

Universities try clocking in to stop students skipping classes

An electronic monitoring system is being tested at two universities and nine more have expressed an interest in using it to track students. Its inventors insist they want to help students rather than enforcing a Big Brother approach, but the development coincides with some universities introducing good behaviour contracts which warn lazy students they could face disciplinary procedures or even expulsion if they fail to turn up for lectures.

The National Union of Students branded the scheme draconian, saying students were being tagged like criminals.

More than 1,000 students at Glamorgan University are now using the technology after trials last year. The software is also being used at Napier University, Edinburgh, which calls the system Tracker.

Staff are equipped with a baton which is passed round students, who log in via a keyring carrying their university enrolment number. Specialist advisers can follow up students' attendance records.

Steve Thomas, director of Network75 and a principal lecturer at Glamorgan University, said: "This is not a compulsory tagging system. Students can just pass the baton on. Monitoring attendance at university is not new; traditionally lecturers have passed a piece of paper round the classroom. But

this is to support students who silently disengage. There can be hundreds of students attending lectures, and 10-20% can be missing without the lecturer realising."

Advisers looked at patterns of attendance. "There is a distinct correlation between attendance and attainment. Students who miss out irregularly, we are not going to target. They may have had a bit of a late night the night before. Students are targeted if they miss three consecutive learning events ... Over 50% of our students work part-time and we are finding a lot of our students who work in take-aways on a Thursday night are missing a Friday morning."

Mr Thomas said: "In humanities last year we identified 35 students who would have withdrawn if we had not intervened. It is life-changing. A false start in the first few weeks of university can be devastating. Students were sceptical originally but are now supportive."

Gemma Tumelty, president of the National Union of Students, recognised drop-out rates needed to be addressed but questioned whether such schemes would work when much of the problem might be increasing debt. "Rather than employing draconian tactics and treating these students like criminals by effectively tagging them ... we believe more should be done to address the underlying reasons behind poor attendance."

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TASK

Decide if the following statements are true or false according to the article. Write T for true and F for false next to each statement.

Students' representatives say that students are happy with the programme now. _____

There's a connection between working in fast food restaurants and skipping classes. _____

It's the idea of the programme, not means, that's new. _____

Students are obliged to take part in the programme. _____

The programme is still in a test phase. _____

According to the authors the programme has already proved to be successful. _____