

Minutes

DG/15/M1

Data Group meeting held on Tuesday 10 February 2015, at UCAS, Cheltenham

Chair:	Wendy Webster	University of Dundee
Attendees:	Christine Giles Daniel Farrell Gurjit Nijjar Helen Reed James Brown Judith Davison Jo Hamilton Laura Cruise Nick Bhugeloo Paul Ashby Stella Fowler	University of Portsmouth University of St Andrews University of Derby University of Cambridge University of Glasgow University of Huddersfield University of Exeter Oxford Brookes Kingston University University of Birmingham University of Gloucestershire (representing the Higher Education Strategic Planners Association)
	Steve Walsh Tania Smith	Aberystwyth University University of Manchester
Apologies:	Daniel King Emma Christmas James Ackroyd	University of Surrey Keele University University of Reading
UCAS in attendance:	Andy Gillett Ben Perry Carys Fisher Chris Wallace Denise Chaffer Fiona Watts Helen Thorne James Harley Louise Cyprien Mike Spink	Head of IT Engagement Data Scientist Policy Executive Head of Product Management Groups & Forums Administrator UTT Relationship Manager Director of External Relations Principal Analyst Scheme Delivery Manager Enterprise Architect

01/15/M1 Welcome and apologies

The Chair welcomed the Data Group meeting attendees and apologies were noted. The group also welcomed Stella Fowler, who was representing the Higher Education Strategic Planners Association, to the group. It was noted that Barbara Jones, Teesside University, had to leave the group due to changes in her job role.

02/15/M1 Minutes and actions from the last meeting

The minutes of the last meeting were accepted as an accurate and true representation of the meeting.

The open actions were discussed:

- DG004 College representative – this had been pursued with the UCAS College HE Advisory Group, the Association of Colleges and SPA in to encourage involvement from the sector and to recruit a member of the college HE sector to join the Data Group.
- DG017 – a duplicated action to be removed.

03/15/M1 Presentation on digital acceleration and the redevelopment of Apply

Chris Wallace, Head of Product Management, joined the meeting to discuss digital acceleration and the redevelopment of Apply. This was the first time the term 'digital acceleration' had been communicated with the sector.

It was explained to the group that, rather than continue to make changes to existing legacy systems, which were highly resource intensive, UCAS was now investing in the development of new digital products and services. The long term aim was to become a globally recognised destination for all postgraduate and undergraduate admissions services. The term for this strategy was digital acceleration; this was not a replacement strategy but a more aggressive stance for transforming the current UCAS technical estate. UCAS still aimed to deliver the goals of the CASE initiative, discussed in October. UCAS was currently recruiting skilled IT experts to work on this development, and the strategy would not impact on operational delivery, particularly Confirmation and Clearing 2015. UCAS also intended to work closely with all customers throughout the planning, development, testing and implementation of the digital acceleration initiatives, to fully understand customer needs and improve the learner experience.

It had been decided the admissions initiative would begin with the Postgraduate scheme – with the intention to test, innovate and build a new admissions service, working in partnership with the UKPASS community. This approach would enable

UCAS to develop and test a new Apply service, whilst minimising the risks to the larger Undergraduate scheme

UCAS was committed to listening to the needs of its customers. All developments would be user-focused and undergo extensive user-testing with providers, applicants and advisers. Regular engagement would take place with Relationship Managers, groups and forums, focus groups, working groups, Yammer, conferences and bulletins. Providers, agencies and other official bodies would be asked for feedback, to gain a deep understanding of sector requirements. The needs of the postgraduate sector would be collected and collated by mid-March, when the development and build would start.

CW/WW
DG022

Volunteers from the various groups and forums would be sought to join the working groups, and a further meeting would be held to discuss how best to ensure data aspects were fully considered.

Course Collect had been reviewed and deemed to be not fit for purpose. Therefore the product would be completely rebuilt as part of the digital acceleration strategy. The group requested that the outstanding concerns from the Courses Repair and Resolve Project be addressed as part of this work.

