

Consultation

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CONSULTATION ON THE FEASIBILITY OF INTRODUCING THE UNIQUE LEARNER NUMBER

Many stakeholders and partners within the education and learning system have for some time been asking whether some kind of unique learner number might be introduced to help deliver improved services to learners. They have suggested that more efficient collection and sharing of appropriate learner data and information will, for example, enable credit accumulation linking episodes of learning, and generally support effective linking of advice, guidance and learning - possibly as a 'Record of Learning'.

There are currently many different individual learner numbers in use across the education and learning sectors - these have evolved over time to meet the specific administrative needs and purposes of different organisations.

Unfortunately, because these numbers have been developed in isolation, there is little, if any, read across from one to another – this results in unnecessary delays, duplication and bureaucracy within the system.

This consultation builds upon a recent feasibility study which considered the case for the unique learner number. This study found that whilst there was a case for the unique learner number, the benefits and costs needed to be better understood within the context of a proposal based upon four service levels before more informed decisions could be taken.

Recognising the diverse size, needs, and circumstances of the organisations across the learning system, this consultation aims to help us to develop a better understanding of stakeholders' and partners' views, particularly around the costs, benefits and implementation issues associated with the various unique learner number service options outlined in Annex A.

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A Consultation

To: Post-16 Learning Policymakers
The Funders of Post 16 learning
The Providers of Post-16 Learning
Post 16 learning infrastructure support and service providers

In particular: Data Managers, Planning Managers,
Finance and Funding Managers

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Introduction

- i. This consultation builds on the findings of a feasibility study undertaken by PA Consulting, which was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and overseen by the Management Information Across Partners (MIAP) group. The feasibility study reports which are available along side this document provides an important basis for this consultation.
- ii. The MIAP group was convened by the DfES to bring together the numerous stakeholders and interests in learner information and records. It plays an important role in developing shared and coherent solutions to the difficulties faced in collecting, using and sharing data and information across partner organisations. Details of the role and membership of the MIAP group is outlined in Annex B.

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 The current proliferation of different learner identifiers and of associated personal records has been identified by numerous reviews as a source of burdensome bureaucracy and as a constraint to the effective use of learner-centred information. This has led to calls from across the learning sector for a single learner identifier as a basis for better information management.
- 1.2 The concept of the unique learner number is firmly set within the context of the Government's commitment to reduce bureaucracy, to raise standards, and to increase levels of participation and achievement across the education and lifelong learning sectors.
- 1.3 PA Consulting were charged to undertake a feasibility study to assess the potential impacts and benefits of a unique learner number for learners – individually and collectively - and for those providing services and support for learners. Within the context of this consultation we have been considering a learner as a person engaging in 'publicly funded' learning, irrespective of domicile, level or length of activity.
- 1.4 In taking this forward PA Consulting identified different options of possible unique learner number-based services. A basic four level model was developed and worked through with a range of learner groups, providers and other stakeholders to assess the requirements, impacts and benefits of different levels of unique learner number-based services. This remains a key aspect of this consultation. (These levels of service are described in more detail in para 2.5 and in Annex A.)
- 1.5 The study found a clear sense that the potential benefits of the unique learner number stem less from having a unique identifier in itself, than from the services and applications that could be based on that identifier. This included its use in enabling credit accumulation and a national database of learners' experiences and achievements (a learner record) - which might provide a powerful basis for better services to learners, better planning and targeting of policies to encourage participation and achievement, and a reduction in bureaucracy through more efficient use of information.
- 1.6 While the unique learner number would be an essential pre-requisite for a national record of learning, it was recognised that it provides only one of several requirements for such a service. Others include the national infrastructures and data sharing protocols and frameworks needed to collate learner data from many different sources, and the conceptual and detailed design of the record of learning itself – issues which are being considered separately from this consultation. Annex A helps to demonstrate how the unique learner number might be used in practice.
- 1.7 Within this context there was a view that the unique learner number would reduce the burden of data on providers by supporting a system that would act as a central source of information about learners and their prior achievement. However, balanced against the widespread support for the unique learner

number as a step towards realising these benefits, were concerns among some providers – notably within the university sector – that the unique learner number would offer limited benefits for their immediate operations, and might impose additional costs and burdens on them.

