



University Smartcards:

'It's all about co-operation and knowledge sharing', says HESCA Chairman Nigel Smith

'It's a very strong system, one of the broadest smart-card schemes in place in Higher Education today.'
Nigel Smith, chairman of HESCA, on the Nottingham Trent University smart card.



It's almost seven years since the foundation of HESCA, the Higher Education Smart Card Association. HESCA was formed expressly to bring together Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and their smart card suppliers in a bid to seek ways of making simpler and more cost-effective the deployment of multi-application smart cards on campuses.

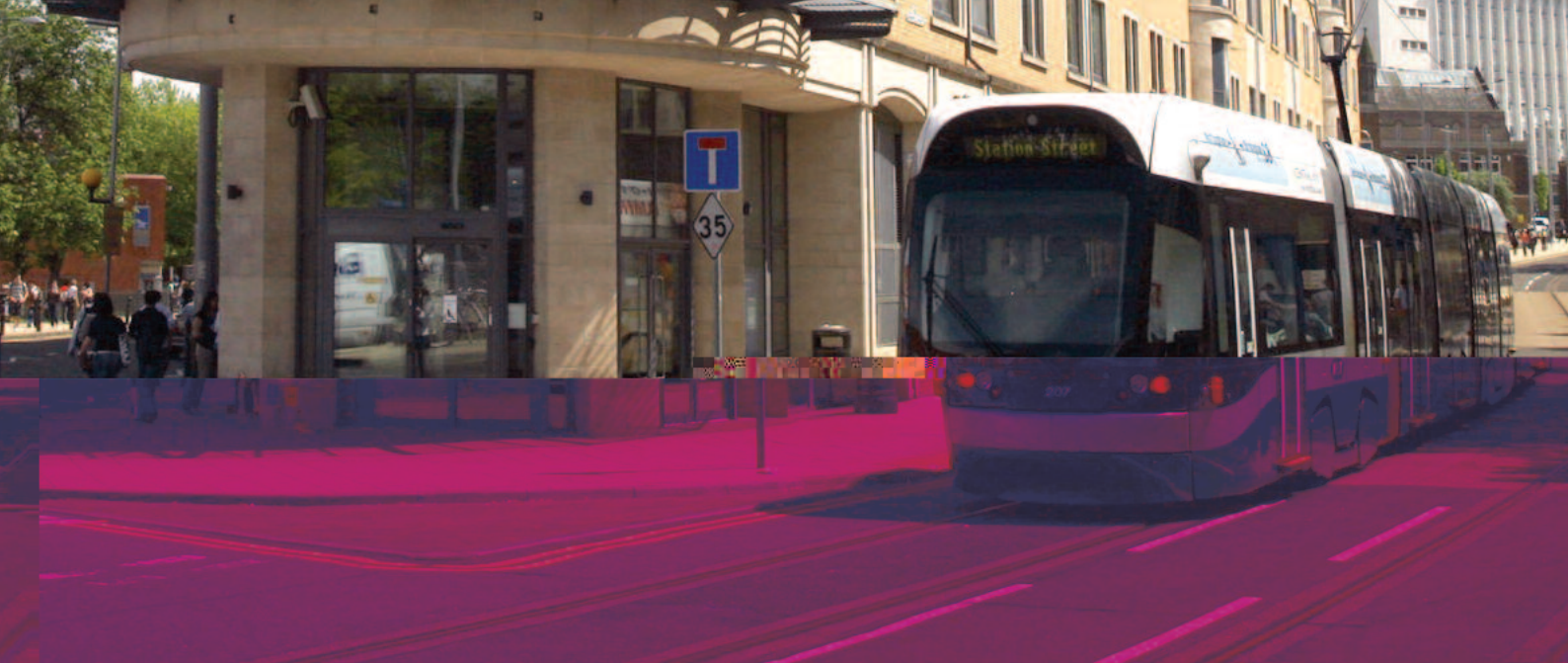
In those days, (as remains the case in some institutions to this day), many universities were in the habit of providing both staff and students with a fist full of single-function tokens, by means of which, for instance, they could be granted access to buildings, prove Student Union membership and avail themselves of the library, the refectory, the car park and so on.

'They were fragmented systems accessed by insecure cards and they were expensive both to deploy and to maintain', said Nigel Smith, HESCA Chairman and Resources Manager at Nottingham Trent University. 'Another problem was that they did not allow HEIs to develop cohesive identity management programmes.'

The obvious answer was the 'smart card', but, as Nigel recalled, 'development cost and complexity combined to stymie their widespread implementation in the U.K..'

HESCA has proved, for many, an invaluable forum. By coming together as a group to tackle these issues and to consider what advantages could be achieved by co-working, cost sharing and standardisation, the organisation has become an influential voice in the marketplace and has accelerated the pace of change. Neither has the concept of co-working been restricted to the HEIs; the supplier base has also embraced co-operation, most visibly MCR Systems and VMC, two companies that have not only worked closely together but have even shared the cost of hiring industry specialists.

Consequently, a growing number of HEIs have embraced the challenge of introducing smart-card solutions, amongst them The University of York, Loughborough University, Leeds University and Nigel Smith's own Nottingham Trent University.



Nottingham Trent University has been at the vanguard of card technology for some time and its system, provided by both MCR Systems and VMC, is engaged in a constant programme of review and improvement. As Nigel said: 'for this academic year we've integrated more value onto the card than ever before and many of the latest features we've added are aimed at contributing to the well-being of students. For instance, thanks to VMC's Metro system, which is particularly suited to the delivery of cashless catering in the University, we've been able to offer 'web-loading'. This means that a card can be credited via a secure Internet site, both by students and their parents or guardians. Parents have been very supportive of the system and it allows them to inject funds that are strictly ring-fenced for 'sensible' purchases, such as travel to and from the campus and meals, and can't be used outside the University - or in the Student Union bars! In other words