The group questioned the longevity of the new technological estate. Full consideration had been taken in building a product that was right for the future – people's online behaviour was constantly changing, and therefore engagement was key to fully understand customer needs.

The group raised the issue of system software suppliers and if they would be fully engaged in UCAS' digital acceleration. Andy Gillett, UCAS' Head of IT Engagement, stated that once the design of the new products had been agreed, the various software suppliers would be fully engaged to understand the implications and future plans. An engagement plan was in place and the Technical Relationship Team would be carrying out visits to suppliers.

The aim was to have a working Search product for postgraduate courses by October 2015 and an application service out to market by March 2016. The Graduate Prospects contract ran until June 2016 and would not be renewed.

There was some debate about the functionality of the new postgraduate service and whether receipt of transcripts would be within scope. UCAS was aware of European efforts to standardise this and the scope of the development was yet to be defined. The group felt strongly that providers beyond existing UKPASS users must be engaged in the development if the Course Collect and Apply solutions were to be used for a renewed undergraduate service.

The group felt that some providers would be concerned that UCAS was planning to spend a considerable amount of money developing a postgraduate service, as

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this was not something which they wanted. It was reiterated that postgraduate represented a much lower risk way of developing and testing new admissions service components. The group recommended that UCAS undertook more engagement with the HE sector about the purpose, benefits and timescales of digital acceleration to encourage buy-in. Comments made by the group would be fed back to the digital acceleration team.

CW
DG023

04/15/M1 Top five data quality issues

Mike Spink, Data Enterprise Architect, presented paper DG/15/001. This identified the top five data quality issues for each major customer group and highlighted some of the issues caused by poor data quality. The group was invited to comment on whether UCAS had identified the right issues, and to prioritise these and identify options for improving or resolving them.

The group responded that this was a useful paper but felt that a critical issue missing from a provider's perspective was the consistency of data descriptions, e.g. rules allowing/disallowing lower or upper case letters. This could generate queries in provider systems, and it was suggested that UCAS needed to impose data standards. It was agreed to add this to a list of issues. The group also agreed that data validation at the point of capture was key and should be included.

MS
DG024

The group observed there was a need to understand the root causes of the different issues in the paper, and a plan should be produced to set out how each could be addressed. Whilst a number of the issues were clearly technical and would need to await the redevelopment of Apply, others appear to be related to user understanding or misinterpretation of meta-data and could be addressed now.

To check if the primary data quality issues had been identified it was suggested that UCAS should analyse the data queries received by the helpdesk to ascertain the type of issues reported. Louise Cyprien agreed to undertake this action, but informed the group that the results would only date back to April 2014 as this was when the new helpdesk service (Infosys) was implemented. However, she would investigate if it was possible to research historical queries, and report back to the group.

LC
DG025

It was suggested that UCAS look at the data improvement schedule which was presented at the Change User Group – this would be located and communicated back to the group.

LC
DG026

In addition, the group agreed it would like to carry out a Yammer survey to find out what other data quality issues providers had. This should be informed by the helpdesk survey results. James Brown and Jo Hamilton volunteered to be involved.

MS
DG027

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In terms of the top five provider data quality issues in the paper, the group noted that 5.1 (schools data) was well understood and would need to be addressed with the redevelopment of the undergraduate service, as would 5.4 (inability to list courses from more than one cycle). 5.2 (maintaining multiple courses datasets) was an issue for the sector to tackle. However, UCAS could look in more detail at 5.3 (getting UCAS communications to the right person in providers) and 5.5 (applying data quality rules to courses data at point of entry). UCAS agreed to come back with a proposal.

MS
DG028

It was suggested that group members should volunteer to champion data quality and work with UCAS on each of these issues. It was also suggested that there needed to be more interaction with the Technical Group, which was meeting on 17 February. Andy Gillett, group owner of the Technical Group, confirmed he would discuss this with Peter Service, the new Chair of the Technical Group, to take this forward.

