**Student Attendance Monitoring System (SAMS)**

1. **Purpose**

This paper will be used to set out options for the recording of student attendance to all members of academic and administrative staff. It will be the focus of the discussions for the three meetings in each of the faculties.

2. **Introduction**

International (i.e non-EEA) students are subject to immigration constraints laid down by the UK Government and implemented by the UK Border Agency (UKBA). The University has “Highly Trusted Sponsor” (HTS) status with the UKBA. This means that we are able to recruit and teach international students. Under the terms of this licence, the University is legally required to monitor the attendance of international students.

A Student Attendance Monitoring System (SAMS) is being developed to provide a reliable, secure, and efficient method of recording student attendance. The project involves two phases of IT development. The first part involves the development of SAMS within SAP Student Lifecycle Management (SLcM) and integration with Syllabus Plus and a scanning solution. It also includes the development of an on-line student absence notice form with document management and appropriate workflow for approval and updating of attendance record. SAP Business Warehouse will be used to produce reports of absence including incorporation of records available in other systems (e-Portfolio and Blackboard) to enable comprehensive reporting of attendance. The second part of the project is the collection of in-class attendance data. There are a number of different issues that need to be considered regarding this project:

- There are a number of different options for how this data could be collected. What is the best method for the University?
- What is the most appropriate type of teaching where attendance monitoring should take place, should it be lectures or small group teaching and practical classes?
- Since this project is driven by the requirements of the UKBA, should the University monitor the attendance of all students or just international students?

There have been face to face discussions with the UKBA regarding attendance monitoring. The UKBA agreed that we could monitor one attendance per week for international students pending the introduction of a sustainable solution for attendance monitoring which meets the UKBA requirements. UKBA have indicated that an engagement dashboard which included one attendance per week but other measures of engagement (submission of coursework, attendance at exams etc) would be acceptable to them as a permanent monitoring system.

There are strong opinions surrounding all these issues and it is important that both students and staff have the opportunity to discuss the options and feed their views into the decision making process. The paper will be discussed at Faculty meetings which will be open to all staff (1 meetings for each Faculty), FLTSECs and ULTSEC. The issues of which students should be included in attendance monitoring and the
type of teaching where attendance monitoring should take place are academic matters and the final decision on these matters will rest with ULTSEC. Ultimately this project is about implementing a reliable attendance monitoring system which will satisfy the requirements of the UKBA. The final decision regarding the method of collection rests with the Executive Board.

1. What is the best method for the University to collect attendance monitoring data?

There are a number of different options.

**Option 1 - Signature Sheets**

**What is the method?**

This is the current, commonly used method of attendance monitoring. Support staff manually input attendance data based on signature lists collected in class.

**Advantages**

- During audits at HEIs the UKBA appear to be comfortable with this method
- Does not require investment in technology

**Disadvantages**

- Expensive and time consuming in terms of data entry
  - Note: Some universities use sheets with bar codes beside the name
- Large manual data input and therefore prone to error
- Risk of students signing in for friends
  - Note: Therefore only effective if it takes place in small group teaching venues with academic staff supervising the operation. Some programmes do not have 1 session of small group teaching per week
  - Note: risk could be mitigated by carrying out a head count check against the list. In classes c.20-50 this would be essential at least on a periodic basis
- Disruptive if used in large teaching venues
- Ongoing need for organised storage and burden of extracting sheets in the event of an audit

**Option 2 - Card Reader alone**

**What is the method?**

A smartcard is scanned on entry to a room or a mobile scanner is passed around the students in a room.

**Advantages**

- Non intrusive and therefore very acceptable
- Cards can be quickly read by scanner
- No need for manual data input
- All students already issued with cards.
• Note: the barcode can be easily copied and consequently the scanner would need to read the chip. The new card has a different chip technology to the old card and so all students may need to be issued with a new card.

Disadvantages

• Risk of students ‘buddy punching’ (scanning cards on behalf of their friends).
• Not acceptable to UKBA unless we can demonstrate that it is a reliable.
  o Notes: Consequently the cards would need to be scanned in small group teaching venues and practical classes and academic staff would need to supervise the operation to ensure that “buddy punching” did not take place. Some programmes do not have 1 session of small group teaching per week.
  o Risk could be mitigated by carrying out a head count check against a list. In classes c.20-50 this would be essential at least on a periodic basis. This is not practical in large classes.

