

Universities



Terrorism threat to universities

- There is a realistic possibility that terrorist actors could have the intent to conduct attacks against universities in the UK due to the large number of young adults that gather at university sites and the almost certain shock value and major coverage an attack at a university would receive.
- It is highly likely that any terrorist attack conducted against a university in the UK would be conducted by an individual or small cell using a low sophistication methodology. E.g., Bladed or Blunt Force Weapons, Vehicle as a Weapon, Fire as a Weapon.
- There is a realistic possibility that terrorist actors in the UK could have the capability to conduct a high-sophistication attack at a university in the UK. E.g., Improvised Explosive Devices (IED), Person Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (PBIED) or a marauding attack with Firearms. The complicated nature of plotting a high-sophistication terrorist attack makes it highly likely that there will be greater opportunity for UK police and security services to disrupt potential attacks.
- The assessments in this report were made using the PHIA Probability Yardstick, for further information please see the Assessment Methodology [section below](#).

Location based threats to universities in the UK

- It is highly likely that there would be an increased terrorism threat to universities in major cities and those in proximity to iconic sites and/or major transport hubs. There is a realistic possibility that a university located in proximity to iconic sites and/or busy public spaces could be impacted by a Marauding Terrorist attack in proximity to their site.
- Whilst it is highly likely that there would be an increased terrorism threat to universities located within large urban locations, there is a realistic possibility that terrorist actors in the UK could seek to conduct an attack against universities that are located in smaller towns or rural areas in the UK due to the lack of other suitable targets in the nearby area.

Previous terrorist incidents related to universities in the UK

- Although not designated as terrorism, individuals have previously demonstrated the intent to conduct malicious attacks against universities in the UK, including:
 - **2024 Leeds:** An individual was sentenced to six years in prison after plotting to conduct an attack against his university, including against females, doctors, people in authority, and the police. The prosecutor stated that items found in his possession, including a starting pistol, ammunition, and chemicals, were “mainly to attack students on campus or the police”.¹
- Terrorist actors have previously demonstrated the intent and capability to conduct attacks against universities globally, including:
 - **2023 Czech Republic:** Although not designated as terrorism, an individual conducted a firearms attack at Charles University in Prague. Reporting suggests the individual targeted the Faculty of Arts using a rifle. There were 14 fatalities and a further 25 people were wounded.²
 - **2022 Portugal:** Reporting suggests that an 18-year-old was arrested by police on suspicion of terrorism offences and possession of weapons. Portuguese police allegedly claimed to have foiled a plot against the University of Lisbon's science department. The suspect allegedly had “several banned weapons” and “a written plan with details of the criminal action”.³
 - **2020 Afghanistan:** Islamic State claimed responsibility for a high-sophistication attack, including Person Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (PBIEDs) and Firearms, conducted at Kabul University. There were 22 fatalities and 22 people were injured.⁴
 - **2016 Pakistan:** Media reporting suggests that four Islamist terrorists conducted an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and Firearms attack against Bacha Khan University in north-west Pakistan. There were 19 fatalities and 17 others were injured.⁵

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Other potential threats to universities in the UK

