**Walking the tightrope: exploring ‘risky’ issues and discomfort in the higher education classroom**

Fin Cullen, Michael Whelan and Mike Seal

**Abstract**

Much recent public, political, and scholarly concern has centred on tensions between academic freedoms and effective pedagogies, student requirements and responsibilities for learning, and their rights as ‘consumers’. Working with uncomfortable issues and those of 'risk' is at the nexus of these possible competing narratives (Boler, 1999; Zembylas, 2015).

Drawing on theoretical work on pedagogies of discomfort and critical dialogue with higher education youth work lecturers, we consider what counts as pedagogically discomforting in and beyond the classroom, and slippages between issues deemed as ‘the emotional’, ‘the sensitive’ and ‘the controversial’. A specific tension in preparing students for professional practice is that higher education pedagogues face a challenging dual duty of care, to students and practice settings, and the concurrent need to assess and prepare students to engage in sensitive arenas of practice. We ask how discomfort could be ethically handled within professional training contexts and what are the key institutional implications for enabling meaningful pedagogies of discomfort and challenge?

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Keywords: *pedagogy; discomfort; challenge; professional education.*

**Introduction**

This chapter is interested in the complex terrain of discomfort and pedagogy in the modern university (Allen, 2015; Boler, 1999; Boler and Zembylas, 2003; Britzman, 2000). This work extends into the field of professional education. We focus here on university-based professional education, and in particular, that of youth work education within England. Whilst specific, some of the tensions explored here speak to wider issues in bridging theory and practice in professional education courses of this kind. This chapter explores how youth work lecturers navigate complex emotionally challenging topics within the classroom through the lens of pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999).

We are interested in the concept of *discomfort,* and a *pedagogy of discomfort,* as a resource and as a pedagogic strategy that might be drawn upon in the youth work education classroom[[1]](#footnote-2). Whilst our focus is on youth work education, we hope the chapter speaks to other higher education contexts where challenging issues are discussed in the context of professional practice such as policing, teaching, counselling and social work. Our focus is on how professional educators conceptualise and operationalise such approaches within their teaching, pertinent because they flag the need for institutions to be responsive and supportive to the lived experiences of educators within the Higher Education (HE) classroom.

**Youth work education in the academy**

Youth work in the UK is a form of informal education situated somewhere between schooling and social work (Bradford and Cullen, 2014). There are a number of ways to become a qualified youth worker including dedicated HE courses. These courses include both theoretical, policy and practice placement dimensions focusing on youth and informal education. At the time of writing, 19 HE institutions run courses, down from 73 in 2010. (PALYCW, 2023). This precarity facing the continuation of many youth work programmes can aggravate against the pursuit of genuinely ‘discomforting’ learning experiences. Seal and Smith, (2021) explore how Freirean-influenced critical pedagogy often shapes youth work courses, even though they coexist within increasingly neoliberal and instrumentalist pedagogic logics of neomanagerialist university settings. Soni (2011) details how youth work’s focus on anti-oppressive and emancipatory practice, critical collaborative enquiry and reflection, working within and across conflict and manage often diverging viewpoints.

**Conceptualising discomfort**

‘Discomfort’ is a slippery, contested concept that has been drawn on across multiple literatures, and more recently within the realm of pedagogy and practice (Francis, 2016; Nadan and Stark, 2017; Boler, 2017; Zembylas, 2017, Nolan and Molla, 2018). We unpack the affective possibilities of discomfort as a way of knowing. For example, Chadwick (2021, p.557) draws on the work of Sara Ahmed (2017) to explore how emotions shape broader epistemic possibilities:

Discomfort is conceptualised here as both a visceral and relational intensity, feeling or sensation and a ‘sweaty concept’ (Ahmed, 2017) that is good to think with.

Discomfort is ‘good to think with’ in exploring issues in education settings. Chadwick (2021) is concerned with the possibilities of discomfort in feminist methodology in order to mobilise the complexity and sweaty ‘stickiness’ of the epistemic concept of discomfort to force new (hopeful?) ways of knowing and thinking anew. Discomfort does not reside solely within individuals but circulates through *and* with the social.

Discomfort is both sticky and elastic. It can hold or constrain in ways that challenge individuals to critically consider taken-for-granted assumptions, extending far beyond the limited temporal and spatial confines of the academy. It propels thinking beyond accepted ways of knowing and being into the realm of ‘affective pedagogy’ and a different epistemic knowledge. Such complexities move beyond broad, institutional regulations of quality or institutional requirements.

