



Universities and their role in countering extremism

This *National Security Practice Note* aims to encourage universities to take proactive steps to counter extremism on campus and to provide them with information on how to do this effectively.

The *Note* is predicated on the belief that the best counter-measures to extremism are provided by those closest to the ground – in this case the campus Muslim communities. The *Note* recommends measures that respond to this communities' needs, rather than being imposed on them to meet other's concerns.

The Muslim communities should not be seen as a threat but as a group which would benefit from assistance to help it combat activities which it sees as against its faith.

Since 2001, there has been a significant increase in the attention given to university campuses by intelligence and law enforcement agencies around the world. Their interest in so-called 'people of interest' has led to warrants for information from universities, covert surveillance operations and informal requests to 'keep an eye on' certain people.

This worldwide trend is due to the fact that universities have been linked with terrorism in four ways.

Firstly, universities have facilitated visas for overseas students which have provided cover for them to enter the nation.

Secondly, universities have provided the education of future terrorists, notably in engineering and other technical disciplines.

Thirdly, universities have provided a source of material, such as chemicals and electronics, for weapons.

Finally, universities have been a place where an interest in radicalisation has been fostered and terrorist members recruited. Few university students and staff have undertaken terrorist acts while at the universities but their university years have been important in shaping their attitudes and belief in terrorism.

As such, campuses have a greater responsibility than ever before to identify information and individuals that could be relevant to law enforcement and intelligence agencies. The education institutions should further build on their level of interaction with these agencies, and all must become pro-active.

Another responsibility of the institutions, like other elements of the Australian community, is to contribute to the work of challenging extremism and promoting the common goals of harmony and understanding in the community.

One significant way to do this is to engage the Muslim campus communities. A model for this could be found by adapting the Muslim Reference Group concept initiated by the Australian Government.

The purpose of forming a campus Muslim reference group would be to:

1. build leadership capacity and communication skills in campus Muslim leaders
2. support the Muslim campus communities' efforts to counter extremism
3. encourage tolerance and social cohesion on campus through public education and activities
4. bring the campus Muslim communities together with the institution's management through consultations and on-going dialogue.

Specific activities which the group would undertake could include developing:

- ways to promote social cohesion and connectedness, including building networks between Muslim campus communities and the non-Muslim campus communities
- ways to challenge violence, ignorance and extremism
- ways that campus Muslim leaders can be empowered to reinforce the message to Muslim youth, their parents and Australians generally, that Islam is compatible with Australian values and culture, and that it can live comfortably alongside and engage with other faiths
- recognition and support for moderate Islam and Muslim practices in the broader Australian communities



The Australian Homeland Security Research Centre undertakes independent, evidence-based analysis of domestic security issues.

National Security Practice Notes is a publication series that covers topical issues which are of critical importance to building national and domestic security capability.

National Security Practice Notes is part of the research program of the Australian Homeland Security Research Centre.

The Centre's 2006 research priorities include:

- Performance measures for domestic security policy
- The appropriate sharing of security costs and benefits between business and society
- National security capability development
- The role of the private sector security in national security

About the author

Athol Yates is the Director of the Australian Homeland Security Research Centre which is a non-partisan think-tank on domestic security.

Athol Yates
Australian Homeland Security Research Centre
Tel 02 6161 5143, Fax 02 6161 5144
PO Box 295, Curtin ACT 2605
Australian Institute of International Affairs Building
Level 2, 32 Thesiger Court, Deakin ACT 2600
info@homelandsecurity.org.au
www.homelandsecurity.org.au

Copyright 2006. All rights reserved.
ISSN1449-9630 (Print)
ISSN 1449-9649 (Electronic)

- responses to ensure that, in the event of a terrorist attack in Australia, the communications and operational responses minimise the potential for vilification of Muslims
- ways to enhance campus participation and improve employment outcomes for Muslim students.

If handled sensitively, the campus Muslim communities would welcome the initiative as it would provide them with significant benefits. These include:

- gaining access to resources that could be used to challenge extreme views
- reducing the potential isolation of young Muslims
- raising acceptance of Islam on campus
- providing a rapid communication channel to bring issues of Muslim concern to the attention of the institution's management
- further demonstrating the commitment of the Muslim communities to combating the use of violence and terrorism in the name of Islam
- educating their members regarding their rights and responsibilities (including complaints mechanisms)
- ensuring that the concerns and needs of the Muslim communities are considered in campus security planning.

For the university, the benefits include providing:

- a rapid way to identify issues which are undermining Muslim tolerance on campus
- a conduit to disseminate information that would be useful to the Muslim campus communities.

For such an approach to work, the institution's management must make a serious commitment towards this group, and treat the Muslim campus communities as an equal partner rather than a controllable committee.

Another important action for an institution to undertake in relation to terrorism, is to prepare for the consequences of a potential or actual terrorist incident involving campus personnel or property.

Actions that should be considered include being prepared to:

- rapidly respond to requests for information by the police relating to any investigations. This could include information on a student's movements, such as which tutorials he attended, which rooms

he booked for meetings, and what chemicals he has had access to.

- immediately deal with any backlash against Muslims on campus which may arise following an incident. The preparations that should be considered include providing an increased security presence, education and physical protection of certain areas and people.
- respond rapidly to concerns by international students and their parents that Australia and the campus in particular is unsafe.

While it is tempting to believe that terrorism is not a feature of Australian campuses, institutions in Australia and overseas have been linked to terrorism. As such, a realistic approach to dealing with radicalisation is required.



Safeguarding Australia 2006
The 5th Homeland Security Summit & Exhibition
19 - 21 September 2006, National Convention Centre, Canberra

   

- Combating home grown terrorism
- Dealing with catastrophic disasters
- Developments in security technology
- 92 speakers over 3 days
- Comprehensive security exhibition

www.SafeguardingAustraliaSummit.org.au
02 6161 5143 admin@safeguardingaustraliasummit.org.au