

**UCUBAN/HE9 14 December 2016**

## **University and College Union**

### ***Higher Education Branch Action Note***

- To** **All HE Branch Secretaries, Presidents and Chairs (Russell Group Universities only)**
- Topic** **Uniform Benchmarking**
- ACTION:** Branches are asked to consider the report below, its relevance at this time to your university, to critique any data that is being collected and reported, and consider any review proposals linked to professional support services staff roles.
- Summary** Uniform, a benchmarking exercise aimed at reviewing professional services in UK universities, is currently being piloted by private consultant firm Cubane Consulting, in 18 Russell Group universities. UCU's Academic Related, Professional Staff Committee has examined the process and has highlighted some issues and concerns it has relating to the data collection process that will feed into local staffing review proposals.
- Contact** Paul Bridge, Head of HE, ([pbridge@ucu.org.uk](mailto:pbridge@ucu.org.uk) )
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Dear Colleagues

#### **What is Uniform?**

UniForum is a benchmarking methodology developed by Cubane Consulting (Cubane), originating in Australia and New Zealand in 2009. Since 2015, it has been adopted by a group of Russell Group Universities. Currently 18 Russell Group Universities are members.

According to Cubane Consulting the aim is " *...to provide University Executive Teams with insights into their support services efficiency and effectiveness, helping make better informed strategic choices*".

Universities sign up to the UniForum process, and the results are normalised against other signed up institutions considered their peers, i.e. Russell Group in the UK.

This is achieved with a 3 stage process:

1. Benchmarking all non-academic operations at an institution, to equate cost, both staff and contracted suppliers and services.
2. Collection of normalising datasets, including information on all Academic Staff.
3. Survey of staff on effectiveness of current service provision.

Results are fed back to the University Executive team. Cubane suggest that as a result, a 3 stage response follows over 3 years:

- Year 1: Reflection on results, both on internal factors and in comparison with peers,
- Year 2: Pilot programs of change, based on results,
- Year 3: Full rollout of major changes.

Cubane advertising has described the Uniforum benchmarking process in the following way:

*“This is the first time the survey has been carried out in the UK, but different universities in Australia and New Zealand 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.”*

### **Which Russell Group universities are members of UniForum?**

The following institutions commenced the process in 2015: Glasgow, Leeds, Newcastle, Kings College London, University College London (UCL), Manchester, Birmingham, Durham, and Liverpool.

Those universities that commenced the process in this year include Oxford, Cambridge, Cardiff, London School of Economics and Queen Mary University London and the University of Southampton.

### **Main Concerns:**

The main concerns are:

- Uniforum benchmarking is creating the potential for jobs losses in professional non-academic services. It is clear that Cubane actively markets that their work leads to change;
- the data which is being collected and which will feed into review proposals can be critiqued in such a way as to lead to the conclusion that it is flawed (see data collection critique table below);
- poor professional support services planning will have long term consequences on the overall operation of an institution which will negatively impact on the work of academics and students, over time.

## Data collection critique:

There are a number of sources of data that feed into the Uniforum benchmarking exercise. The overall aim of the data collection exercise is to analyse the results in terms of how much a service costs, how much time is spent on it, how satisfied users are with the service and how the service compares to other universities delivering a similar service. Branches should request the data from their institution in order to analyse any review findings. If a request is refused then branches are encouraged to discuss with their regional officials what options they have for accessing the data.

Each dataset is listed below with a corresponding critique:

<b>Dataset</b>	<b>Critique</b>
Staff Dataset: HR Data	Whilst UCU's Bargaining and Information System (BIS) includes useful financial and staffing data it will be important for branches to request the most up to date data directly from their institution.
Staff Dataset: Time Allocation	<p>Managers are required to provide a percentage time allocation to activities for every person listed in their area. Such an exercise reviews current staffing and would not be capable of identifying the gaps in terms of more support required for academics to work to their core tasks.</p> <p>Task with less than a 10% allocation are not included in the analysis which could potentially lead to a downgrading of roles.</p>
Supplier Data	Supplier data feeds into how a service is costed. This includes everything from buildings and maintenance and external and internal suppliers. Including all this data could potentially blow costs out of proportion and lead to the conclusion that a service is not cost effective.
Normalising data	Effective benchmarking involves comparing like with like. Branches need to look at the normalising data to ensure that all factors and local circumstances that relate to a particular service are taken into account.
Service Effectiveness Survey (optional)	<p>The survey is optional and is purchased separately by the University.</p> <p>There are 2 different versions. Each have similar questions which seeks feedback on how users experience the service and how satisfied they are with it.</p> <p>The survey does not seek feedback on how services can be improved or what might be needed to improve the service from a user's point of view (staff/students).</p>

	The survey results are then analysed in light of all the other data collected eg HR data, time allocation, supplier data etc.
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### **Next Steps:**

Branches are encouraged to;

- request all relevant data set reports from management;
- to critique any data that is being collected and reported;
- consider the impact of any review proposals linked to professional support services staff roles;
- report back to Paul Bridge (Head of HE).

**Paul Bridge**  
**UCU Head of higher education**

**ACTION REQUIRED:** to consider this report, its relevance to your University and data being collected; also consider any review proposals linked to professional support services staff roles.