Boler’s (1999) ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ offers a helpful theoretical tool to help frame a small exploratory project with HE based youth work lecturers to see how they navigated and understood this terrain. For Boler (2017), a pedagogy of discomfort is about purposeful working with and through the tricky terrain of emotion, through which educators and students are invited “to engage in a collective critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs” (p.9). Working via discomfort is key to collaboratively and critically developing realisations, questioning investments, existing assumptions and encountering and re/developing new perspectives towards social justice.

Key aspects to Boler’s conceptualisation are:

* *Spectating versus witnessing;*
* *Understanding and exploring anger;*
* *Avoiding the binary trap of innocence and guilt;*
* *Learning to inhabit our ambiguous selves.*

Each aspect is explored as a powerful element in engaging in this collaborative critical enquiry, which collectively frames experience when encountering emotionally complex phenomenon. For example, *witnessing* rather than *spectating* places responsibilities upon participants to proactively engage with learning experiences in a manner that challenges the critical divide and objectification of others’ pain and experience; a vital part of working towards social justice with marginalised and oppressed communities.

Anger features in this conception. Boler (1999) takes care to unpack different elements of anger as a common part of this process that can cascade in greater and lesser constructive ways. This includes participants’ often strong investments to ‘other’ and blame perceived protagonists, in order to avoid acknowledging their own complicity in broad, structural, oppressive relationships. Finally, this also speaks to the ambiguity and complicity for all participants within complex intersectional oppressive relations or broader unequal social systems. There is no outside looking in. Rather, the visceral aspect of this emotional labour involves all and creates a pedagogic tightrope for educators and those educated in collaboratively encountering such risky and ‘discomforting’ territory together. Yet practice for real world situations demands this.

Practitioners need to work with difficult and discomforting issues. Youth workers, in common with other professions, are ‘street level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky, 2010), necessitating the need to critically and reflectively engage in the messiness of practice and the often-disconnected calls of policy demands. To work with people requires workers to engage with ethical and emotional complexity – the stickiness of discomfort that moves beyond the classroom to practice. Seal and Smith (2021) note the need to unpack understandings of who knowledge creators are, and public and private notions of professionalism and pedagogic relationships. This means that the deconstruction and critical reflection upon power dynamics in the classroom, will itself be a discomforting pedagogic experience.

Broader questions of the *ethical* arise in relation to the process and acceptability of educators evoking strong and discomforting emotions from learners as part of a critical pedagogic intent (Boler and Zembylas, 2003; Zembylas, 2015). Whist Zembylas (2015) acknowledges that discomforting learning can be harmful, this should not foreclose the need to explore issues of complexity and crisis as a learning opportunity. ‘Safety’ might thus be meaningless for those already marginalised from educational processes or may be reconfigured to not ‘rock the boat’ and unsettle those with privilege in facing up to painful issues of power, complicity and oppression. Thus, creating ‘safe’ classroom spaces is an impossibility, in that all learning spaces are replete with wider power dynamics, hierarchies of knowledge and privilege.

**The study**

This small-scale study involved two focus groups on trigger warnings with seven UK-based youth work lecturers. The first focus group took place online and the second took place in person at an annual youth work lecturer conference. For each, participants were asked to reflect on their own professional education programmes and institutional contexts, and on areas of sensitivity they encountered and pedagogic strategies they used in negotiating such issues. Recordings were transcribed and thematically coded (Braun and Clarke (2006).

We note our own investments and assumptions in this research. All authors have a background as youth and/or community work practitioners and have led professional education programmes in HE. Our prior professional experience bridges work within the homelessness and drugs field and our subsequent pedagogic and research fields reflect this. We co-taught on the same professional education programme and have written on the area of discomfort (Cullen and Whelan, 2020; Seal, 2019). This meant we had existing relationships with the field and with research participants, although due care was taken to ensure any pre-existing familiarity with individual participants did not unduly influence focus group discussions and/or the analysis of the anonymised data. This is a vital component of our own divergent understandings of the purpose and role of discomfort in professional pedagogy and the authorship of this chapter necessitated reflective discussions involving our own evolving praxis and emergent understanding regarding the role of the affective domain in social justice education.