Option 3 – An Engagement Dashboard

What is the method?

The engagement dashboard is a portfolio intended to balance engagement and attendance. Weekly in class attendance (using smartcards) would be key but supplemented by additional information, for example, submission of coursework, examination attendance, BlackBoard login, On campus logins etc. For research student the dashboard could potentially contain dates of meetings with supervisors (from e-portfolio) and attendance at some scheduled activities. The intention is that the data from the dashboards would be drawn from different systems and would not need to be manually input. There would be a minimum monthly review of the dashboard for international students and international students would check in on a monthly basis. This method was discussed with the UKBA and they regarded it as an acceptable method.

Advantages

• There is a clear educational and welfare benefit for all students in that students who are not engaging with the programme can be identified and support provided
• Dashboard would also be of benefit to personal tutors
• Non intrusive and therefore very acceptable
• Cards can be quickly read by scanner
• No need for manual data input
• The range of indicators used means that there can be a lighter touch in terms of attendance monitoring (1 session per week)
• The risk of buddy punching is mitigated by the fact that there are other indicators also in use. It could also be mitigated by ensuring that attendance monitoring took place in small group teaching where possible.
• All students already issued with cards.
  o Note: the barcode can be easily copied and consequently the scanner would need to read the chip. The new card has a different chip
technology to the old card and so all students may need to be issued with a new card.

Disadvantages

- Compliance Attendance Monitoring Officers would need to arrange monthly check ins of international students and interviews for those students with problems highlighted on the dashboard
- International students will need to check in on a monthly basis

Discussion point: What is the most appropriate method (i.e reliable, secure, acceptable and efficient) of recording student attendance?

2. What is the most appropriate type of teaching where attendance monitoring should take place, should it be lectures or small group teaching and practical classes?

Students have expressed the wish that attendance monitoring should take place in small group teaching and practical classes. Their view is that for a student these sessions are the most important from an educational perspective and also that by monitoring these sessions it is possible to ensure that students don’t abuse the system by signing in for each other or “buddy punching” their cards.

The University undertook a survey for all programmes to establish the amount of small group teaching per week (i.e. class size of less than 50). The picture was very mixed across the programmes, however there are programmes which could not fulfil the requirement of one small group teaching or practical class per week. This therefore means that we have to monitor in large lecture theatres as well as small group teaching and practical classes.

Discussion point: Where a choice exists, should we favour monitoring in small group teaching and practical classes rather than large lecture theatres?

3. Should the University monitor the attendance of all students or just international students?

Many other universities already widely monitor student attendance for all students. This is for pastoral reasons. There is strong academic research over many years suggesting that monitoring is helpful to overall engagement, support and successful completion. Some disciplines at Newcastle University have always systematically monitored attendance.

However, the main reason that monitoring is being increased is because the UK Border Agency wants all universities to keep regular records of the attendance of international students as part of the University’s Highly Trusted Sponsor (HTS) status. This is a legal requirement for the University – the University must report when international students do not attend classes; when they don’t attend international students do not fulfil the terms of their visa. UKBA have indicated that attendance in classes is the key measure.
To date the University have taken the view, on principle, that if it had to increase attendance monitoring for international students in a class context then this should apply to all students. This has also been the position of the Student Union to date. The students recently voted on this issue however there was a low turnout with only 7.3% of the student body voting. It is questionable therefore how representative the vote was. Nevertheless 54% voted for all students being attendance monitored and 46% voted that just international students should have their attendance monitored. Of the 97 international students who voted, 49 voted that all students should have their attendance monitored and 48 were against. This would suggest that the student body is split on this issue.

There have been logistical problems in attendance monitoring all students in large venues. This has meant that in some instances international students have not been able to sign the class list because of logistical problems. The introduction of smart card readers in large lecture venues may still result in queues at scanners and consequent disruption to the lecture. This must be avoided.

**Discussion point:** Ideally attendance monitoring should take place in small group teaching or practical groups where there is a clear educational and pastoral value in monitoring the attendance of all students. However, where there is not one session per student per week of small group teaching or practical groups then attendance may need to be monitored in large teaching venues. To ensure that the educational experience is not disrupted in these instances then should international students have priority in using the scanners to protect their visas?

**SAMS Steering Group**

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