing with the delivery of citizenship programmes to undergraduate and graduate students, due to insufficient scientific data supporting successful learning outcomes (Wynne, 2014). Nevertheless, the student population is prepared by universities toward a responsible citizenship through the expansion of knowledge and shaping of attitudes. This is reflected, for example, in the mission statement of Harvard University: to educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society. Johnston (2011) emphasises the critical role of adult educators, as change agents, when they draw from poignant current events, such as terrorist attacks, to inspire social transformation. This approach can benefit higher education milieus by integrating teaching moments into existing curricula, through the linkage of

current events to learning material as a best practice. While discussing with students, if they were to express extremist perspectives, the United Kingdom strategy called 'Prevent' encourages educational staff to refer possible cases of student radicalisation (Streitwieser, Allen, & Duffy-Jaeger, 2019). However, this policy has been criticised for inhibiting academic freedom by stigmatising cultural groups and securitising higher education (Durodié, 2016).

3.2 *Organisation Axis: University Life*

A large proportion of university students find themselves in a defining phase of their adulthood, during which they search for meaning and social identity. Therefore, it is crucial that universities adhere to organisational practices that are socially responsible and lead by example, showing what community living should be. In general, universities have reacted to public announcements of radicalised cases within their student population by organising discussion forums to provide information of associated risks and answer questions of concern. For instance, the Université Paris-1 in France organised a seminar on the topic of radicalisation prevention to better understand the phenomenon; however, the event was cancelled at the last minute, considering the guest speaker as problematic (Vidalie, 2020). The University of Edinburgh in Scotland is also systematically assessing risks with external speakers and events, while maintaining its commitment to freedom of thoughts and expression (University of Edinburgh, 2019). Nevertheless, mitigating measures implemented by universities are not always effective, since young adults tend to experiment with several avenues prior to forming their identity (Illeris, 2014). For that reason, Cranton (2011) encourages educators to pay attention to local medium, magazines published by diverse associations and activist groups. Furthermore, Ponsot, Autixier and Madriaza (2018) suggest the employment of field practitioners for the detection of radicalised cells forming or, at least, as a deterrent for individuals intending to use university campuses as recruiting sites.

3.3 *Knowledge Axis: Scientific and Technical Activities*

In general, the production of new knowledge is essential to gain a comprehensive appreciation of the student radicalisation phenomenon. Several initiatives have been implemented across the world, among which research bodies focussed on this specific topic were established over the past five years. A world first, a UNESCO Chair on the Prevention of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism was inaugurated in 2018 at Université de Sherbrooke in Canada. This research chair recently launched the Prevention-Impact Project aiming at developing evaluation models for primary, secondary and tertiary education programmes preventing violent extremism. Then again, when taking a closer look at the number of university students who have radicalised over the

past years, their complete transformation occurs relatively infrequently, even though it can be devastating when it does. We must remember that the positive expressions of critical and free thinking, through various forms of radicalism emerging from institutions of higher education, has traditionally served as catalysts for societal changes. Therefore, it is a delicate balancing act for national governments to safeguard citizens while protecting the academic freedom of university staff and students (Streitwieser, Allen, & Duffy-Jaeger, 2019). In order to preserve academic freedom that lies at the heart of democratic societies, universities have the social responsibilities to protect fundamental principles on which these institutions were built, at the same time as contributing to the general population welfare.