**The emotional, the sensitive and the controversial**

The focus group discussions consisted not so much of individual strategies and pedagogic approaches, but rather the kinds of areas that were institutionally or culturally prescribed or located as variously emotional, sensitive and/or controversial. This was shaped by the presence, or lack of institutional guidance. Certainly, legal precautions regarding, for example, the Prevent[[2]](#footnote-3) duty were clearly identified. Institutions were seen as increasingly risk adverse when it came to potential reputational damage and yet broader areas of sensitivity were neglected with scant support or clear guidance. This created significant uncertainty for lecturers interviewed in how to explore such territory. We turn to look at each aspect here.

***The emotional***

All lecturers interviewed identified topics that were deemed emotionally challenging. Indeed, one participant noted the incredulity voiced by students on other university courses, observing that youth work programmes covered such fraught areas:

*A couple of my students at Level 5, the second year of their degree, have said recently they've been talking to their friends on other courses or family members and they're going, ‘I can’t believe you discussed these sorts of topics. I can’t believe your course allows you space to discuss these things’* (FG1, P2).

There was a recognition that some topics were especially ripe for emotionally ‘hot’ classrooms, but the origins of these emotions and the sources of anger, distress and/or anxiety differed. Sometimes it was perceived as an important site of self-recognition for students in their own investments or role in oppressive power relations:

*…we teach a social inequalities module in the first year, and a lot of that is that students are realising they have been oppressed, but also that they have been oppressors. And so, the sensitivity comes out there, and often that is the space where people express their opinions, their experiences, and that can often be quite different or upsetting to some students as they kind of wrestle with … having the critical arguments around that space and being willing to listen to each other and hear each other’s experiences*

(FG1, P3)

Tugging at heart strings and being passionate was deemed here as a vital professional attribute. It was recognised that youth work lecturers’ commitment, engagement and passion were central to the role, and therefore it was recognised that they were foregrounded within an educational environment that sought to prepare students for such practice experiences.

*I was thinking actually I go in with a purpose of being emotive, I want people to be emotional about what they’re learning, you know I want it to tug at heartstrings, I want them to feel passion about what they’re getting into*

(FG1, P3).

These aspects have been echoed in prior work. Indeed Moyles (2001) recognises the paradoxical lure of passion as a key driver for early years practitioners. Such a vital emotion is paradoxically positioned as a trait, but also as highly gendered – somewhere outside ‘true’ (dispassionate? masculine?) professionalism (Moyles, 2001). Passion in the youth work lecturers’ accounts was similarly positioned as a virtue – an irredeemable vocational good that on one hand motivates (future) practitioners and yet, too much or perceived unwarranted emotion/passion might seem to potentially erode claims for valid professional intent and discernment.

A tightrope threads throughout these educators’ accounts. This hinges on the need to be passionate *and* critically engage with visceral emotion as a key driver for the formation of practitioners. Yet the ‘wrong’ kinds of emotions at the ‘wrong’ time, might erode claims for valid professional authenticity and/or be seen to pose harm to individual learners. The clashing rights and duties to individual students, on the one hand, and, on the other, to broader practice will likely always be a complex gulf to bridge. However, lecturers were engaging with the deep emotional labour of carving out these affective territories – often with very limited individual or institutional guidance, a point we return to later in the chapter. However, the space to mobilise discomfort as an educational resource seemed to be increasingly butted up against, and constrained by, constructions of ‘the sensitive’ as an ethical ‘can of worms’.

***The sensitive***

Ethical issues regarding the nature and purpose of sensitive and emotional pedagogy arose from participants’ accounts in a number of ways. Firstly, there was the ethics of raising such complex and challenging issues in the classroom in the first place:

*It was just making me think what right do we have to open up this can of worms, you know? … that’s just a thought you know, what right do we have to introduce these sensitive topics and provoke these emotions?*

*(FG1, P2).*

Here, the rights of students and educators are pitted against each other in relation to the perceived need to provoke and explore sensitive and complex issues. A *‘can of worms’* evokes an intense sense of ‘disgust’ and lack of control. The wriggling ‘stickiness’ of the affective domain, instilled by such emotionally high stakes teaching, holds strong ethical dilemmas in relation to what youth work and youth workers might resemble, if such areas were not routinely explored within training programmes. However, this raised questions regarding the role of the pedagogue in facilitating and supporting these reflective and affective explorations. Some tensions flowed into an ‘ethic of care’ (Noddings, 1988) and how the academic, professional and pastoral aspects of lecturers’ roles were entwined.

