Using virtual reality to educate students about staying safe

Working with the University of Northampton to develop a community safety package that teaches students to stay safe on a night out.

First published
22 December 2023

Updated
22 April 2025

Key details

Does it work?	Untested – new or innovative
Focus	Prevention
Topic	Community engagement Crime prevention Violence against women and girls
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Region	East Midlands
Partners	Police Education Fire and rescue service

Key details

Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	March 2022
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Communities

Aim

To create a virtual classroom of interlinked headsets that provide an immersive learning solution for students. This initiative highlights, especially for women and girls, the risks posed within the night-time economy and demonstrates coping techniques to mitigate them.

The immersive package aims to provide reassurance to students at the university and is a provision to make them feel safer in the night-time economy.

Intended outcome

This initiative intends to:

- raise the profile of community safety/crime prevention in an immersive experience
- deliver crime prevention education in a unique way that ensures a higher retention rate
- educate the public about measures taken in public spaces to make students safer
- upskill media students who use the virtual reality equipment to create content in exchange for free crime prevention material, therefore overall saving costs

Description

As part of the Home Office initiated SWaN (Safer Women at Night) fund, the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (OPFCC) was awarded funds to target interventions towards this aim. The OPFCC purchased virtual reality equipment and 'classroom in a box' technology. This

equipment was loaned to the University of Northampton to enable them to create an immersive package, showcasing Northampton night-time economy and how students can keep themselves and each other safe at night.

Working with the University of Northampton, Northamptonshire OPFCC have trialled a bespoke, interactive way for students to work through safety scenarios. This includes how to identify signals that could indicate danger and practical ways to reduce risk. A fully immersive experience provides students with the total freedom to look in any direction within the headset, allowing them to truly experience the full effects of virtual reality training.

This package was created in conjunction with the university to benefit the studies of the digital marketing course and provide the student population with safety awareness. The OPFCC supported the sharing of the package to those most likely to benefit from it. Media students developed material to promote safety within the night-time economy. This approach will embed a culture from within, led by students themselves and therefore driving credibility with fellow students.

The equipment is stored at the university and can be transported easily around the campus. The university use the technology at various events to support crime prevention and give general safety information. There is a particular focus on this during fresher's week, which is the best time to educate new students about the night-time economy as they may be unfamiliar with. The university set up a stall to promote the virtual reality immersive experience.

The cost for the equipment is £30,000 for the purchase of 20 headsets. The university produce the virtual classroom content for free in exchange for the use of OPFCC equipment. The OPFCC retain ownership of the equipment and a contract was drawn up to ensure agreement on a common understanding.

Content is available for students on campus at the university, but this could also be branched out to the wider public if appropriate. As part of the contract, the university has agreed to produce one new immersive package each year, designed by students on the digital marketing course, suitable for use with the virtual reality headsets. They have since created a water safety package which is encouraged for staff to use as well as students on campus.

Overall impact

Whilst Northamptonshire OPFCC cannot prove any reductions in crime, there have been many benefits identified. These benefits include:

- introducing virtual reality to university for the first time
- using virtual reality to deliver crime prevention in an innovative way, including prevention of violence against women and girls, in addition to wider crime prevention with ongoing immersive packages
- supporting students with their studies by enabling them to create new immersive learning packages each year
- saving money on developing the crime prevention virtual reality content

Positive anecdotal feedback has been received by students, senior police officers and volunteers. Moreover, guardians have started to use the technology alongside the Safer Nights Out van.

Learning

- Virtual Reality content is time consuming to create. Once funding was received from Safer Streets 1 in November 2021, the first immersive learning package around night-time safety was implemented by March 2022. For the second package around water safety, it has taken four months to create the video footage and implement. These timescales are achievable but when applying for funding, it is important to check timescales. It is not just about having the ability to implement the resource, it takes multiple resources to create the video content, including the editing and the production. In realistic terms, a period of 6 to 12 months is expected, and this must fit within the students' curriculum programme and term dates.
- This initiative needs a supportive university to deliver the content. The partner university was keen to develop a partnership. Developing and maintaining this strong partnership has been key for the success.
- A contract which covers every aspect such as security of devices, insurance, warranty, breakages, who retains the equipment and when and how many packages a year will be created by the University, is needed to avoid any conflict or confusion further down the line.
- The content created by the university will be tailored to what is deemed appropriate to produce. Therefore, it may be the case that the packages are tailored more towards general awareness of crime prevention, and they are unlikely to produce packages around topics that may be seen as controversial. If your focus is crime prevention, it is important to create your own content through a university as it is not available externally. The intention intention is to eventually add the resources

that have been created for us to an external hub for wider use.

Best available evidence

The [Crime Reduction Toolkit](#) does not include any best available evidence on education interventions using virtual reality to increase the safety of women and girls.

Other educational approaches include the bystander programmes that aim to prevent sexual assault among young people by encouraging young people to intervene when witnessing incidents or warning signs of sexual assault. The programmes are usually delivered in an educational setting, with the format of a single training or education session (for example, as part of university induction). See the [Bystander programmes evidence briefing](#) for further information.

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Tags

Violence against women and girls   Crime reduction