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# Universities are using surveillance software to spy on students

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**With remote learning now the norm, universities are using surveillance software to keep tabs on students who are not engaging with their studies**



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**SCREWED OVER BY** the A-levels algorithm, new university students are being hit by another kind of techno dystopia. Locked in their accommodation – some with no means of escape – students are now being monitored, with tracking software keeping tabs on what lectures they attend, what reading materials they download and what books they take out of the library.

Analysis of three popular learning analytics tools, which track student attendance at lectures, library visits and more, shows at least 27 universities across the UK use such software. The picture of how much intrusive tracking universities are relying on to monitor their students is opaque and has little oversight.

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A number of universities using monitoring tools, including Nottingham Trent University, the University of Hull and York St John University, as well as all but one of the 24 institutions comprising the Russell Group, did not answer questions about their use of the technology. This included whether any limits are in place to ensure students are not being surveilled as they go about their studies, and what punishments the university would hand out for non-attendance tracked through such systems.

The data collection can be vast. One university's privacy notice to students shows the level of detail institutions have when tracking student engagement. The University of the West of England (UWE), which did not acknowledge a request for comment, monitors how students interact with learning analytics tools.

The system it uses, called Solutionpath Stream, tracks how often students log onto their virtual learning environment, click on any content, hand in any work, take out books from the library, access journals, view reading lists, print, scan or photocopy documents, log on to computers owned by the university and attend lectures, seminars and workshops. If students are deemed to be not engaging with their

education, they may be contacted by a student support advisor, the document advises. It adds that an automated process will email students every two weeks if they're deemed to have low engagement with the university.

"A lot of this software has more information on students than some banks do," says Hannah Smethurst a legal tutor who has been researching the impact of technology at the University of Edinburgh. On the face of it, making sure students are attending classes may seem innocuous. But she argues that wellbeing checks could evolve into more data-driven demands that students perform certain tasks.

"It seems the perfect time to have access to such information now that there's even less 'control' of the students," adds Hugh Stevenson, a third-year student at UWE, who is skeptical about the tech.

That's something that has the National Union of Students (NUS) concerned, too. "Such tools are often employed with very little explanation of their purpose. At a bare minimum we need legal assurances on how this data will be used. The lack of transparency undoubtedly fuels students' mistrust of universities but it also stokes anxiety, aggravates mental health and dissuades many from political engagement," says Larissa Kennedy, NUS president. "We must resist our spaces of learning turning into arms of surveillance."

At Bolton University, whose vice chancellor has admitted the institution monitors access to learning materials, library use and lecture attendance to warn staff about students struggling with their studies, Ansh Sachdeva, the union president, says students aren't "punished if they miss online lectures". Rather, the tracking system is used to check how long students are logged in for. "That gives an idea of how long they've spent and making sure they've done their work. They can see it later as well, but our university is not being forceful on students. They can have various reasons for not attending," Sachdeva says. Bolton University did not answer any questions about its tracking of students.

The coronavirus pandemic – and the rapidly shifting sands universities have faced as a result of government indecision – has forced universities to try and implement a whole new way of teaching and supporting students. And the speed of change has allowed little time for introducing checks and balances. “In previous years it seemed more like you would try and do this student monitoring and would have to go through quite a few stages,” Smethurst says. This year, she worries that the pandemic has created conditions where universities feel it’s necessary to monitor the digital movements of students.

Some universities are trumpeting their surveillance practices as a boon. On October 7, the University of Buckingham, a private educational institution, unveiled a so-called “trailblazer degree” for undergraduates starting in 2022 that appears to, amongst other things, psychometrically analyse students to tailor the learning experience to them.

“AI and intelligent platforms will monitor student engagement and understanding, helping staff to see where students are falling behind or need more materials to aid their learning,” the university claims in its marketing materials. The system, it adds, will also “flag up at-risk students and alert university staff to those that may need extra attention”. To do this, the system monitors academic performance, engagement with course materials and other students and takes data from chatbots.

