

University Safety & Security: The factor of differentiation?



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Introduction

Universities are increasingly being financially squeezed by shrinking student admissions, possibly due to the significant increase in student fees and the reduction in government funding; a double whammy! Overseas students provide a welcome income, but what else can universities do to attract students?

The presence of superb facilities does not seem to be providing the solution as many universities already have these. While academics may seek to demonstrate the value of top-quality teaching, well-equipped laboratories and world-class research, students and their parents may be looking at other important features, such as the “feel good factor” and value for money or return on investment. Furthermore, there is growing evidence that students and parents are taking a greater interest in security and the risks posed to students while at university.¹

Many universities have similar courses, similar facilities, similar Halls of Residence etc. Do they all have similar levels of safety and security? The short answer is no! This could be the business differentiator between similar universities and the factor that could swing the decision; whether the student goes to one with a fear of providing overt security or to one that embraces the enabling mechanism that imparts confidence to those living, working or visiting the campus.

There is also a requirement for universities to consider their “duty of care”. Is the provision of an appropriate and proportionate level of security within a university an enabler? This paper considers how universities may continue to attract students by ensuring that their safety and security are approached in a professional manner.

Background

The world has changed and in the 21st century we are in an era so different to the halcyon days when the most important aspects of student life were to enjoy the experience, make friends for life and achieve a qualification. Safety and security at universities is an important factor that students and parents may feel is vital. Paying huge fees should guarantee that appropriate levels of security are inherent within the infrastructure.

¹ Call for universities to disclose crime data to prospective undergraduates:
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-18492299>



Working within the higher education sector Advent IM has discovered that while many universities do recognise the importance of providing the necessary infrastructure to ensure that they meet their “duty of care” to their staff, students and visitors alike, others do not recognise its necessity for a variety of reasons. Some universities fear that the very presence of security offends the view that within a liberal environment such as higher education, there is no need for such measures. Others suggest that if overt security is present, there must be a problem and therefore it will instil a lack of confidence in prospective students or their parents.

The international threat environment is one which is so different to the time when many of the current senior members of university management and academics enjoyed during their university years. Furthermore, the substantial increase in the international student population has changed the face of universities over the last generation, drawing in huge income and providing a cosmopolitan community. While this is to be welcomed, not everyone from all cultures agree with Western values.

The Government’s Prevent Strategy

Prevent is part of HMG counter-terrorist strategy. Statistically, both in this country and overseas, most terrorist offences are committed by people under the age of 30, therefore university environments are potential recruiting grounds for extremists. Universities² and colleges promote and facilitate the exchange of opinion and ideas which enables debate as well as learning. Although universities must protect academic freedom and maintain a warm, welcoming and safe environment, it is also essential that staff, students and visitors are protected.

More than 30% of people convicted for Al Qaida-associated offences within the UK, between 1999 and 2009 were known to have attended university or a higher-education institution. These statistics also correspond with classified data about the educational backgrounds of those who have recently engaged in terrorist-related activity in this country; a significant proportion has attended further or higher-education.³

Some students were already committed to terrorism before they began their university courses; some of those convicted following Operation Overt for example.⁴ Other students were radicalised while they studied at university, but by people operating outside of the university itself; this includes the terrorist that killed himself in an attempted terrorist attack in Sweden who had been educated in Luton.

² HMG Prevent Strategy June 2011

³ Simcox, R. Stuart, H. and Ahmed, H. (2010) *Islamist Terrorism: The British Connections*. London: The Centre for Social Cohesion. P227-232 and 237-245

⁴ www.bbc.co.uk/news/10455915

There are other examples that may be quoted, but the important factor here is that security must be taken seriously within places of higher education, both in terms of countering radicalisation and the provision of an appropriate level of physical security that demonstrates competence, encourages social interaction and provides students and their parents that this important element of university life is taken seriously. The Prevent strategy suggests that reporting this activity highlights the ways that universities can play an important role as part of this strategy, while still upholding their commitment to academic freedom and learning.



What are Best Practice differentiators in the Provision of Security?

Clearly, terrorism or extremism is not prevalent in the vast majority of universities. Acquisitive crime is probably the most common problem, from the theft of cycles to new laptops and mobile phones. These are provided at some expense by parents wishing to ensure their child has the best tools for their course and often as their child leaves home for the first time.

There is significant interest in security for students attending university as demonstrated by the number of websites that provide tips on how to stay safe, such as the Complete University Guide⁵ or The Student Room⁶. Evidence that security at universities is taken seriously by parents and students is readily available on the Internet in terms of league⁷ tables for crime. The ranking is based on the relative levels of significant crimes to students (burglary, robbery and violent crime) within three miles of the university campus. These tables can be misleading however, as the crimes specifically do not include those where students themselves are involved. Furthermore, many universities do not publish figures that reflect crimes that occur on campus, unlike the US where universities provide much greater detail.

So how should universities react to the variety of security threats to their campuses from simple acquisitive crime to complex matters of extremism? It is vital that any security regime is proportionate and appropriate; therefore a risk-based approach to security should be adopted, recognising the threat environment and the assets that must be protected. In a higher education establishment security should be present but not overwhelming; a reassuring presence, but offering deterrence to would be criminals. It's about getting the balance right. Parents and students are much more aware of the risks in a modern society and universities must demonstrate that those affecting safety and security on their premises are being addressed.

