



Project: Unique Learner Number

Adoption of the ULN in HE

Executive Summary

July 2015

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The Unique Learner Number (ULN) is the linchpin in a vision of a joined up learning landscape in which robust multi-lateral data sharing is enabled and existing cross sector data collections are streamlined or eliminated. There are currently in excess of 20 million ULNs allocated and used widely in the Further Education (FE) sector in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and the school sector in England and Wales (mandated in Northern Ireland schools from September 2015). The ULN is not used in Scotland where the Scottish Candidate Number (SCN) fulfils a similar role and it is not allocated to non-UK students; very few ULNs currently flow through into Higher Education.

The ULN is the key to the Personal Learning Record (PLR), which contains a record of educational achievement including verified qualifications up to Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) Level 8 from awarding organisations, the FE Individualised Learner Record and the schools National Pupil Database but does not include qualifications awarded by HE providers (HEPs). The ULN and PLR are administered by the Learning Records Service (LRS) which is a publicly funded UK shared service that was established in 2008. It is part of the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) which is an executive agency sponsored by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).

Without mandating the ULN, which has enabled it to be implemented in the school and FE sector in England, Wales and Northern Ireland over the last 7 years, ULN adoption in HE will require gaining consensus from a wide range of stakeholders. Maximising benefits from the PLR will require gaining convergence in the way educational achievement is recorded and presented to students, HE Providers, employers and Professional Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) across the UK. Not securing access to the PLR outside England has emerged as a significant risk to the benefits of adopting the ULN.

The objective of this paper is to define a blueprint that articulates what a fully realised HE adoption of the ULN and PLR would look like; that is supported by key stakeholders. The report also sets out a roadmap to transition to the blueprint. The ULN blueprint and roadmap have been designed to support the HEDIIP New Landscape.

The project discovered around 36 person identifiers in use in UK education sector including approximately 23 in the UK HE landscape. With no common identifier being used to link these disparate data sets; data linking and sharing has to rely on fuzzy matching on personal details a process which is time consuming, requires specialist expertise and can be prone to mismatches.

The project approach has been to consult extensively with stakeholders across the UK to gather requirements and identify a set of critical success factors. Following requirements analysis an impact and prioritisation process took place, this identified the processes, service and capability enhancements required to support HE. A second round of consultation was then undertaken to refine and develop the proposals. In all through workshops, meetings and teleconferences the project has engaged with representatives from over 50 organisations.

Process changes will be required to capture and verify ULNs during the HE admissions process and embed the ULN within data sets. HE Providers will need to take on the responsibility of registering non-UK students with the LRS. For the PLR to fulfil its role, to provide a complete record of an individual's educational achievement, HE qualifications should also be uploaded to the PLR. The project has identified a wide range of benefits including:

For students

- Over 350,000 students a year will have the ability to view and share all their qualifications online.
- Reduction in the need to pay between £5 and £50 to replace lost certificates and transcripts.
- Data linking and sharing enabled by the ULN will improve analysis of progression and retention, thereby enabling improvements in student support services.
- Data linking and sharing will also enable the development of more joined up student services.

For HE Providers

- Reduction in the 4.5 days per 1,000 applicants taken to verify qualifications during admissions.
- Reduction in the £16k to £30k cost per HEP of procuring and verifying contextualised admissions data.
- Improved analysis of the effectiveness of widening participation activities.
- Reduction in the need to provide employers with qualifications potentially saving up to 1 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) per Provider.
- Improved accuracy of GCSE entry qualification data by 4% through using the PLR.

For NHS Business Services Authority

- Improved processing efficiency for around 80,000 NHS bursary students and 11,000 social work bursary students.
- Reduction in the 15,000 duplicate training accounts.

The ability to track students into destinations using the ULN is a major benefit to many stakeholders including Health Education England (HEE) and Research Councils.

The ULN is often considered a long awaited, easily accomplished task that HE should have progressed with implementing many years before now. What this report presents is a very transparent view of stakeholder requirements and the complexity associated with delivering them; this may challenge preconceived ideas. It is recognised that the requirements would result in benefit to the sector and the report communicates the set of capabilities and implementation activities needed to deliver them.

The report therefore proposes that the requirements are addressed in a number of phases with the opportunity for ongoing review of the business case before progressing to the next phase. In the initial phase focus is on basic adoption of the ULN in Higher Education to achieve benefits with the least cost of implementation. The succeeding phases will seek to roll the ULN out across all student cohorts; deliver additional benefits to a wider group of stakeholders and; subsequent to cost benefit analysis progress towards achieving the full blueprint.

An outstanding issue is how students in Wales will access their PLR, this can be done at present through the National Careers Service but it is unclear whether this will be future Welsh Government policy. Skills Development Scotland are developing a learner portal for the Scottish Government and currently have no plans to include the PLR or ULN, but there is support for the ULN in Scotland for use in assessing widening participation and enabling verified qualifications to be available to students online.

The report makes the following recommendations:

- The ULN blueprint and roadmap described in this project are approved by the HEDIIP Programme Board as a statement of intent.
- HEDIIP together with implementation partners initiate Phase 1 of the roadmap.
- The HEDIIP PMO should work with the NHSBSA and HEE to explore the potential of mandating the ULN for students funded by NHS and Social Care bursaries initially in England.
- In preparation for Phase 2 HEDIIP PMO working with the SFA continue to liaise with:
 - SFC, SQA, Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Government to resolve the issue about adoption of the ULN and PLR in Scotland.
 - Welsh Government to establish how students will access their PLR.