This comes at a price. As former youth workers, the pastoral dynamic came easily to some lecturers and whilst the university official policy emphasised ‘referral on’ to over-stretched institutional student wellbeing services, participants’ own investments and role blurring was evident within these accounts:

*I kind of do feel it’s mine to deal with to an extent. Because I open it, because I’m teaching youth work values, I feel I’ve got to practise what I teach. I do feel a responsibility to deal with the insights, the emotions and whatever that I help create in the classroom. So, I agree that we’re not therapists, we’re not counsellors, but I feel that I do have a certain amount of responsibility outside the classroom to support students as well*

(FG1, P4)

Another similarly noted:

*So, there’s a part of me that’s kind of going there is nothing, but at the same time there are things that are in place that potentially it places the responsibility on me*

(FG1, P3)

This blur is perhaps familiar to many liminal professionals who bridge educational and welfare roles. Within such fluid boundary work arises an ‘ethic of care’ (Zembylas, 2017) for the lecturers who, isolated in large institutions, care *too* much or are provided little in the way of care for their own endeavours reflecting the ‘care-less’ nature of the neoliberal university (Rogers, 2017). Instead, discourses of *responsibilisation* framed these responses. Participants felt responsibilised for the individual and group emotional wellbeing of the cohort, often at the expense of their own personal wellbeing.

***The controversial***

When asked to consider what safety net was in place at an institutional level, participants highlighted significant gaps in relation to support or guidance offered by institutions. One participant notes her changing experiences of institutional guidance in relation to ‘the controversial’ across the period of her employment:

*… when I first started at the university … my contract actually said something about me saying controversial things, giving me permission. I can remember like saying to everybody, ‘Look, look what my contract says. It says I can be controversial!’*

(FG1, P4)

This participant’s account of her early HE experiences contrasts sharply with a more recent experience of seeking guidance in relation to controversial or sensitive topics:

*I've done quite a lot of research in previous years - I've found nothing in the university. The university doesn't have anything on sensitive topics, controversial topics. There, there are things obviously around equality and diversity and things like that, but nothing specifically about dealing with sensitive topics*

(FG1, P4)

For this participant the discursive tightrope was a precarious experience, where decisions in relation to what might be deemed *too* controversial and how such topics should be dealt with were largely left to her to determine.

Another participant’s account provides insights into how walking the discursive tightrope felt in relation to gender inequality and women’s oppression – a topic which was resisted by some students who rallied against the perceived ideological stance of the lecturer. This meant that the lecturer’s own embodiment played out. The participant noted how her male students’ angry denials of gender inequality played out in a more combative lecture space:

*A young man in particular last year who was very, very aggressive when we were starting to discuss… women's oppression… for me it’s quite difficult to have sometimes those discussions with students because I want to put across a balanced viewpoint, but I can’t – I’m a woman, I can’t put across a balanced viewpoint, I have to acknowledge that you know… I’m wanting to debate something in as honest a way as possible, but obviously I have my own experiences of living as a woman. So you know, I think that’s sensitive for me*

(FG1, P2)

The educator’s stance is a precarious and complex one. Her account constructs ‘neutrality’ as somehow institutionally expected and yet impossible, and notes that all educators enter the classroom with emotional investments. Negation and refutation of educators’ own pasts and present experience of oppression and political allegiance came to the fore here and showing how HE educators themselves inhabit their complex ambiguous selves and vulnerabilities in the classroom.

When prompted to consider the institutional supports available for lecturers who look to open up ambiguous and vulnerable classroom spaces, one participant’s response drew into focus the associated vulnerability:

*Well, there, there isn't any. There isn't any that I am aware of unless anything went wrong and I'm then I'm sure that there would be. There certainly wasn't any in my induction*

(FG1, P1)

The suggestion here is that you know you have gone *too* far in the exploration of the sensitive – into the controversial – when you find yourself falling, but what lies beneath is something far less reassuring than a safety net. This meant lecturers were pushed to either avoid the controversial and, by association, the sensitive and the emotional. However, if these areas of discussion were deemed to be important or essential to professional education, as they were for our participants, then continuing to explore them required of educators to put appropriate pedagogic approaches or strategies in place. One strategy discussed was the use of content warnings:

*So, it's [the use of content warnings] not something I've been directed to do or read any guidance on doing or even given any information about really, I've just done it as a sort of reflecting on my teaching practice, seeing what's happened in the past, seeing how students have reacted to what I've been showing them*

(FG1, P2)