Protective Security, including physical security, personnel and information security is an essential business enabler. Its measures ensure the effective functioning of any

⁵ <http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/preparing-to-go/staying-safe-and-secure/>

⁶ <http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/showthread.php?t=2036184>

⁷ Crime rate compared in university league table: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-18492299>

organisation and will assist it in achieving its vision, aims and objectives. Security is therefore an integral part of that vision.

Security risks in all universities must be managed effectively, collectively and proportionately to achieve a safe, secure and confident working and learning environment to encourage its academic life to flourish. A proactive approach will demonstrate to staff, potential parents and students that the university takes the safety and security of its people seriously.

Ultimately, accountability for university safety and security lies with the Vice Chancellor. Demonstrating leadership in driving an effective safety and security regime is vital if there is to be buy-in from senior managers and the academic team. Faculties, Departments and Colleges must manage their security risks within the parameters defined by the security policy; therefore the first vital element must be for an effective security policy to be created that defines the approach the university has adopted regarding such an important business process. This should be cascaded down through the entire organisation and applied at the “coal-face” by the university security team.

The Important Role of the University Security Team



The way that universities approach the establishment of security teams varies widely, with many universities identifying a safety & security function as essential, while others feel that their support to students should be a mostly pastoral one. The latter function is important, particularly for vulnerable students, but the protection of staff, students, visitors and their assets is equally so. Furthermore, all organisations must address their duty of care to everyone that visits its premises.

The establishment of an effective university security team, with sufficient numbers of staff, who have received appropriate standards of individual security officer training, will have a major impact on the quality of life for academic staff, students and visitors alike. An effective security team, with a smart, corporate appearance will develop a reputation within the community that will deliver confidence among everyone that uses the facilities and will provide a deterrent to criminals. Conversely, the absence of a visible security team may have a negative impact and encourage inappropriate behaviour and increased crime.

When students arrive at university for their first year, the majority of “freshers” have just left home for the first time. There will clearly be a requirement for a certain amount of counselling and pastoral activity, but the students must also be educated to become a little ‘street-wise’ in taking care of valuables that will be the target of opportunist thieves that are well aware that new students will have attractive new phone, laptops and valuables and until settled into the environment are likely to leave easily disposed of items lying around.

The role of the university security team here is an important one; to ensure that every student, but particularly the “freshers” understand the threat to their valuables. Secondly, there should be some support and advice regarding asset marking, including basic protective measures, and finally, an incident reporting mechanism needs to be in place that is easy for students to use.

Nationally, it is estimated that a third of students become victims of crime, mainly theft and burglary. Figures also show around 20 per cent of student robberies occur in the first six weeks of the academic year.⁸ Induction into the university should always include a short presentation from a senior member of the security team to educate the new students to the potential risks faced by them. This should not be dramatic but factual to help them to understand basic safety and security issues on and around the campus. The briefing should also include the likelihood of being subject to acquisitive crime, benefits of asset marking, information on “green routes” for use during darkness hours and where to get help when needed.

Take Security Seriously!



Security is an important process that must be acknowledged by all and continuously ‘steered’ in order to provide and receive best practice results. There are security responsibilities that fall on senior management, departments and colleges as well as the security team; but responsibility for security rests with all persons who work, live or study within a university community and cannot simply be left as a matter for the university security team or the Police.

Universities should develop their own security culture in line with their core values and mission. The development of the Security Policy is only the first step to establishing that culture, but this will need buy-in from all. This is especially so for the senior management team. It is their responsibility to ensure that all members of the academic team, as well as the administrative support staff and students understand that everyone has a role to play and that security is a corporate responsibility held by every individual.

Safety & Security - The differentiator

In harsh economic times there is frequently a temptation to reduce the resources expended on what is often seen as an unwelcome business expense, especially by organisations that do not see or understand the indirect benefits of what security delivers. Security *is* a business differentiator. Unfortunately, there are organisations

⁸ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/8621007/Scale-of-crime-in-university-cities-revealed.html>

that do not view security in this way; but those that do embrace its processes and its obvious benefits, may find that they survive this current economic downturn more strongly than a similar one that does not.

Summary

The current costs of going to university and the tough economic climate mean that students and parents are eager to ensure that they get a good return on their investment, leading to an expectation that their chosen university will provide all services, including effective security as a given. This paper has considered how any university may continue to enjoy a satisfactory student uptake of its courses by using every tool at its disposal including embracing an appropriate and proportionate approach to security and safety as an integral part of university routine. There is stiff competition to attract students to attend the courses run by each university and many have similar top quality facilities, courses and residences.

Universities should not fear demonstrating the fact that they adopt a proactive approach to security, but use it to sell the safe environment that has been created. Security is not a dirty word but a process that should be embraced by all to enable the entire university community to relax, study hard, but above all enjoy the experience.

A safe and secure environment supports all aspects of university life, providing a safe place to learn, deter crime and will reassure students that their financial investment is sound; most importantly, they have made the right choice. Finally, parents will feel that the trust that they place in the hands of a university for the protection of their child is well founded.



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