AG
DG029

The group agreed that this was a very good paper to stimulate debate and looked forward to further discussions and resolutions.

05/15/M1 UCAS Exact analytical service and Strobe applicant tracking service

James Harley, Principal Analyst and Ben Perry, Data Scientist, joined the meeting to give a presentation on Exact and Strobe.

James outlined Exact (Expanded Adaptable Customer Tabulations) – a new service from UCAS that provided customers with a wide range of analytical data, to individual specifications from the UCAS Undergraduate scheme. Exact was capable of producing more than six billion output tables. The data could be selected over a range of years going back to the 2004 application cycle. Exact was an agile service, in continual development based on customer feedback.

Exact was available to everyone, not just providers, and used a custom-built pricing model. The costs were on a sliding scale, driven by the extent, complexity and resolution of data requested. The prices were calculated instantly and the average turnaround for requests was two-three days. It was also confirmed that a provider's own data would be offered to them free of charge.

The group queried the possibility of a self-service subscription to Exact as it felt that paying for individual queries would become costly and cumbersome. This would be investigated.

JH
DG030

The soft launch of Exact took place in November 2014 and to date there had been 124 individual requests. The main launch of Exact was scheduled to take place in

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spring 2015. The documentation was currently being refined with UCAS Media and would be available online shortly.

It was confirmed that extensive testing had taken place and UCAS was confident that the data supplied was accurate. Members questioned how UCAS had mapped different versions of JACs – this would be looked into.

JH
DG031

The group also questioned the need to be aware of the level of suppression before committing to requesting a report. It was confirmed that a diagnostic of the report was run first to demonstrate this.

Members asked if it would be possible to use Exact to look at numbers of unconditional offers made. It currently included data about total number of offers made, but not offer types.

There were a number of questions about the nature and extent of data available in Exact. The group wanted to know exactly what information about their provider would be available to other providers and third parties. This information would be provided to the group. The data now available had previously been available via UCAS' bespoke analytical service and Exact was a very significant improvement on this. It did not contain live cycle data. Licencing arrangements limited the reuse, publication and resale of data.

JH
DG032

The group said providers would want to know who had requested data about them and what had been supplied, not least because this could generate FOIA requests or press enquiries. Providers would like to be notified if their data had been requested, as HESA currently issued notifications if their data had been requested by a third party. The group also requested a list of the types of requests made – this would be reviewed.

Members asked what information about providers was in the public domain and how this had been decided. The group was informed that the publishing of the End of Cycle data had been discussed at the Annual Review Meeting, with Council and with HESPA and ARC-APG representatives. Since most of the FOIA requests UCAS received were for data, the published datasets were also designed to address this

It was confirmed that AppTrack was part of the legacy estate and therefore is not able to offer the functionality required. The digital acceleration project would investigate developing another replacement product.

Strobe – Standardised tracking of outcomes with benchmarking and evaluation

Ben Perry, Data Scientist, outlined another service which was currently being trialled. Strobe was an application that tracked an individual's data into UCAS admissions and reported on key admissions cycle outcomes in an aggregated

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manner. Strobe would also be a paid-for service and – prices were currently being trialled at £5 per record and £2.50 per record for universities and colleges.

The group agreed the new products would be of benefit to sector.

A copy of the presentation would be attached to the meeting minutes.

DC
DG033

06/15/M1 Higher Education Data & Information Improvement Programme (HEDIIP) update

Mike Spink discussed paper DG/15/000 which focused on the three main initiatives in HEDIIP:

New subject coding system

This is a replacement for the existing JACs coding system, as discussed in detail at the October meeting. UCAS was making strong recommendations to the project to ensure the new system was fit for purpose and future proof. It was anticipated that the proposed prototype would go out for national consultation in spring 2015.