Despite active use of strategies such as content warnings, lecturers described the way in which these strategies reinforced cliff edge moments in discussing sensitive issues, in a potentially counterproductive manner:

*… I've seen examples with kind of yellow triangles with exclamation marks on in the actual session plan, and I think I wouldn't go to that session. I'd be like, I'm not going there and I don't like that. I think that can be a trigger in itself, to make a really big deal of it like that*

(FG1, P4)

While content warnings were seen as a potential resource in managing or containing the risks associated with exploring sensitive topics, they were also problematic in that guidance in relation to their use was absent and they might undermine a more dialogic pedagogy. In the face of these challenges in relation to ‘the emotional’, ‘the sensitive’ and ‘the controversial’, the following section considers how Boler’s (1999) insights into pedagogy of discomfort offers a tool for useful analysis and possible directions for individual HE educators and institutions.

**Discussion**

These accounts are powerful and demonstrate how youth work lecturers routinely navigated complex emotional and ethical terrain. They raised complex ethical dimensions and the challenge for educators themselves in inhabiting ‘ambiguous selves’, ubiquitous in youth and community work. Whilst content warnings were sometimes flagged, the nature of the youth work programmes, and the perceived need to engage critically with sensitive practice issues, meant that there was an underlying expectation for students to be emotionally ‘resilient’ and ‘regulated’ in bridging discomforting spaces, in order to inhabit the role and identity of the professional. Part of these discussions hinged on learners’ inhabiting distinct roles across and within learning contexts. ‘*But I am different in practice*’ was a recognised assertion identified by some lecturers from their youth work students, and this was interpreted as the learners’ need to inhabit multiple shifting roles in distinct professional and pedagogic spaces and times.

Rather than being a problematic hurdle in relation to congruence in practice as a professional, the youth work university classroom was produced as a space of necessary expressive visceral emotion – that might need to be hemmed in, in the constraints and demands of practice contexts. The youth work student as divided/split learner-practitioner emerged across some of the accounts, as a learner who presented different emotional-professional selves, that bridged varied learning contexts.

Issues of power are key in who defines and regulates such identities and spaces. The control and regulation of such spaces can often replicate paternalist intent in ‘saving’ students/communities from discomforting arenas that they routinely engage with in the everyday. Thus, premature closing down of seemingly volatile unsafe discussions may leave students ‘stuck’ in liminal states, because of an intolerance of the irrational, the affective and the contextual. Such an approach rarely strengthens students’ readiness and/or engagement for the shifting affective terrain of practice.

Another arising theme was that of *responsibilisation*, with individual lecturers reflecting on the conflicting demands and expectations from institutions, learners and practice contexts. This creates extra significant and potentially intense emotional labour for the professional youth work lecturers. Prior work has explored the intensification of HE, the ‘hidden injuries’ of growing precarity and insecurity, often for female academics (Gill, 2013), and a push to ‘responsibilise’ individual academics in negotiation of ‘risk’ in HE (Rawolle, Rowlands and Blackmore, 2017; Torrance, 2017).

Responsibilities in relation to the defining, mediating and containment of pedagogical spaces should not lie entirely with the lecturer or the institution, after all, this seemingly reproduces and perpetuates enduring power differences, inequalities and a dependency relationship between learners and educators (Seal and Smith, 2021). These tensions compel lecturers to boundary surf the twin ethics of ‘care’ and ‘discomfort’ in developing students’ critical learning, with very limited institutional and/or sector support.

The salience of Boler’s (1999) work shines through, in thinking how this opens new ways of knowing and feeling, navigating strong powerful feelings of anger and complicity and the need to witness the challenging terrains where personal and professional experiences entwine. Practitioners and lecturers need to find together, language to articulate these experiences, and to ‘swim with’, or be ‘at ease’ with, the troublesome tension, dissension and discomfort engendered by pedagogical exchanges (Harris, Heywood and Mac an Ghail, 2017). Such spaces need to include and contain the inner conflict, and sometimes pain, for both tutor and student groups which can result from the disruption of worldviews and the deeply held values that reside therein.

The divided/split practitioner shaped the youth work lecturers’ accounts. This might speak to the need to inhabit ‘ambiguous selves’ (Boler,1999). Shifting and contingent subjectivities across time and place involve lecturers in the classroom and youth workers in their practice contexts. However, learning to be a practitioner necessitates a value congruence across diverse landscapes and requires the heavy emotional labour of naming emotion and a sustained value base across multiple sites. In a split model, the discomfort encountered in practice is explored and deconstructed in reflective practice sessions or professional supervision.

