Response Executive Board to classroom scanners

Dear staff and students,

We can imagine that, after the articles in Mare and Leidsch Dagblad last week, you have questions about the University's new classroom scanners, which were installed in buildings and lecture halls at the start of this academic year. This has caused some concern, which we can understand. In this email we hope to answer your questions and alleviate your concerns.

What are classroom scanners and why have they been hung up in University buildings?

In Covid year 2020, the University started using a counting system with scanners to measure how many students and staff were present in all the University buildings. This has proven to be valuable information during the coronavirus pandemic. It allowed (and still does allow) us to monitor how many people were present at each location, thus enabling the University to check whether we are complying with the government's regularly changing coronavirus measures that should provide optimal safety for students and staff. Around 80 counting systems (scanners) were installed last year at the entrances and exits to all University buildings, except for the LUMC buildings.

This system was chosen because, of the available systems, it is the most accurate at counting people anonymously, our privacy can be guaranteed and with other systems there are privacy risks with features that cannot be deactivated (e.g. a system based on wifi tracking).

The experiences with this system were so positive – the scanners are reliable and accurate, and privacy can be guaranteed – that the University decided at the end of 2020 to measure the occupancy not only of the buildings, but also of the lecture halls (we will explain this further below), also because the coronavirus measures increasingly related to these. The Privacy Officer and Data Protection Officer carefully assessed the systems and concluded they are secure, and the University Council approved the purchase.

What is the benefit of the scanners – what can we do with them?

With the classroom scanners, the University can monitor the occupancy and use of teaching rooms at any time of the year and day via a dashboard, and take immediate action if necessary. For example, the University can take action if there are more than 75 people in a room, the maximum according to the current coronavirus measures. And, outside of the pandemic, the system provides relevant information for our timetable makers: if a room for 300 students is only used by 60 people, a smaller room can be booked next time. It also happens that lecture theatres are booked but not used: we call this 'no show'. This is a shame and a waste of resources. By using the scanners to flag this up in good time, such a room can be released quickly, for example to provide extra study spaces. Finally, the data on occupancy provide relevant information for University plans for renovation or new building projects.

In the summer of 2021, more scanners were therefore hung up. Since the start of this academic year, a total of 371 people counters have been installed at all University buildings, except for the LUMC buildings. Lecture halls with multiple entrances also have multiple scanners. As most of the scanners are hanging at the entrance to a lecture hall, we call them classroom scanners.

The scanners have now been manually validated and calibrated, to ensure that they do not double-count people and that all exits are included, thus making the data on occupancy and numbers as reliable as possible.

What else can the scanners do and what are the risks?

Classroom scanners have four privacy settings. These determine what the user of the software can see. At level 0, people are visible. From level 1, you no longer see people, but only the floor and the route walked. At level 2, you only see a walking route, and at level 3, nothing at all, but it is still possible to count. The University's scanners have always been set to level 1, which guarantees that no-one is identifiable. Nor is footage recorded or stored. Each classroom scanner has a privacy filter, which means that the video stream is switched off by default. Neither the University nor the supplier can see or identify anyone.

On the advice of the Data Protection Officer, a 'processing agreement' was drawn up with the supplier in 2020. This precisely records and describes agreements about privacy settings and security. The agreement says that the scanners: '...convert images into anonymous counts in real time'. And 'the images are not stored and do not leave the sensor'. Images are therefore not stored. The agreement also states that the supplier cannot access the data and settings. Neither the University nor the supplier can see identifiable people.

What has been going on?

As an extra security measure, the classroom scanners are connected to a virtual LAN (VLAN) of the University. This is an isolated and secured network within the University network. This means that the scanners cannot be accessed from outside the University network. The University recently found that, due to human error, two of the 371 scanners had ended up outside this secure VLAN. One of the scanners was out of order. An externally visible login page to the other scanner could be accessed via google, but nothing is visible on this page if you do not have the login details and password used to secure the page. This means that no personal data was visible or leaked. The error has now been rectified and all scanners are within the secure network.

What will the University do now?

The University has only recently started working with the 371 scanners, and was still testing the system. For that reason, the scanners were initially set to privacy level 1 (only floor and walking route are visible for counting purposes). In the meantime, extensive testing has been done with privacy level 3, the highest level, which allows for counting but does not show anything. Based on this, the University has decided to use this level with immediate effect. In addition, the University plans to have an accelerated external audit carried out to address any concerns about the system.

Communication

A lesson learned is that we should have paid more attention to communicating with you – our employees and students. This started too late because all attention was focused on hanging, testing, calibrating and validating the data of the new system. It is precisely because of all the privacy aspects that we can and want to guarantee that this must be done as thoroughly and carefully as possible. But this also applies to the communication; this could certainly have been better and we are learning from this.

More information

We hope that this email has addressed any concerns and answered any questions. If you have any other questions about the counting system and the new classroom scanners, please contact the people who know all about these at info@ufb.leidenuniv.nl.

Kind regards,

Martijn Ridderbos (Vice Chairman),

Also on behalf of Annetje Ottow (President) and Hester Bijl (Rector Magnificus)

Executive Board