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FEBRUARY | MARCH 2016  
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## Access control in student accommodation

ANDREW EVANS from ASSA ABLOY discusses solutions for student accommodation facilities and how security is a major factor for overseas students when choosing an education provider offering on-campus accommodation.

**E**ducation is Australia's fourth largest export, an industry in excess of \$15 billion. The bulk of this relates to higher education and international higher education. It is Victoria's top export and New South Wales' second top export with overseas students making up more than 20 percent of the total student population in Australian universities.

What draws overseas students to choose Australia? Advertising and marketing campaigns overseas are commonplace for Australian higher education institutions and universities with college accommodation are often at an advantage in attracting students, as it is a high-ranking factor in their decision-making process.

Student accommodation today consists of a very diverse estate. In larger cities, some students may opt to live in shared house accommodation, or lease private student accommodation. But, for overseas students, on-site university accommodation is preferred. As accommodation options, both privately owned and university owned, compete and offer the latest amenities to attract students, in many cases, the security and access control systems have either not kept pace with the rest of the technology or remain as outdated as the concept of students having landladies. Rapid advances in technology mean there is a plethora of potential solutions for each security and access challenge, but the fact the choice is so wide is, in itself, a problem for time-constrained university estates/facilities managers.

### The purpose of access control in student accommodation

At its most basic level, access control is a system for enabling or preventing people from entering or exiting a location, whether a whole site, a single room or cupboard.

A secondary function may be to record the movements in and out of locations and provide a data trail for audit, traceability, compliance or improvement purposes.

The majority of access control systems rely on the person or asset transiting in or out of a location being recognised and validated, usually by a credential such as a key, card, identification tag or smartphone with an access control application. The credential used by the app can be something they know such as a password or PIN or biometric data such as iris recognition or fingerprints.

In many systems, more than one layer of credential may be required and some systems require a second-party credential (e.g. second keyholder, visual recognition by an approved inspector via CCTV link).

Within university and student accommodation, the purpose of access control is relatively simple to define:

- to protect students from unauthorised access, which may threaten their personal safety or their possessions
- to ensure the institution meets its statutory duty of care and other legal responsibilities, including health and safety compliance



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- to provide the university with the versatility to manage different occupiers of the accommodation at different times of the year (e.g. conference guests during vacation periods, managing the end of term and end of academic year student arrivals and departures), and
- to contribute to the effective life cycle management and costing of the university estate, including maintenance, repair and refurbishment.

In addition, many universities prefer to keep the number of credentials required by any one student to a minimum (reducing the problems and costs associated with loss/replacement), so the same credential may be used to authorise access to other premises besides accommodation, such as study areas, laboratories and sports facilities or as payment/authorisation for the use of facilities like libraries, restaurants and dispensing/vending equipment.

## Challenges presented to university accommodation

The main challenges faced when assessing security/access control for student accommodation are outlined below:

Who owns and manages the accommodation and who is responsible for the access control/security? Many universities have their own accommodation units, either on campus or nearby, yet it is rare that there is sufficient quantity to house all students for the full period of their studies. This means that in university towns, there is also a very wide choice of privately rented accommodation, aimed at students. Indeed many landlords/property investment advisers recognise these suburbs as locations offering a relatively high rental return on capital.

In the last decade, there has been an explosion in purpose-built student accommodation built and operated by privately run companies. Each state in Australia has its own version of a rooming accommodation code, which stipulates minimum standards and provides guidance on legal requirements. However, there are no legal requirements on access control standards.

In an increasingly technology-reliant world, both parents and students expect the latest technology. A steel lock and key would no longer suffice in student accommodation, especially since tenant churn presents key duplication risks. Wireless access control has proven to be very successful in student accommodation around Australia and the Aperio wireless access control locks have the ability to provide the same functionality as a fully hardwired access control door and the flexibility to work with numerous different credentials, which has not been previously available in other wireless systems.

Parents too have real fears about the potential risks to the personal safety of their children, who may be 'leaving home' for the first time. From a wealthier demographic used to high levels of security, parents of overseas students expect

accommodation that has similar high levels.

## Core issues in implementing effective access control

For many student accommodation premises, the core issues lie in three main areas: responsibility, understanding and finance.

**Responsibility:** One of the key issues is to establish the 'responsibility chain' for security matters.

There may also be several different stakeholders involved: the private landlord, and/or their letting/managing agent, the maintenance and cleaning contractors, the university student welfare/admissions departments, and the insurers for the different risks – ranging from public liability and building fabric to the insurance of contents and student possessions.

Finally, even on university controlled campuses, some aspects may be outsourced (manned guarding, managing CCTV) to private contractors. Unless the responsibility chain is mapped, recorded and communicated, any access control system will fail at the first hurdle and, in the real world, all of the above groups are busy, with multiple responsibilities and concerns, so sustaining security as an area of attention is challenging but essential.

**Understanding:** Essentially, many property managers lack a clear, independent and up-to-date source of guidance and advice on school security and access control. This has two consequences: either security is 'forgotten' until a headline scare or the organisation becomes over reliant on the specialist suppliers of security systems and equipment.

**Finance:** There is no question that financial constraints are now a major factor in decisions regarding all public sector organisations, and capital for access control upgrades is scarce. At the same time, educational bodies would be unwise to ignore the reputational damage and financial risk of claims for compensation, which would be inevitable in the event of a serious security breach.

## Options and solutions

Faced with this complex balance of competing priorities, how can those responsible for student accommodation navigate an effective way forward, ensuring adequate security within the financial and technical parameters of their premises?

The following may provide useful indicators:

- Implement an up-to-date risk assessment using the free survey services provided by many leading access control providers and by engaging in a serious debate within the governing and management structure within the university and with external accommodation providers about the level of risks in different spaces and times. This risk assessment must start with the likely level, frequency and severity of threat to student security and safety, quickly followed by the safety and security of students and other staff, and then considering the security of other visitors and users of the site.
- Implement a 'bottom up' ground level approach to access control. At its simplest, start with the most important entrance and exit points and the critical access doors inside the buildings.
- Select appropriate technologies. The latest access control systems offer a bewildering array of sophisticated options - all at a price. Yet in many instances changing mechanical lock cylinders, implementing a master keying system with effective key management, is often the most cost beneficial option in the short-term; however, electronic access control provides longer-term benefits.

Where a complex already has an existing access control system but needs to be extended to include new additions and extensions, consider using 'bridge' or interim technologies that can link and connect existing mechanical or electromechanical locks to the main access control system in a very cost-effective manner. The Aperio wireless access control range provides an integrated alternative to expensive hardwired solutions for any refurbishment or addition, whilst continuing to maintain existing high levels of security. Aperio is well suited to compliment any new or existing access control system.

These technologies can help to extend the protection offered by the access control system to new areas and zones without the need for full system replacement. ●

*This is an abridged version of a white paper by ASSA ABLOY titled: 'Access Control in University Accommodation. What degree of risk should students accept?' Andrew Evans, ASSA ABLOY national sales manager, contributed regional insights and opinions to this article.*