There are three potential flaws with such an approach. Firstly, it relies upon the student practitioner to bring such issues to the group or to supervision, or even recognise they are present (Harris, Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2017). Secondly, professional supervision and small group reflection has been substantially critiqued (Fook, White and Gardner, 2006) as ritualised ways of performing reflexivity and a defensive practice in higher education (Trelfa, 2021). Thirdly, Eraut (2004) and Ekebergh (2009), contest the link between reflection on and in action as assumed. Reflecting on actions afterwards will not necessarily influence directly future actions in the moment. This means it is vital that student practitioners’ ability to work with discomforting issues is mediated in the classroom and crucially assessed there – and this has distinct implications for consolidating and developing existing and future pedagogic practice.

**Implications for HE pedagogy**

This chapter explored how discomfort is experienced and understood by youth work lecturers in the HE classroom. We found accounts conflated sensitive, emotional, controversial, challenging and discomforting issues, and that further conceptual clarity is needed. However, the study speaks beyond this, considering the exploration of difficult and sensitive topics in higher education and, more generally, within professional practice outside higher education. It notes the fluid boundaries between learning spaces of professional practice and the HE classroom, in that the *everyday* seeps in. Professional educators face a challenging dual duty of care, with a concurrent need to assess and prepare students to engage in sensitive arenas of professional practice.

Ongoing questions remain on how discomfort can be ethically handled within professional training contexts and the institutional implications for enabling meaningful pedagogies of discomfort. The key challenge is that complex terrain cannot be simply managed with a one-size-fits all approach. Rather mutually respectful institutional and professional cultures of care, compassion and ‘sticky’ discomfort are vital to developing effective and affective praxis. This affective epistemic domain is far from easy. It brings together structural inequalities, with emotionally positioned and embodied personal and professional selves. Yet simple solutions such as ‘trigger/content’ warnings, or a hollowing out of the curriculum to dodge and limit painful or contentious terrain, may be counterproductive in limiting vital discussion of professional and wider social issues. The neoliberal responsibilisation of teaching staff and students, and the associated management of risk, run deep throughout these accounts and yet cannot fully recognise the shifting and by necessity ‘risky’ terrain essentially uncovered in evolving professional education programmes.

Whilst we argue against crude attempts to create neat protocols or simple lists of actions, the insights from this work, previous work on this topic (Cullen and Whelan 2021; Seal, 2019), highlight some useful pointers for work of this sort within HE professional contexts. Purposeful engagement with sensitive and challenging topics within professional education programmes is not simply a teaching hazard, to be risk assessed and managed. Rather, it should be an integral part of the meaningful preparation of students for professional practice. This suggests a programmatic approach in considering how such topics are introduced and explored, and how students are encouraged to engage with complex discussions critically and constructively. While the sensitivity of some topics can be predictable, there is much about what can be ‘triggering’ that is inherently unpredictable. This suggests a more dynamic approach in managing discomfort arising from sensitive conversations, rather than an over pre-occupation with the avoidance of discrete triggering events or moments, as is implied by the use of content warnings.

This chapter draws on Boler’s work on pedagogies of discomfort, which offers a valuable resource in considering a number of ‘good practice’ principles that might guide such work. There is an imperative on higher education institutions to ensure the training that lecturers receive reflects the value of purposeful engagement with sensitive and challenging topics within HE contexts. This should not just be about pushing further responsibilities on lecturers, but also clarifying the boundaries of their responsibilities. Participants spoke about ‘youth working’ their students, and in the absence of explicit guidance or support from their institutions it is unsurprising that they might draw on knowledge and skills from previous areas of professional practice. However, within HE their role is that of lecturer *not* youth worker and this means such educators need to be appropriately prepared and supported for the vital pedagogic particularities of working with the ‘sensitive’, the ‘controversial’ and the ‘discomforting’, within the context of higher education institutions.

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1. UK youth work education within HE most commonly refers to programmes such as ‘BA Youth Work’ or ‘BA Youth and Community Work’, and allied generic programmes, such as ‘BA Childhood, Youth and Education Studies’. Graduates typically enter careers in youth work in community, school and charity settings. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Prevent is part of UK statutory counter terrorism guidance. This mandates universities to identity and report students vulnerable to becoming involved in violent extremism. Critics have noted the securitisation of UK education spaces with consequences for academic freedom and freedom of speech (Zempi and Tripli, 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)