- 1.8 However, the report suggests that there are good reasons for pressing ahead with the development of the unique learner number proposition as a matter of some priority. Not least because of the number of similar or partial unique learner number solutions currently being developed and piloted in parts of the lifelong learning system (as in Wales for 16+ and as part of various local initiatives), but also because of the wishes of stakeholders to progress schemes that will depend on a national unique learner number.
- 1.9 It is recognised that the complex practicalities of designing, building and implementing the unique learner number, and any related services, need to be fully understood and resolved before a national scheme is designed and rolled out. This consultation aims to develop our understanding of costs, benefits and some of the complex practical implementation issues involved.

2 Background and Context

- 2.1 The current structure of learning provision and services has evolved over many years to meet the huge diversity of learner needs. However, a drawback of this diversity is a system that can appear fragmented and disjointed. This has not proved conducive to collaboration between partner organisations, and can be confusing and off-putting for current and potential learners alike.
- 2.2 Significant efforts are being made, across all parts of the sector, to provide more joined-up and learner-centred pathways and experiences. An important part of this is the work to improve the sharing and use of information about learners at both the personal and collective levels. However, there are some very real difficulties of linking and tracking individualised data, held in many different provider systems, across learning episodes and events. This has seriously inhibited progress towards more effective policies, programmes and services.
- 2.3 The current proliferation of different learner identifiers and of associated personal records has been identified by numerous reviews as a source of burdensome bureaucracy and as a constraint to the effective use of learner-centred information. This has led to calls from across the learning sector for a single learner identifier as a basis for better information management.
- 2.4 PA Consulting were asked to assess and advise upon the feasibility of introducing a single unique learner number for all individuals engaged in the national lifelong learning system. The main objective of the feasibility study into a unique learner number has been to understand what a unique learner number service might look like, and to remove some of the uncertainty over the costs and benefits of introducing a unique learner number.
- 2.5 PA Consulting suggests that the progressive levels of a unique learner number service might be:

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- ? Level 1 – unique learner number as a common identifier for all learner records – all learners would be issued with a single and unique personal learner identification number. This would be recognised by all learning providers and would be attached to all of their personal learning-related record data created from that point forward and which could use smart card technology, similar to that used for the Connexions Card;
 - ? Level 2 – unique learner number used as a common key to link learner records - a unique learner number would provide a common key for linking and exchanging learner records and data between providers and service agencies, and for building up longitudinal data views from different recording systems;
 - ? Level 3 – unique learner number used to create unified records for all learners as a key for data pooling or warehousing - extracts from each learner's (distributed) individual records would be consolidated into an authoritative record of learning achievement, using the unique learner number as the common key, and held centrally to be accessed as needed by learners and other authorised users;
 - ? Level 4 – unique learner number used as the basis for single integrated learner registration system - a single information system for managing all learner records, including applications, registrations and progress/achievements, providing a 'one-stop' central service for learners and providers across all sectors and modes of learning. This level of service would go well beyond the basic unique learner number concept, and the remit for the initial feasibility study. However, it does help demonstrate the potential development routes that could be opened up by the introduction of a basic (Level I or II) unique learner number service.
- 2.6 Essentially, the initial feasibility work has, so far, only been able to consider the first two levels – a sort of 'stand alone' case for the unique learner number - concluding that this 'stand alone' case for a basic unique learner number service is positive, but not compelling because of the somewhat limited benefits that might arise.
- 2.7 Inevitably, given the number of variables and the infrastructure development required, it has proved more difficult to consider the case and quantify some of the costs and benefits associated with levels three and four. None-the-less, the key finding was that there is strong support for the concept of a unique learner number in support of lifelong learning objectives, notably as an enabling device for:
- ? Encouraging participation through simplified entry to learning, for example, simplifying application processes;
 - ? Encouraging individual progression and cumulative achievements, for example through credit accumulation, improved advice, guidance and support derived from a national record of learning;
 - ? Better informed planning and targeting of learning provision, for example

through entitlements, and a better understanding of particular cohorts and priority groups.

