

Students' surveillance imaginaries: cultural influences and implications for learning

Anna Wilson, Nuala Broderick, Elena Moore
University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom

Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

There is a growing body of work exploring surveillance capacities and practices in Higher Education. Initial concerns about data protection and privacy, a drift towards behaviourist conceptualisations of learning and the active undermining of relationships of trust have been exacerbated by the rapid digitisation and platformisation of almost all aspects of academic work, especially during and following the Covid-19 pandemic. A relatively small number of studies have explored students' perceptions and experiences of the surveillance practices they may be subject to, focusing mainly on Learning Analytics. There has, however, less attention paid to students' broader perceptions of surveillance capacities and practices, how these are shaped by cultural factors, and how they in turn shape learning. This paper presents the initial findings of a project using speculative fiction to explore just such issues among international students studying in UK universities.

Full paper

During the first quarter of the 21st century, the HE sector has seen a widely acknowledged increase in surveillance capacities, particularly as a result of increasing use of digital technologies for all aspects of academic work. HE's 'surveillance cultures' (Lyon, 2017) have been a focus for debate and concern (e.g. Beetham, 2022; Gourlay, 2024), particularly about impacts on academic freedom, increased performativity, loss of anonymity and the potential uninvited monetisation by others of (personal) learning data. Initial concerns about data protection and privacy, a drift towards behaviourist conceptualisations of learning and the active undermining of relationships of trust have been exacerbated by the rapid digitisation and platformisation of almost all aspects of academic work, especially during and following the Covid-19 pandemic (Beetham et al. 2022).

A relatively small number of studies have explored students' perceptions and experiences of the surveillance practices they may be subject to (Noteboom, 2024; Slade & Prinsloo, 2014), focusing mainly on Learning Analytics (see, e.g., Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2016;

Jones et al., 2020). There has also been some work relating to the increasingly overt visa monitoring processes that universities are required to enact in a rising number of jurisdictions (Brunner, 2024; Walsh, 2019). There has, however, less attention paid to students' broader perceptions of surveillance capacities and practices, how these are shaped by cultural factors, and how they in turn shape learning.

This paper presents the initial findings of a project using participatory speculative fiction to explore just such issues among international students studying in UK universities. We build on earlier work (Ross & Wilson, 2023; Wilson & Ross, 2023; 2024) that developed the methods and explored "surveillance imaginaries" among learning technologists and academic staff.

The project has three intersecting aims:

- To explore the surveillance imaginaries of postgraduate students from China studying in the UK.
- To explore the impacts of these on acculturation, engagement and experiences of studying in the UK.
- To (begin to) consider the implications for curriculum design, pedagogical and support practices.

We focus on students from China because social norms and expectations around surveillance in China differ from the UK (Ollier-Malaterre, 2023) and because they currently represent a significant fraction of international students studying in UK universities. In some courses, Chinese students form the large majority. The prior experiences and expectations of Chinese students in relation to surveillance cannot be assumed to be the same as domestic students, as surveillance and attitudes towards it emerge from and are embedded in different sociopolitical, historical assemblages. Ollier-Malaterre (2023) describes how surveillance in China is part of the everyday, growing from 'deep historical roots' (p. 1), drawing on 'the most recent technological advances' (ibid.), and conducted in partnership between state and commercial companies. With one for every 12 people, China has the largest number of CCTV cameras per citizen in the world (p. 2). Facial recognition is used to facilitate cashless payments, and there is a government objective to build a universal social credit system. While discourses and narratives around surveillance in the UK and other Western countries are almost always about mistrust and resistance, in China there are strong narratives of protection, moral quality and cohesion (Ollier-Malaterre, 2023). Understanding how such prior experiences and expectations shape students' surveillance imaginaries in the UK HE context will have important implications for curriculum design, pedagogical and support practices.