3.4 *Participation Axis: Communities of Mutual Learning*

Although there are studies suggesting that the radicalisation process cannot be deconstructed into a series of stages (Leman-Langlois, 2015), others posit that its operationalisation follows a distinct sequence, ultimately leading to terrorism (Moghaddam, 2005; Silber & Bhatt, 2007). In order to reverse the radicalisation process already in progress, Moghaddam (2005) suggests the involvement of all stakeholders, which, in the case of university students, means the university, classmates, family members, specialists, police services, etc. For instance, when suspecting that her son was developing radicalised tendencies while attending university as an international student, a mother reported him to the authorities, leading to his arrest, repatriation, incarceration and court trial that most likely saved his life (Custeau, 2018). It truly takes a “village” to intervene in such a situation by targeting the network neuralgic points, protecting students against malign influences. In that regard, in addition to raising the awareness of university staff and students, the Université de Liège in Belgium published an information guide for families suspecting students of radicalisation, offering readily available resources (Bousetta & Dethier, 2019). Regrettably, we know relatively little on the reversion of transformation, especially when it is involuntary, other than cases of individuals “de-radicalising” due to the disintegration of groups they belonged to (Della Porta & LaFree, 2012). The same can be stated about students who decide to leave terrorist groups to return to their home countries and reintegrate their original societies. Either way, universities must assume their social responsibilities by rallying with other actors to intervene when deemed necessary.

4 Canada: Student Radicalisation, USR and Future Outlook

Over the past 20 years, Canada has suffered from the radicalisation of students with cases emerging from postsecondary establishments. In fact, it is estimated

that approximately 50 college and university students left Canada to join terrorist groups, with most of them meeting an unfortunate fate (Government of Canada, 2016). These students are identified as foreign fighters, that is, “individuals who travel to a State other than their State of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts” (United Nations, 2014, p. 2). Even though not all radicalised students joining terrorist groups will relocate domestically or abroad to get involved in the activities of said groups, doing so demonstrates the serious nature of their individual transformations.

The Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence, established in 2016 in Canada, suggests that a search for belonging, meaning and identity motivates students to adopt radical ideologies from terrorist groups (USR: Education axis). Looking at radicalisation with a cultural lens further explains the challenges faced by students who were raised by families of various ethnicities. Notably, students coming from first or second generations of immigrants adopt different strategies to form their individual and societal identities, depending on the degree of intercultural asymmetry between their society of origin and the one they immigrated to (Camilleri, 1998). With a view to embrace a “living-together” philosophy, the University of British Columbia and University of Ottawa have both publicly denounced acts of discrimination, marginalisation and stigmatisation taking place on their respective campuses (USR: Organisation axis). Although these acts were not exclusively aimed at Muslims, Benraad (2015) argues that there is a growing feeling of humiliation, indignation and frustration in that particular community toward international events, suggesting injustice perpetrated by the West. Therefore, it forces individuals struggling with this perception to choose between continuing to support western views, even if perceived unjust, or develop new perspectives clashing with western societies.

In 2017, a Canadian reporter produced a documentary entitled “Where are you Youssef?” to retrace the steps of a university classmate who migrated to Syria to join the Islamic State (USR: Knowledge axis). Essentially, this initiative demonstrates the role that fellow students can play in preventing the propagation of radicalisation by developing a better understanding of the phenomenon. Indeed, university students represent institutions of higher learning as novice scholars, producing new knowledge by engaging in scientific and technical activities. At Queen's University, a doctoral candidate conducted a research project interviewing current and former foreign fighters, as well as parents and closed friends (USR: Participation axis). The results of this study, combined with all other efforts collectively invested by university stakeholders, will indisputably enhance the understanding of student radicalisation for higher education institutions to assume greater social responsibilities toward a brighter tomorrow.

5 Conclusion

The phenomenon of student radicalisation is a multifaceted topic that warrants a great deal of nuances, while further examination is considered to better understand its implications for higher education. Over the past decade, Western universities developed strategies to prevent, react and reverse radicalised cases emerging from their student population. All the while, the institutions struggled with preserving fundamental democratic values and principles of academic freedom. In general, prevention programmes implemented by universities received critiques of securitising higher education and even targeting specific ethnic, religious and cultural groups. Actually, several examples used in this chapter to illustrate student radicalisation related to recent cases from the Islamic State, because it was the dominating terrorist group over the past decade. It was in no way my intention to support a discriminatory rhetoric, but rather to expose challenges between implementing anti-radicalisation strategies and protecting the rights of free thinking. In that sense, the USR framework proved valuable to examine obligations related to education and knowledge, and may support continued scholarly discussions to further explore issues of student radicalisation in higher education institutions.

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