- 2.8 However, balanced against widespread support for a unique learner number, were concerns among some providers – notably within the university sector – that a unique learner number would offer limited benefits for their immediate operations, and might impose additional costs on them.
- 2.9 There will be cost implications for providers and other data owners who will have to update their information systems to accommodate the unique learner number. However, it has been suggested that provided that the unique learner number implementation is undertaken over a sufficiently extended period, and in consultation with stakeholders and partners, it should be possible for most of these costs to be absorbed within routine system maintenance and upgrade budgets.
- 2.10 The costs of developing and providing a basic unique learner number service could be significant. The report suggests that these costs are driven primarily by the numbers of learners to whom unique learner numbers and cards should be issued, and the subsequent demands on the service provider i.e. re-issuing lost cards. However, it has subsequently been suggested that if an existing number (and service provider) were to be used i.e. national insurance number, these costs would reduce significantly.
- 2.11 It is expected that the immediate impacts of a basic unique learner number service would be on administrative costs for learning providers and other learning services, and would come from time savings on data provision, entry, verification and reporting. PA Consulting found it difficult to estimate these costs with any precision. On this basis, an important focus for this exercise is to get a better idea of the potential costs and benefits associated with the implementation of the various unique learner number service options.
- 2.12 The proposition outlined in Annex A aims to articulate the four service levels, identified by PA Consulting, as a workable model for a unique learner number service in sufficient detail to help partners and stakeholders to recognise where such a service might impact upon their business. This will also help us to identify and consider the potential implementation costs and user benefits (including for learners and others) at a more specific level than has been possible so far. Whilst noting that this is still very much work in progress, we would welcome comments on the proposition outlined here, and the potential impacts, costs and benefits to you, your organisation and your customers.

3. Points for consultation

3.1 We would welcome comments on the proposition outlined in Annex A. In particular the potential benefits, savings and costs to you, your organisation and, where appropriate, your partners and / or customers, both in terms of one off costs and ongoing annual costs or savings.

3.2 It is expected that the immediate impacts of a basic unique learner number service would be on administrative costs for learning providers and other learning support and service providers, and would come from time savings on data provision, collection, entry, verification and reporting.

3.3 PA Consulting found it difficult to estimate these costs with any precision. On this basis, an important focus for this exercise is to get a better idea of the potential costs and benefits associated with the implementation of the various unique learner number service options for different types of organisation.

3.4 Annex A aims to articulate the four levels identified by PA Consulting as a workable model for a unique learner number service in sufficient detail to help partners and stakeholders to recognise where such a service might impact upon their business, and to enable us to identify and consider the potential implementation costs and user benefits (including for learners and others) at a more specific level than has been possible so far. Benefits might include:

- ? reducing demands on students and learners to provide information
- ? enabling credit accumulation and a record of learning
- ? reducing administrative burdens on staff
- ? tracking the progression of students
- ? reducing data errors

3.5 If advantages are financial, it would be helpful if you could give an estimate of savings envisaged - both one off and annually. Ideally within ranges of say:

- ? negligible
- ? less than £20,000
- ? £20,000 - £50,000
- ? more than £50,000 – with an indication of amount

3.6 In terms of additional costs, it would be helpful if you could give an estimate of these costs envisaged, again one off and annually. Possibly within ranges of say:

- ? negligible
- ? less than £20,000
- ? £20,000 - £50,000
- ? more than £50,000 – with an indication of amount