
HE Update

Data Assurance Update

January 2019



The OfS Data Strategy: The landscape until 2021

Data is at the heart of the Office for Students' (OfS) new regulatory framework. In November 2018 they published their strategy, which describes their intentions for collection, management and use of data from providers to support their regulatory responsibilities and become a fully evidence-based regulator¹.

The strategy outlines the data sources OfS plans to use. This is wider ranging than the current main sources of data – the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), UCAS and the Student Loans Company (SLC). Information from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) will also be used, alongside analysis of unstructured and big data from social media and web analytics. We don't know precisely what this wider use of data by OfS will look like. Potentially, the best preparations that universities could make is to ensure that they use this data proactively themselves: because it makes good business sense to do so, *and* to ensure questions from the OfS don't come as a surprise.

Responsibility for providing high-quality data remains with each institution's governing body and, given its growing importance, executives and non-executives alike need to continue to ensure robust oversight is in place, especially in these changing times.

With a welcomed added shift to reduce the already large burden placed on institutions, the OfS will no longer require the submission of the Estates Management Record (from 2019/20), nor value for money reports. Completion of an annual in-year Higher Education Students Early Statistics (HESES) survey is also expected to be removed in forthcoming years.

HESA plan to launch a consultation² in early 2019 to determine how their activities can help support institutions in meeting the OfS' requirements, as well as exploring potential alternative collection opportunities where returns are no longer needed by the OfS.

Data Futures: Are you ready?

As the transition to HESA's Data Futures programme moves ever closer, universities must prepare. The Data Futures agenda aims to upgrade current data collection systems to capture better data more efficiently and effectively, through aligning submissions with institutional business processes.

¹ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/office-for-students-data-strategy-2018-to-2021/>

² <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/29-11-2018/hesa-responds-office-students-data-strategy>



Focusing firstly on student data – future treatment of staff, finance and other data remains to be decided – the old, annual and ever-growing, Student Record is to be replaced by in-year collection across three reporting periods. While this means that the returns will need to be signed off by providers on three occasions, data can be submitted as frequently as suits each institution when data is captured and updated. If no changes are required during two reporting periods then no submission is needed. This aims to reduce the burden on compilers by spreading quality assurance activity across the year, which in turn should provide institutions and external parties with improved information to support decision making.

During 2018, an Alpha Group of fourteen universities contributed to the initial design of the system. A Beta test, which will involve 112 universities, is due to commence early in 2019 (although at the time of writing details remain unclear). This will provide a more extensive examination of the data platform HESA have designed, with real data being required to test the software, the various student record systems involved and HESA’s ability to produce the statutory outputs required.

Despite the apparent delay in beginning the Beta test, it is still expected that the mandatory trial submission for all universities will take place at the start of 2020 – which is approaching fast!

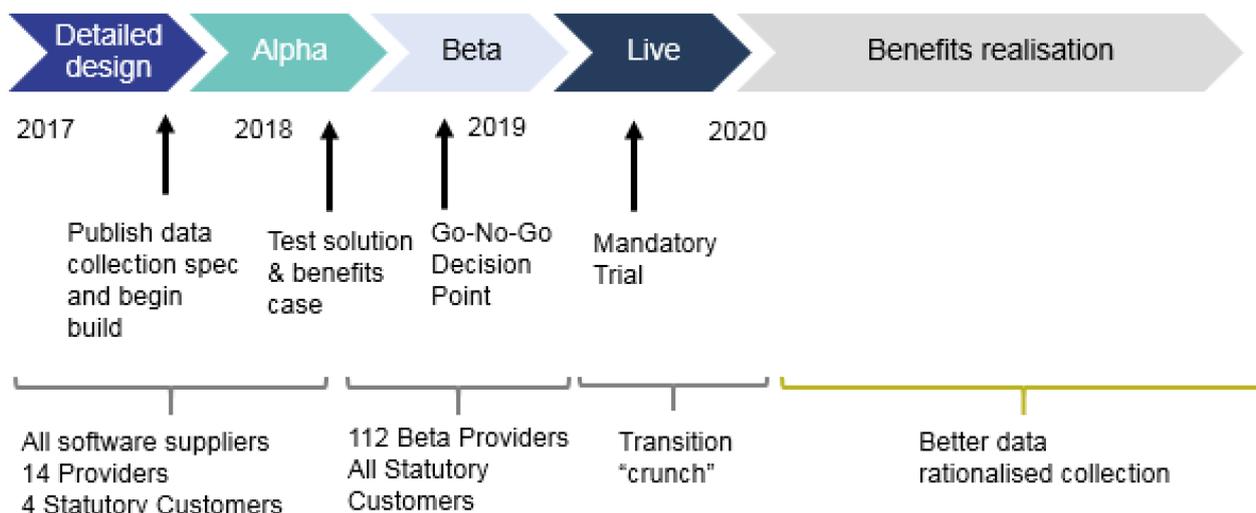


Figure 1: High-level view of the ‘Data Futures Timeline’

A summary published³ following an event held by the Student Records Officers’ Conference (SROC) in November 2018 covered concerns that ‘on-the-ground’ staff have about the move. These highlighted some key questions that executive and non-executive management need to ask themselves of their institutions:

- Are the right level of resources and skills in place to meet the demands of the transition?
- Is there engagement and buy-in from management and colleagues across the institution?
- Are business processes flexible enough to allow for different data collection and assurance deadlines?
- Is your student record system up to the job, and how is any reliance on your system provider being managed?

³ <https://sroc.ac.uk/newsfeed/everything-i-hate-about-data-futures>



- Does Data Futures actually reduce the burden, in both the short and long term, for your staff?
- How will the in-year data collected be used externally for reputationally significant areas such as the national league tables?

Knowledge Exchange Framework

Deviating somewhat from the theme of reduced burdens, KEF, the younger sibling of REF and TEF, will shortly be with us. Although still subject to consultation, it seems that the existing HE-BCI return will underpin this new measure. Hitherto, HE-BCI has had a relatively low profile, but potentially KEF may see the HE-BCI data assume a new greater level of importance.

HE-BCI data capture has always been relatively challenging, and unstructured, across the sector. This may be an opportune time for providers to explore systemic approaches to data capture; to investigate whether research management and finance systems should be configured to support knowledge exchange data returns; and to explore how this data is used to manage knowledge exchange activity across their organisations.

How can we help?

Uniac's data assurance team has extensive experience in providing data assurance and consultancy services to our member Universities and beyond. This includes real-time assurance reviews for individual statutory returns at the point of compilation, tailored to the institution, as well as advisory work around the use of information, data analytics and big data within higher education.

For further information on how we can help, or any other aspect of Uniac's internal audit and assurance service please do get in touch.

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