

Briefing for MPs

• Data Management

Data Transfer between Schools and Colleges

Background

Every child enrolled in a state funded, or independent, school is issued a Unique Pupil Number (UPN) which acts as an identifier for the pupil throughout his/her school career. The UPN is used to coordinate pupil information supplied to local and central government as part of the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC). The specific UPN is generated by the school's own system and in the majority of cases this is Capita SIMS, a proprietary software package. Issue and use of the UPN is mandatory and is governed by the Data Protection Act (DPA), i.e. certain forms of data cannot be transferred to other bodies without express consent of the individual or parent/guardian. There is a statutory duty on schools to provide UPNs with Key Stage assessment information, Pupil Level Census returns, and pupil records transferred to other schools using the Common Transfer File (CTF).

The mechanism by which data is transferred between schools and Local Authorities is the CTF. The CTF is both a means and protocol to record and transfer data. The Education (Pupil Information) (England) Regulations 2005 describe the information that must be transferred and the method by which transfer must take place. If a pupil transfers to a new school the CTF has to be submitted within 15 days.

Once a pupil undertakes GCSEs she/he is issued a Unique Candidate Identifier (UCI) and this is used to track qualification information between schools and between schools and Awarding Bodies.

Colleges are required to use the Unique Learner Number (ULN) as it is mandatory for the Individual Learner Record (ILR). The ULN is issued to all students from age 14, and increasingly from age 12, but schools often do not use it effectively perhaps because of the parallel systems in use, the issues around data protection and because it is not mandatory that they use it for funding and for data returns.

The ULN is the key identifier for the Personal Learner Record (PLR). The PLR is an online collection of qualification and participation records drawn from the ILR and the National Pupil Database (NPD) held on individuals issued with a ULN. The PLR allows learners to share information about their qualifications and skills with learning providers, awarding organisations, employers, information advice and guidance services and government agencies, provided they are registered as approved organisations. ULNs also provide the unique identifier to enable learner information to be transferred and matched between organisations.

Issues for Colleges are as follows:

- Schools are under no legal or statutory obligation to share any data with Colleges. In fact, in many cases the DPA as it applies to the UPN and CTF prevents them from doing so;
- Information attributed to the UCI is not passed to Colleges because the systems required are not compatible and schools are reluctant to pass on such information;

- In many instances the data management in schools lies with the LA, i.e. schools do not manage their own data and many Colleges draw students from multiple LA;
- Colleges do not use, and do not have easy access to, Capita SIMS as they use different products, although some are supplied by Capita;
- There is no compatible mechanism for Colleges to use the UPN and CTF even if they were allowed access to the data;
- Protocols and technical mechanism do exist to transfer data from the NPD into the PLR, but this is an ad hoc process and is constrained by data protection issues and by the willingness of schools and LA to work with the Learner Records Service;
- Students who have been issued ULNs are often not aware that they have been, as it is not used in schools other than for Diploma and QCF courses, and this leads to duplicate ULNs being issued and thus creates problems with data integrity;
- Awarding Bodies are reluctant to use ULN because of concerns with data integrity.

Summary

A great deal of data is collected on all school pupils, but is not passed to Colleges in a uniform or consistent manner. The lack of coordination means that data integrity is lost, duplicate information created, a huge administrative burden devolves to Colleges and the policy agenda of providing informed IAG, tracking disadvantage, progression and destination is compromised.

The Learner Records Service has the means to secure and manage data from schools and the major MIS suppliers do have the capability to facilitate integration between systems by schools and Colleges; moreover, work done by the Welsh Assembly has proved that the technical and data protection issues might be overcome. Further, work being done by the Higher Education Statistics Agency suggest that securing the better use of data between institutions is possible, practical and would lead to efficiencies in the system that would enhance the quality of provision offered to students.

