

Biometrics in schools – Activity 4

Group 3 stimulus material: UK national newspaper article on the use of biometrics in UK schools

How fast and how far? An update on the use of biometric technology in schools

Over the past quarter of a century, biometric systems have been deployed increasingly commonly in a range of public and private spaces – including in schools.

The first recorded use of biometric systems in schools in the UK was around the year 2000, when the use of fingerprint recognition to replace the use of library cards was introduced in some schools.

But how have things changed since then?

Spread and normalisation

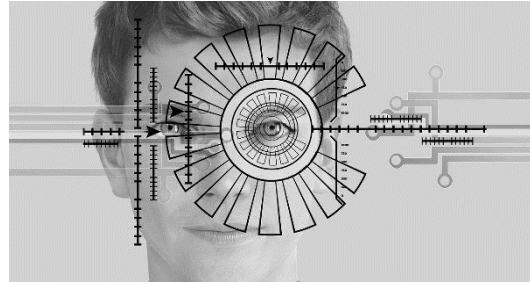
It was estimated by the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) that approximately 30% of secondary schools in England were using biometric systems in 2011 (BBC News, 15 May 2012).

In 2014, it was estimated by Big Brother Watch (a non-governmental organisation or NGO) that campaigns on issues related to civil liberties and privacy estimated that 40% of school in England were using biometric systems, and that only 69% of these schools consulted pupils' parents before implementing the technology.

In 2022, an NGO called Defend Digital Me extrapolated from a sample of 374 schools that 75% of secondary schools in England, and 54% of all schools including primary schools and nurseries, where using biometric systems.

Regulation

The UK Government passed the Protection of Freedoms Act into law in 2012. According to the Act, schools in England and Wales must inform parents of their intention to implement biometric systems and must obtain consent for pupil participation from at least one parent of each pupil. An objection from a pupil overrides



consent from their parent (and vice-versa), and schools are required to offer an alternative to every biometric system (e.g. library cards or cash as an alternative to fingerprint readers). The Act does not apply in Scotland or Northern Ireland.

The UK Government does not monitor compliance with the Act, or the number of schools using biometric systems, or what pupils' biometric data are used for, or the number of pupils that have their biometric data stored in school or external supplier databases.

In autumn 2021, mainstream UK media outlets reported the introduction of facial recognition technology (FRT) in nine schools in North Ayrshire, Scotland (e.g. The Independent, 18th October 2021) and a further 27 schools in England (e.g. Sky News, 20th October 2021) to facilitate payments in school canteens. The system was proposed as a no-contact solution to improve hygiene in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and also as a way to increase efficiency.

This use of FRT in schools was probed by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) in late 2021, with the ICO challenging the education authorities to provide evidence that the installation and use of biometric FRT was "a necessary and proportionate way to manage payments for a school lunch service". It was also debated in the House of Lords on 4th November 2021.