Unique Learner Number (ULN)

More widespread adoption of the ULN was being promoted by the HEDIIP Team. It had been decided that UCAS should not allocate the ULN as HEDIIP investigations had concluded this was not a viable option given the current processes associated with the ULN allocation. UCAS was in agreement that the ULN has a lot to offer applicants – by improving the learner journey significantly and having the option of pre-populating the application with information. However, this would be dependent on UCAS' ability to validate the ULN at the start of the application process. The group agreed it would be vital for UCAS to carry out validation and a clear set of parameters needed to be in place to ensure the accuracy of the ULN. Currently only 12% of applications included the ULN – due to many reasons including the applicant being unaware of it.

Data capabilities

This was a new work stream, producing a framework and resources to enable individual providers to assess their Data Lifecycle Management (DLM). It would be a free tool which would assess the different data maturity scores and look at the outcomes for each level, so providers could see which level they were.

The perception of providers was that they may not be as mature with the data as they had previously thought. Therefore, this would be a way of reviewing and highlighting individual processes, which had previously uncovered numerous different practices. UCAS was assisting in the validation of this free tool, as any improvement to data quality would benefit the sector as a whole.

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Members noted that the ability to benchmark data maturity would be really valuable. However, some concerns were raised about whether this was unfair since some providers have already invested considerable sums of their own funds, giving them a perceived competitive advantage. The group was advised that the intention was only to provide benchmarking tools, and it would then be for providers to decide what they did with the results. Realistically if some of the benefits of HEDIIP were to be realised, many providers would need to strengthen how they governed and managed data.

The group asked that these initiatives were also raised at the regional meetings by the Relationship Managers so the sector was aware of these developments.

07/15/M1 Education department data and the UCAS contextual data service

Carys Fisher, Policy Executive, joined the meeting to discuss paper DG/15/003 on contextual data.

Contextual data and information was any data used by universities and colleges which put attainment in the context of the circumstances in which it had been obtained. This typically included educational, geo-demographic, socio-economic background data and information about an individual's circumstances. In response to requests from the HE sector, UCAS introduced a contextual data service in 2012. There was no charge for this service but providers were required to agree to conditions of usage before access was granted.

The group raised the issue of the quality of schools data, as this severely limited the usefulness of UCAS' contextual data, as discussed in October. UCAS' decision not to invest in legacy systems meant that improvements in the quality of schools data (beyond focusing on communications channels) would need to await systems redevelopment.

The group requested to have contextual data presented in a meaningful way, including the national average of the country field and the progression to HE data, as well as providing guidance to understand the data once it has been issued. The group was reminded that this has been discussed previously and the DfE did not provide national averages information. One member thought that this was not the case. UCAS would investigate this as well as looking at if it was possible to provide progression data to providers on an Apply centre basis, e.g. data on numbers of applications, offers and acceptances.

CF
DG034

Paul Ashby highlighted an issue with contextual data at the University of Birmingham stating that it had been unavailable for a while but was unsure if this was a problem at the university or at UCAS. Louise Cyprien agreed to investigate and report back.

LC
DG035

The group was informed that a recent SPA survey on contextual data was due to be opened shortly on the SPA website, and they were encouraged to respond.

08/15/M1 UCAS Teacher Training data quality challenges

Fiona Watts, Teacher Training Relationship Manager, joined the meeting to discuss paper DG/15/004. Fiona outlined her role and responsibilities for lead schools and SCITTs and the on-boarding processes for UCAS Teacher Training (UTT).

The group was informed that data for UCAS Teacher Training was provided by the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) rather than collected directly from training providers. NCTL data collection and management processes had caused challenges for UCAS, particularly in relation to contacting the right people at training providers, advertising providers using their preferred names, and verifying training programme information.

The group asked if there was a Yammer group for UCAS Teacher Training. Although this would be a very useful way of communicating, due to the large number of training providers and schools involved there were concerns that it could be too cumbersome to manage.