Anthony Seldon, the architect of the course and former vice chancellor at the university, calls it “fundamentally exciting”. Smethurst prefers to think of it as “a dangerous precedent in relation to universities’ responsibilities towards their students, who are often incredibly vulnerable and in need of human support”.

Universities UK, the industry body representing universities across the country, declined to answer questions including how prevalent the use of such digital monitoring tools had become. It recommended getting in touch with Jisc, the not-for-profit organisation that supports universities to implement digital technology. Jisc’s regulatory advisor, Andrew

Cormack, admitted the body “don’t have sight of all the tools that individual members are using”.

But Jisc has produced a number of guides on how to use such tools safely and rigorously. The code of practice for the use of learning analytics was last updated in August 2018, while the new code on wellbeing and mental health analytics was first published in July 2020. Jisc was involved in co-designing the University of Buckingham course that appears to lean heavily on monitoring and assessing students using AI.

“The adoption of digital learning platforms, which began long before the current pandemic, significantly increased the amount of data available to universities about how students learn,” says Cormack. “Understanding how that data can be used to improve learning – in particular to provide faster feedback and guidance than traditional assessment processes – has been a subject for academic research for at least a decade.”

But it’s not clear that there’s a standardised approach to monitoring students – and given the unprecedented nature of the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on higher education, no guide to follow. “Every university is doing it differently, and then trying to assess good practice,” says Lilian Edwards, a professor of law, innovation and society at Newcastle University.

Students, thrown into turmoil with the issues around A-levels and a rapidly rise of positive Covid-19 cases in halls of residence, seem to not have recognised the level of monitoring they’re being asked to agree to. “Students starting university this year don’t appear to be concerned about the prospect of their online learning being tracked or monitored – at least, it’s not something they’re actively thinking about,” says Robert Perry of Pickle Jar Communications, a university marketing consultancy that frequently surveys students. “Right now, they’re facing issues that feel much more immediate, especially those who are confined to their halls.”

But a reckoning could be around the corner, reckons Perry. “Once they get through this intense phase and start adapting to the various methods of online or blended learning they need to use, they might start to have some questions about what they’re being asked to engage with.”

Edwards points to examples in the United States, where the move to online teaching has happened over the summer, of students reporting significant overuse of technology that moves from monitoring to surveillance. Digital proctoring tools in the US have watched students through their webcams while they take exams.

“The evidence from America is that campuses end up being an experimental petri dish for this kind of extreme datafication and surveillance,” says Edwards. That concerns her for two reasons: one, the disproportionality. “There’s a balance between helping them study and taking all their personal data,” she says. “But even taking that away, you get down to what happens to that data. Could it be taken out of context? Someone misses two tutorials and says they were isolating. That might then lead to algorithmic conclusions being made that this person is not keeping up with their studies or is depressed.” Edwards argues that it is almost inevitable that such systems will create false assumptions that could be bad for students and even end up on their long-term record.

Such data on attendance and attention, Edwards points out, would be a gold mine for future employers and a raft of associated industries, including insurers. Her worry is that universities could end up selling that data about students on as a way of generating supplementary income. (Most, if not all, the university privacy notices WIRED looked at made clear that they presently only keep student data gathered through such software on file for the duration of their studies.)

But far from forswearing data use entirely, Edwards thinks that some form of monitoring is required if we eventually return to a world where on-campus teaching happens – just perhaps not what’s already

available on the market. “There’s going to be a difference between that kind of surveillance – on campus, physical, real life surveillance – and remote surveillance,” she says.

Edwards is involved in a project at Newcastle University that could see monitoring of safe returns to campus by looking at occupancy levels in corridors, and the CO2 produced in them. The university declined to respond to a request for comment. Privacy-maintaining CCTV images could also be used to monitor physical distancing without processing the faces of those in the footage.

For universities considering using digital surveillance tools, Smethurst has one piece of advice. “It’s horrific,” she says. “It doesn’t work. Stop trying to use it.”

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