

Case study about a university student indicating intent to travel to Syria

Overview of situation that arose

University senior management and safeguarding leads attended FE/ HE WRAP training to gain awareness of the Prevent strategy, factors leading to vulnerability and behaviours that might raise concern. The training also highlighted the support available to universities in protecting vulnerable individuals from the risk of radicalisation and the rationale for early intervention.

A few months later the university contacted the local Prevent coordinator asking for advice and support in relation to one student. Concerns had arisen after the student asked for an extension to their dissertation deadline. The university investigated the reason for the request and a member of staff formed the impression that the student might be intending to travel to Syria and that there was another student also involved.

Action taken

An initial meeting was arranged between the university's senior management, its legal department and local Prevent coordinators.

University representatives were concerned with fulfilling their legal responsibilities, but also wanted to ensure a proportionate response that avoided any inappropriate disclosure of information and minimised reputational damage.

The Prevent team outlined the position in relation to Threat, Risk and Vulnerability and gave reassurances that potential courses of action would all focus on safeguarding the individual and would support the institution to put the student at the heart of the process throughout. However, they also highlighted that as no information had been shared at that stage the university still held all the risk associated with the student and would continue to do so until a decision was made whether or not to share any information.

The university was given time to consider their position and decide upon its course of action. In light of the circumstances the university decided to speak to the police who confirmed that the individual student was not a threat to the institution but there were concerns regarding the student's proposed travel to an area of conflict.

A further meeting was held at the university during which the institution was provided with a full information pack. This was aimed at enabling the university to have an informed conversation with the student in which the legal implications of his possible intention to travel to Syria were highlighted along with the university's wider concerns. The information pack included advice issued by the FCO regarding travel to the region.

The information pack and support was well received because:-

- The university didn't have to do the research
- The information had a legal basis which informed the university's decision-making, and enabled the university to inform the student of all relevant risks and the legal implications of his intended course of action without having to comment on or challenge the situation
- It enabled the university to outline the issues from a safeguarding perspective by challenging the criminal implications of the proposed travel, the potential impact on the individual's student status, and the reputational risk/damage to the university.

- It enabled the university to make a “difficult but strong decision”.
- It enabled the university to disclose information on a need to know and proportionate basis to appropriate staff. This helped safeguard the individual and the institution.

On receipt of the information pack, the university arranged a meeting with the student to outline its position, during which the information pack was used extensively. The institution then introduced the student to the local assessment team who gave him legal advice regarding the potential criminality and harm associated with his intended course of action. They also offered ongoing support from the local Prevent team.

During this meeting the student indicated that he had been subjected to peer pressure by another student and that as a result of the intervention he had decided not to travel. He is now receiving ongoing support from the university. The other student is no longer attending the institution.

Reflections

- Situation monitored by university and dealt with in-house with the support of Prevent
- University very comfortable with approach taken
- General understanding of risk very much enhanced by documentation provided
- Approach allowed the institution to share the risk and responsibility
- Legal position used as a point of reference
- Aided consideration of how wide any internal disclosure should be and the implications if the student had been influenced by others within the Institution including staff.
- Realisation that there is a spectrum ranging from genuine humanitarian aid to Jihad and that there are muddy waters in between
- In the worst case scenario, and perhaps a serious case review, the institution could show a robust structured approach to the situation that documented what action was taken and the decision-making process that led to it.
- Partnership approach worked – was proportionate and in the best interests of all parties
- Case study outlines a process/structure for handling of similar situations which is commensurate to the circumstances and provides an appropriate and proportionate response
- Control of the situation always remained with the university
- The initial disclosure to a member of staff was key to the engagement process and provided an opportunity to minimise the risk to both the student and the university
- The approach taken ensured that the individual and the institution were at the heart of the process and that dealing with the situation on a safeguarding/vulnerability basis provided the best initial response for all parties but still allowed for an escalation of the situation from a position of non-criminality if circumstances dictated it