A joint data working group had been established, to provide a forum for operational colleagues from UCAS and NCTL to work together to ensure joint information, transfer, analysis and interpretation of data was aligned and clearer guidance was produced. Procedures for the exchange of operational data between the two organisations were also being standardised.

It was noted that the group was slightly disheartened to read a paper with numerous fundamental issues which they believe should have been tackled beforehand. However, Fiona confirmed that, as this was the first year of UCAS Teacher Training, issues had been identified and fixes put in place; lessons had been learnt and would be built upon for the future.

Wendy Webster highlighted that some data had been lost in the transition from GTTR to UCAS for the Scottish HEPs. This would be investigated and was potentially easy to resolve.

FW/LC
DC036

09/15/M1 Any other business

Equality characteristics

Ben Jordan, Policy Executive, joined the meeting to discuss paper DG/15/005 on equality characteristics, following recent changes made to the collection of data relating to an applicant's sex and gender. After strong feedback from representative groups it was identified that the wording of the changed question

could potentially cause offence, and it was therefore changed and the help text revised.

Ideally, UCAS would like to add a third option to the gender question, but the cost of making the change on legacy systems was excessive. UCAS would address this in its systems redevelopment.

A group member sought clarification as to whether the changes made by UCAS were still providing accurate data for use in the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) student record return. UCAS responded that it thought this was the case.

Post-meeting note: Daniel Farrell, University of St Andrews, sought clarification from HESA as to whether these changes were providing accurate data for use in the HESA student record return. Indications from HESA suggest this is not the case, and a joint UCAS-HESA statement was subsequently produced:

For the 2015 application cycle, UCAS introduced additional questions into Apply regarding a range of protected characteristics. Upon the launch of these changes UCAS receive feedback from applicants, particularly those from the trans community, that the wording of the question was potentially offensive and discouraging to some applicants. In light of this feedback, UCAS made additional changes to the questions asked in UCAS Apply.

*Following discussions between HESA and UCAS, HESA has decided that the question asked in UCAS Apply does not satisfy requirements for the Student and AP records and have therefore requested it is not supplied as part of the UCAS Data for HESA (*j) transaction going forward. UCAS will continue to provide the data to institutions for their own internal monitoring.*

UCAS was working with representative bodies to ensure consistency and clear representation of the diverse range of applicants, so nobody was deterred from applying and no offence caused. UCAS would liaise with HESA, Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) to discuss sector-wide definitions and gain future direction.

The group was satisfied that equality was being dealt with appropriately and effectively, although it was noted that at some point in the future there could be a requirement for UCAS to collect this data from EU and international applications, as well as home applicants.

Confidentiality of Data Group papers

The group queried the recent issue of Data Group papers which highlighted their confidentiality. The group was concerned as they needed to discuss the content of

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the papers within their peers and felt that this was not possible due to the security markings.

It was confirmed that some of the documents discussed in the Data Group meeting were of a sensitive nature and not for sharing with the wider sector, but levels of confidentiality needed to be made more explicit within documentation. It was agreed that in future a note would be made on documents indicating where content was confidential and the extent to which group members could discuss and share this with others.

HT/DC
DG037

The group also asked if they could receive supporting papers for the meeting earlier, so they could engage and consult with their colleagues prior to the meeting. It was agreed to try to deliver Data Group papers for consultation and consideration as soon as they were available.

10/15/M1 Date of next meeting

It was agreed to hold the next Data Group meeting mid-June and potentially hold a Data Group 'brainstorming' session beforehand. Once dates had been agreed, Denise Chaffer would issue meeting invitations.

DC
DG038

It was agreed that the June agenda should include an update on digital acceleration, a discussion about HEDIIP (inviting Andy Youell to attend), and an item following up on the data-related items stemming from the international consultation. The group asked for papers to be circulated earlier to enable consultation more widely with their colleagues.

The group was encouraged to submit any items they would like to see for discussion on the agenda in good time.

ALL
DG039