

UNIVERSITY SECURITY

Darren Chalmers-Stevens *examines global universities and the safety and security dividend*

With the contribution of international students to the UK economy estimated to be worth £20bn – and with safety a priority for both parents and students – it's little wonder that attitudes towards security departments are changing.

Universities are under growing pressure – from regulation and from global competitors – to modernise their security provision and to pay closer attention to the well-being of students. In the UK, which remains one of the top global destinations for international students, there is increased scrutiny from the Government, from the sector's regulator (the Office For Students) and from agencies including the Equality and Human Rights Commission. And while higher education senior executives previously took into account common law duty-of-care obligations to protect students physically, there is also now a spotlight on issues such as mental health, sexual harassment and incidents which undermine inclusivity (for example racial abuse, religious intolerance and homophobia). The focus has

“STUDENTS ON CAMPUS NOT ONLY TELL US THAT THEY FEEL SAFER, BUT THEY REALLY ARE SAFER”

shifted, and widened, to include accountability for the overall well-being of both students and staff. An important result of these pressures is that security departments are extending their remits, and a new generation of leaders is emerging with the tools and the vision to change the way things are done.

At a number of campuses, traditional approaches to security are being overhauled in favour of more active, engaged and connected operations. At these universities, security and safety officers and first responders are being given new skills – in areas such as mental health first aid, for example. And senior policy makers are recognising the wider role they can play: it's no longer just about protecting the institution against risks, liabilities and reputational damage, rather it's about positively contributing to campus life and improving levels of student satisfaction.

For example, at Teesside University in Middlesbrough, head of security Claire Humble has transformed her department and her officers' role to the point where

they are making a more valuable contribution to the university and to the wider community.

Her department is supporting the university with attracting new students, particularly from overseas, and retaining them. The most recent IDP research into student buyer behaviour highlights the importance of security as a decision-influencing factor; and a Universities UK report found that 88 percent of students viewed campus security as helpful or very helpful in their decision making. Against this background, Claire Humble believes that her officers have a vital role to play in enhancing day-to-day experiences of campus life.

Middlesbrough has been much in the news recently. It is one of those iconic industrial towns of the North-East that is re-inventing itself and emerging from a period of post-industrial decline to find a completely new identity. Visiting the town today you can see this renovation happening in the bars and cafes that have sprung up in the Victorian-era lanes behind the high street and in the central shopping area, which remains busy despite the well-documented challenges that all UK high streets face.

LEADING THE WAY

And you can feel how the university is playing a key role in this revival. The influx of almost 19,000 students is adding to both the economy and the local culture, giving Middlesbrough a new sense of purpose. It's no coincidence that the university is one of the town's biggest employers.

Universities are always important contributors to the communities that they are part of. Increasingly we are seeing them reaching out to neighbouring institutions and agencies, sharing intelligence and collaborating on safety and crime reduction and as a result SafeZone is already set to be part of some of these safer city initiatives.

At Middlesbrough, Claire Humble makes sure she's closely connected to what's going on and tuned into how students are thinking about the community they have now joined. This month, for example, she attended a university forum for international students to gauge feelings.

“The message that came back to me very strongly is that students were choosing to study with us because they felt they could be safe here. This confirms our own experience and it backs up the conversations we have with prospective students and their parents when





Some security solutions enable universities to send out alerts to both individuals and groups in specific geo-defined zones

they are deciding whether to come to Teesside.” This is a remarkable achievement, given that Middlesbrough like many other communities in England’s North-East has been through a period of deprivation and is now working hard to re-invent itself.

A key tool used by Claire Humble’s team – in fact the technology she says that’s made the biggest difference – is CriticalArc’s SafeZone service. It’s a real-time command and control solution that puts Teesside’s campus officers directly in contact with students and staff, via a safety app on their phones, when they need help, advice or urgent assistance for whatever reason.

At Teesside the solution lets officers on patrol and in the university’s control room see exactly where checked-in users are – students, staff and fellow officers – and it lets them send out alerts to individuals and groups in specific geo-defined zones.

Introducing SafeZone technology is just one of the confidence-building improvements that Claire Humble has been responsible for since she joined the university from her senior police role in December, 2017. With the support of senior executives, she wanted her security team to be seen in a more positive light and is absolutely convinced that officers could make a value-added contribution to student recruitment and retention.

SafeZone has now been implemented by a number of universities and global enterprises in Europe, the Middle East, Asia Pacific and the United States and is allowing security and emergency teams to respond more quickly and effectively to requests for assistance, and to manage their own resources more intelligently.

It is also being used to support staff and university students on campus, while travelling and during fieldwork. Security and safety teams can ‘geo-fence’ additional areas as required. This is particularly important for institutions that promote study abroad and/or have a strong overseas presence. Duty of care applies to staff and students, in any location, on any assignment.

And many security teams have relied on SafeZone to respond to critical incidents globally: for example, advising students at risk and communicating real-time during the Strasbourg terror attacks of 2018 and helping others in difficulty during natural disasters, medical emergencies and travel disruption in locations such as India, Malaysia and South America.

“At the operational level we’ve completely rebranded ourselves. We’ve changed our operational look, with more comfortable and modern uniforms and a more diverse team. Officers don’t wear caps

and ties, but their uniforms are clearly branded 'Campus Security'. We've also updated our digital footprint, with online resources telling students and parents what to expect, and giving opportunities for feedback, good or bad."

And the response? She says they've had mainly positively feedback through their website but also feedback they can work on and crucially, all non-urgent comments are answered within 24 hours (48 hours at weekends). "All this effort is linked very closely to SafeZone. We've put a YouTube video together showing the role of our officers, giving a high-level fly around the site and safety tips. Our message to students is that we are committed to you, we are friendly, and we are there to help."

REASSURING PRESENCE

This message of reassurance has been particularly important for students coming from different cultures. Knowing that they can get advice or help at the touch of a button on their smartphone has made a big difference to the way students feel, particularly in those first few crucial weeks on campus – a time when feelings of isolation or uncertainty can be most acute for young people away from home for the first time.

Recent research nationally underlines the importance of supporting students. A UK-wide 2019 poll of 38,000 students at 140 universities (conducted by the Insight Network of therapists and psychiatrists and published by *The Guardian*) found that a third of students felt they needed professional help for their mental well-being, with around one in 10 experiencing depression and anxiety disorders.

The same study identified second years as particularly vulnerable to stress and thoughts of self-harm.

Issues including harassment, violence against women and hate crime affecting at-risk groups are also of continuing concern. The national representative organisation, Universities UK, has called on institutions to be more systematic in their approach to tackling these problems and to develop clear response procedures and centralised reporting systems.

TRADITIONAL SECURITY IS BEING OVERHAULED IN FAVOUR OF MORE CONNECTED OPERATIONS

The sort of technology measures and culture-change being implemented at Teesside and a growing number of other universities shows clearly one way this can be done. And for anyone wondering whether it's worth the effort, Claire Humble is in no doubt. "Students on campus not only tell us they feel safer, they really are safer. If there's any sort of emergency, we can send help much more quickly. And anyone who's worried that something doesn't seem right or are feeling anxious about something can get in touch and know we're there to provide help and support 24/7." This new way of working makes undeniable economic sense too. And with the contribution of international students now estimated to be worth £20 billion to the UK economy, it is perhaps little wonder that attitudes towards security departments are beginning to change ●

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Security, safety officers and first responders are all being given new skills to deal with the evolving university landscape



Picture credit: Teesside University