- It is highly likely that any terrorist actor with the intent to conduct an attack against a university in the UK would prioritise attacks against locations that offer publicly accessible and crowded study, hospitality, an/or entertainment spaces. E.g., Food halls, student unions, major event spaces, etc.
- There is a realistic possibility that the terrorist threat posed to universities in the UK could be dependent on the public profile of the university. For example, terrorist actors could prioritise an attack against Oxford or Cambridge University rather than a small, regional university in order to attract greater attention and media coverage.
- It is almost certain that the terrorism threat posed to universities in the UK would be dependent on the time of year and/or term times of the university. It is almost certain that university terms would attract the highest footfall to universities across the UK and therefore be prioritised by any terrorist actor seeking to conduct an attack at any such site across the UK. Alternatively, it is highly likely that the threat posed to universities would be reduced during holidays.
- There is a realistic possibility that terrorist actors in the UK could have the intent to target specific high-profile individuals hosted by universities in the UK. E.g., The presence of a controversial political commentator holding a debate at the university could lead to an increased threat from individuals with terrorist intent.
- There is a realistic possibility that there could be a heightened threat to any university in the UK hosting a major event on their site. E.g., Summer balls, live-music gigs, and/or community events would likely attract large crowds to university sites. Terrorist actors could have the intent to target large crowds hosted during major events.
- There is a realistic possibility that individuals attending university in the UK could have links to terrorist groups and facilitate activity on their behalf, including the radicalisation of other students. There is a realistic possibility that certain individuals could become inspired to conduct attacks. UK university students have previously demonstrated the intent and capability to conduct terrorism-related activity, including:
 - **2023 Birmingham:** A PhD student was convicted of preparing acts of terrorism after building a drone with the intention of supplying it to Islamic State. Counter Terrorism Policing stated that “conversations on his devices clearly demonstrate[ed] his support for ISIS as well as extremist material and violent propaganda videos”.⁶
 - **2012 London:** A former University College London (UCL) student was sentenced to life imprisonment for attempting to conduct an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) attack on a US-bound flight on Christmas day in 2009. The explosive failed to successfully detonate. The individual, nicknamed the “underpants bomber” due to the location of the IED used in the attempted attack, was reportedly acting on behalf of al-Qa’ida. The individual had previously been the leader of UCL’s Islamic society and allegedly sought to popularise his views among fellow students.⁷
 - **2007 Glasgow:** An individual involved in a 2006 plot to use liquid explosives to blow up transatlantic airliners was a graduate of London’s City University and was allegedly the president of the University’s Islamic society.⁸
- There is a realistic possibility that the terrorism threat posed to universities in the UK could be subject to change based upon the current socio-economic and political climate of the country as well as community relations within any given city in which a university is based.
- There is a realistic possibility that staff employed at universities in the UK could pose an Insider Threat. For example, staff employed within university science labs in the UK could grant terrorist actors access to monitored substances, research and/or items, bypassing applicable restrictions on the accessibility of certain materials.
 - **2024 UK:** Although unlikely to be designated as terrorism, in April 2024, MI5 warned that foreign states are currently targeting British universities in order to undermine national security. The security services and UK government warned that cutting-edge research conducted at British universities could be exploited by states in order to boost their own militaries and economies. The warning follows UK Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee’s warning that China could gain undue influence in British academic research.⁹
- Although it is highly unlikely that any such act would be designated as terrorism, there is a realistic possibility that universities in the UK could be impacted by Non-Violent Direct Action (NVDA) student protest groups. E.g., In April 2024, students at several top UK universities organised occupations of university buildings in response to their university’s alleged involvement in the Israel-Gaza conflict.¹⁰

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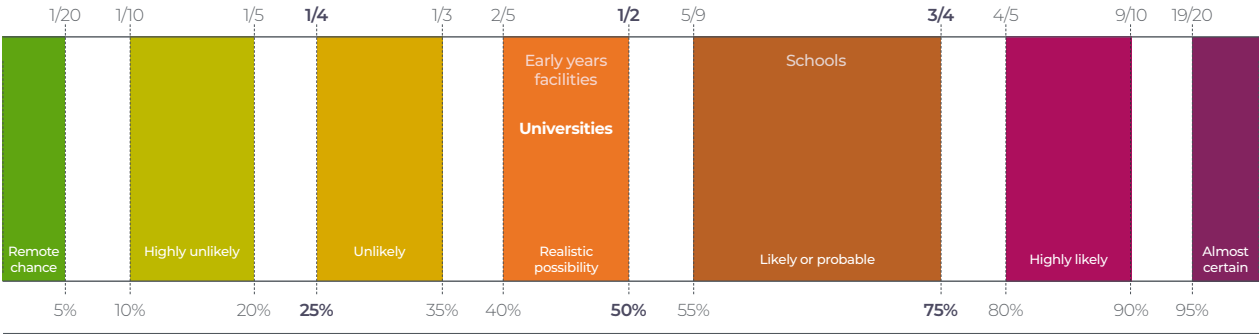
Threat visualisation

The diagram below outlines the intent of terrorist actors in the UK to conduct attacks against universities within the education sector.

Terrorist intent can be defined as the desire and/or determination of an individual to conduct an attack against any given site.

The intent of terrorist actors to conduct an attack against the education sector in the UK is subject to change based on the assessments outlined in this report.

Note: The terrorism threat to any given site is not based solely on intent, but also the capability of terrorist actors in the UK as outlined in this report. Terrorism threat is also mitigated by the UK’s countrywide terrorism risk mitigation infrastructure including both public and private security and safety capabilities.



Assessment Methodology

The assessments made in this report have been made using the Professional Head of Intelligence’s “Probability Yardstick” (above). The Probability Yardstick is a standardised instrument used to provide a professional standard for intelligence assessment.

- **Almost certain:** An event has a greater than 90% chance of occurring.
- **Highly likely:** An event has a 76% to 90% chance of occurring.
- **Likely:** An event has a 55% to 75% chance of occurring.
- **Realistic possibility:** An event has a 40% to 54% chance of occurring.
- **Unlikely:** An event has a 25% to 39% chance of occurring.
- **Highly unlikely:** An event has an 10% to 24% chance of occurring.
- **Remote chance:** An event has a less than 10% chance of occurring.

Time spans

- **Short Term:** 0–6 Months.
- **In the next 12 months.**
- **Medium Term:** 12 months–5 Years.
- **Long Term:** 5+ Years.

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Intelligence cut-off date: 30 April 2024

For more information please contact solutions@poolre.co.uk

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