

UniForum Q&As

What is UniForum?

UniForum is a benchmarking service offered by Cubane Consulting, which involves the application of a well-tested methodology for capturing data regarding the distribution of all university support services against a comprehensive Activity Framework.

The project enables us to collaborate with a number of other Russell Group universities to benchmark how we organise our professional services to support teaching and research. It also helps us to share best practice and identify where we need to invest in order to maximise future opportunities.

Although we expect UniForum to help us improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our professional services, the process is not being driven by the need to make savings. It is very valuable to benchmark ourselves against universities of similar scale and complexity, and develop best practice from experiences across the participating institutions.

The programme is not the only source of data considered in future planning of professional support services - it is simply a first step in informing the general approach which we will take to identifying improvement opportunities. Other sources of qualitative and quantitative data will be considered as well, and we will also actively consult with staff to incorporate their views.

The programme is led by Cubane Consulting and was originally developed in Australia and New Zealand, where it has been running for eight years. The UK programme began in 2015 and there is now also a programme running in Canada.

The project is sponsored by the University Executive Group and is being managed by the Strategy and Planning team. Updates on the progress of programme will be available via For Staff and the Reporter.

Which Russell Group universities are members of UniForum?

18 Russell Group Universities are now participating in the UniForum programme. In 2015 there were nine universities in the programme.

The following universities are also members of the programme: Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Durham, Edinburgh, Exeter, Glasgow, Kings College London, Liverpool, LSE, Manchester, Newcastle, Oxford, Queen Mary, Southampton and UCL.

How long is the programme?

We have initially signed up for the UniForum programme for four years, committing to at least collect benchmark data in alternate years. Having collected activity data in the first year (2015) we have committed to undertake a second collection in 2017.

Preparatory activities for the 2017 data collection process have begun. The activity collections will take place in August and September 2017. There are two parts to the activity collections – the Professional Staff activity collection and the Supplier activity collection, which are collected at the same time.

In addition to the activity benchmarking exercise, we will also be running a Service Effectiveness Survey. This will enable satisfaction with services to be measured and will highlight the attributes of a service that contribute to its satisfaction ratings. It will be running between 14 and 30 November 2017 and staff invited to participate will receive a personalised link to the survey.

It's expected that the initial findings will be presented to the University early in 2018.

What does the UniForum Activity Collection involve?

The primary data collected by the UniForum Activity Collection covers all administration and support service staff. It identifies how much time is being spent supporting different administration and support activities, as well as how much resource is contracted in to provide support services.

The primary data inputs cover:

- all non-academic staff who are on the University payroll, whatever their role or employment arrangements
- contracted services and contractors where the service provider is supporting day-to-day operations that could be provided by in-house staff
- selected academic staff whose roles are almost exclusively administrative.

The Professional Services activity collection is undertaken by identified managers and supervisors (known as Respondents) to collect how they allocate their staff's time to a range of activities over the past 12 months. There are 153 different activities that time can be allocated to and the smallest allocation of time is 10%.

The Supplier activity collection is a separate survey of managers of contracted services. This follows a similar process as the Professional Services activity collection, to allocate the provided services to the 153 activities.

Senior managers across the University are considered to be 'Primary Contacts' and will provide a local review of the information supplied by the Respondents in their area, and approve the data collections before submission.

The data is collected using a web-based tool and the processes supporting this are managed by the University's UniForum Programme Manager in the Strategy and Planning team.

Are there any other tools/strategies for the validation of data to ensure that information is correct?

We are employing a number of strategies to ensure the data collected is as accurate and representative as possible. We will provide all Primary Contacts with progress reports at appropriate intervals during the collection, so that they can review the data that is being submitted and follow-up anything that may need double-checking.

We are also actively encouraging those professional staff members responsible for completing the data collection (Respondents) to consult with colleagues directly if they are unsure about what activity allocations should be submitted.

What is the aim of the Service Effectiveness Survey?

The Service Effectiveness Survey is undertaken to seek feedback regarding key support services at the University: finance, purchasing services, human resources, information technology, marketing and student recruitment, research support, student and teaching support and facilities management. All responses to the survey are confidential, and no-one at Leeds will have access to individual feedback.

How has the survey led to administrative efficiencies within other universities that have undertaken it?

In Australia and New Zealand, where the programme has been running for longer than in the UK, universities chose to join UniForum for a variety of reasons and use the resulting information in different ways depending on their individual circumstances and objectives.

Some recent outcomes at other universities have included: programmes for the continuous improvement of service delivery; business case support for investment in systems; and skills upgrades for service delivery teams.

What happened with the data that was collected in 2015?

Data from the 2015 collection was provided to senior managers within the University. This has provided insight into how professional services are resourced at Leeds and how we compare to other similar institutions.

This insight has helped us understand how efficient and effective our support services are. It has also helped us identify opportunities to improve end-to-end processes and identify where investments may be required.

The UniForum data is one of a number of data sets that has helped inform an evidence-based approach to the planning of the professional services that support the academic activities at Leeds. UniForum data has also been used in business cases for investments to improve services.

With more Russell Group institutions now involved, this year's collection will provide a broader basis for comparison, with more data being available which should provide even greater insight.