

# Tracking student emotions 'could improve online retention'

**THE** [www.timeshighereducation.com/news/tracking-student-emotions-could-improve-online-retention](http://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/tracking-student-emotions-could-improve-online-retention)

Open University explores whether webcams can be used to monitor learners' facial expressions or eye movements

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Monitoring the emotions of students during online learning could help to improve retention and course design, researchers believe.

Academics at [the Open University](#) are developing tools to analyse learners' emotional responses to online programmes, using either self-reporting or automated technologies.

These could include using webcams to [monitor engagement and emotions](#) via students' facial expressions or eye movements.

But Bart Rienties, reader in learning analytics at the OU, told *Times Higher Education* that students would need to be convinced that the educational benefits of monitoring emotions outweighed the [potential loss of privacy](#).

"In a normal university, a good teacher continually sees if students are paying attention, so distance education is at a disadvantage: we cannot see emotions that are naturally occurring when people are learning," Dr Rienties said.

"The technology is in place to allow us to do this online but we understand people might feel uncomfortable constantly sharing their emotional expressions, so we have to find a balance between being able to tell students it would be useful because it can help us to overcome barriers and design new learning materials, and avoiding the 'Big Brother' feeling."

Dr Rienties said that he expected tools for analysing emotions in online learning to become available within the next three to five years. Being able to better identify when students were [bored or were struggling](#) to understand could be particularly valuable, he argued.

"Universities are investing a lot of money in trying to reduce the dropout rate and can quite accurately predict dropout [rates] now, but we need to know why people are dropping out and at what point they lose interest," Dr Rienties added.

"This is strongly related to emotions, so being able to predict earlier when students are thinking about quitting could be a more useful approach for learning analytics."

Analysis of emotions does not necessarily have to involve intrusive monitoring, OU researchers believe. Garron Hillaire, a PhD student at the institution, is exploring whether the same end result can be achieved by analysing individuals' written responses to learning materials.

The issue was discussed at a [talk held at the OU](#) last week.

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## POSTSCRIPT:

Print headline: *Tracking emotions could improve online retention, says OU*

