

Title: Policies and Responsibilities for Governing Violent Extremism at Ontario Universities

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Research Question: This research looks at the governance of violent extremism on Ontario university campuses. Specifically, it explores: 1) how Ontario universities are governed; 2) how student organizations (such as clubs) and student governments are governed, and; 3) pre-existing policies that could apply to the governance of violent extremism. The policies of ten universities and the governance structure of all Ontario universities are examined.

Importance: Universities are places of heightened vulnerability to radicalization to violence. In an effort to counter radicalization, the UK has introduced new legislation requiring university administrators to play a role in preventing extremism. However, this legislation is concerned with all forms of extremism (both legal dissent and violent extremism) raising concerns about giving security primacy over the academic freedoms that characterize universities. Universities in Canada enjoy some protection of these freedoms due to their status as sensitive institutions. While this status protects these freedoms, it makes it more difficult to gain a clear understanding of the levels of violent extremism on Canadian campuses. However, there is some evidence suggesting a link between student organizations and violent extremism in Canada. Given this evidence, university administrators in Canada may wish to take a proactive stance towards understanding how violent extremism operates on university campuses. Such a stance would demonstrate that universities have both the will and the knowledge to mitigate these vulnerabilities, ultimately making legislating duties to prevent violent extremism unnecessary.

Research Findings: Universities in Canada are under provincial jurisdiction. In Ontario, universities are set up under individual legislative acts and are typically governed by two primary bodies. It is the Board of Governors, the body for administrative governance, that would set policies concerning governing violent extremism at the university level. Student governments also have a prominent role to play in countering violent extremism on campuses as they typically govern student organizations. However, student governments are regulated by individual agreements with their respective institutions and operate with little oversight. While policies on student behaviour exist at both levels of governance, there are no substantive references to violent extremism or terrorism within them (though there are provisions in some cases that specifically prohibit causing others to fear). Rather, existing policies can be used to govern violent extremism only through the application of non-specific policies and references to existing municipal, provincial, and federal laws.

Implications: While universities have existing policies that could be applied to violent extremism, as they are non-specific, these policies do not serve to demonstrate that universities are aware of the vulnerabilities to violent extremism on campuses or are prepared to address them. To resolve this, violent extremism should be explicitly addressed. This research acts as a first step towards the creation of policies which explicitly address this problem, by examining existing policies and governance structures. However, before new policies and best practices for countering violent extremism on university campuses can be created, steps must be taken to better understand how violent extremism operates on campuses and the awareness that university and student government administrators have of the issue.