

Course data: making the most of your course information

Kim Catcheside

For prospective students, making the right choice of university course in the first instance is vital – this is no easy feat unless there is consistent, transparent and reliable information to compare university courses. And it's not just students who need this, it's also central to the sector as a whole, and increasingly individual institutions who require information for their own purposes – for benchmarking changes and developments, marketing and so on. Changes to the funding of higher education mean that universities are needing to respond in different ways to market forces. How they manage the information about their main product i.e. courses is central to this but many are finding the transition difficult. For the last two years Jisc has been running a programme of activity entitled 'Course data: making the most of course information' to help universities and colleges make the most of this valuable resource. Gill Ferrell has been working for Jisc on the course data programme since 2010.

Gill Ferrell

I think possibly the education sector has been behind other sectors in thinking about joining up its information and making it shareable. To give you an example, say you go into a supermarket, there are a range of products, products from all sorts of places, but you can pick something up, you know where to look for the weight, the size, what the dietary information is and you take it to the till point and it doesn't matter if you're in an international supermarket chain or your local shop, that till will be able to read the barcode, it knows what it's selling you, very very fundamental data exchange. That sort of exchange simply wasn't possible in higher education. A lot of the important information about courses was largely paper based, created multiple times for many purposes which might start with an academic designing a course, producing information about that course for quality assurance, which is useful, but in a very academic language that might then have to be re-written by a marketing department to send to use for the prospectus for marketing to students and over the years, the uses for the information has increased, but it's tended to be paper based that's duplicated in different forms rather than one source that's useable and shareable.

Kim Catcheside

Some might say that this is a case of the higher education sector behaving true to form, with a tendency for each institution to operate as an individual entity rather

than as part of an aggregated whole – education is not considered an industry after all, despite the fact that the pressure to behave like one is greater than ever. Is this the main problem or is there something inherently difficult about managing course information?

Gill Ferrell

The problems are really with data and how it's managed and the business processes around that. Imagine you've got disparate processes across a large university, departments doing their own thing in their own way, paper in filing cabinets all over the place so knowing what's the definitive version of information, can actually be quite difficult and when you're thinking about a course that will run over many years it'll change- the students that come in to year one might be different from last year's year ones. And you need a record of what's going to be offered for planning and advertising purposes, you need a record of what students are doing now so they can be correctly assessed and you need an archive of that so when students come back and ask for transcripts. So you're looking at the past present and future. When we started this programme a lot of places didn't have the business process in place to do that.

Kim Catcheside

The programme has been helping institutions share good practice in the management of course data but Jisc's particular focus is on technology. What are the technical developments that underpin this work?

Gill Ferrell

Jisc's involvement in this goes back to 2005 when people started looking at standards for exchanging course information and looking at XCRI – it's an acronym for eXchanging Course Related Information and there's been technical work dating back as long as that, at improving data exchange.

JISC could see there was a need for this kind of joining up that interoperability was going to be necessary as there were increasing range of stakeholders demands on information. It's taken a number of years for people in the sector to realise the extent of the problems.

It's hard to make XCRI sound exciting because it is just the plumbing, it is about data management and it's hard to get people fired up about it until they see the problems of poor data management and how they're losing out to competitors. But now it's a de facto standard – we've got 63 institutions who've been experimenting with it and found considerable benefits in doing so.

Kim Catcheside

Elaine Garcia from Plymouth College of Art who has been working on the course data programme explained to me a little more about what XCRI is and what it does.

Elaine Garcia

It stands for creating course information so the idea is that it's an auto discoverable feed that lives on the internet so that anybody that wants to find some course information related to an institution will be able to go on to the internet and find this feed which has the timely, relevant, most up to date information about that institution's courses and because it's in the same standard for everybody they'll be able to use that in a database, put it into a website or whatever they want to do with it.

Kim Catcheside

Currently, there are 63 HE providers involved with XCRI, who have been working together to improve the management of course information and to produce these standardised data feeds that can be used both internally and externally – but this ground up approach has been, by its nature, time consuming; Central Government's Key Information Set was rapidly introduced in 2012 and all HE providers are required to provide course data as part of the Unistats website. How do the two activities relate?

Gill Ferrell

I think the timing of this programme and KIS has been a bit difficult because JISC has seen the need for this for many years, it started doing the technical underpinning and then woompf, there was a government decision and KIS had to happen very quickly and people hadn't quite finished working through some of the technical developments though, those that were ahead of the game, found that producing the key information set, or the KIS was relatively easy, others who were lagging behind a bit have struggled and in some cases have had to produce their key information set independently of these other developments that would have helped them to streamline and automate it.

Richard Puttock

It's become clear to us that students and their advisors need consistent comparable information in order to make informed decisions about what and where to study. We see that as important so that they can make sure that they are choosing the right course for them.

Kim Catcheside

Richard Puttock, Head of Data Management at the Higher Education Funding Council for England , has overall responsibility for the key information set and the Unistats website.

Richard Puttock

Now, we've been providing information for a number of years, the key information set and the revised Unistats site is our latest step in to this arena so we have taken an approach whereby we've done a lot of work with prospective students trying to work out what it is that they want to know about in terms of informing their decisions and where they look for information and we've tried to provide information they want in a place where they are likely to find it.

The key information set is something that the government were very keen on. It's evolution of work that we're already undertaking in the public information agenda and it's very much a data focused project so a lot of information in KIS is data – so it's employment rates, it's salaries, it's student satisfaction.

Kim Catcheside

Can XCRI and and XCRI CAP work with KIS?

Richard Puttock

Obviously XCRI and XCRI CAP are more qualitative in the sort of information they provide so I see the two things as running in parallel and having quite different drivers behind them. KIS has been mandated centrally and is very data focused – it's focused on hard facts and stats. I think XCRI CAP sits quite nicely alongside it – it contains more qualitative information about the course

Kim Catcheside

Tim Bolton, Vice Principal Academic at Plymouth College of Art, tells me why he sees a need for the work the College has been doing through the course data programme to complement KIS information.

Tim Bolton

Well I think the government agenda generally across education towards choice based on putting information out into the public realm we could all embrace and so that was very positive but what we know is that actually most of the measures are incredibly inaccurate or really gloss over the issues for most institutions and for most students so where the new report for instance looks at students incomes 6 months after they graduate its tremendously difficult for us to tell the longitudinal story for students original

aspirations, business plans, where they end up 5 or 6 years down the lines. You know just the issues of the kind of industries they end up being employed in so if you just narrow it down to the figure it's very difficult to tell that story and I think what we want to be able to do is to tell a far broader story about the student experience.

Kim Catcheside

Elaine Garcia is showing me the work that a range of specialist art colleges have been doing together to try and give that more comprehensive picture of the student experience in each of the various institutions.

This is the aggregator site which we've commissioned for all the creative institutions that are involved in the XCRI -CAP project so this is going to represent Falmouth university, Bournemouth Arts Institute, the Courtauld Institute and ourselves and this is going to bring all the XCRI features into one site so the idea will be that if students want to look for an art course in the UK they can go to this site they can see all of the specialist institutions and that this site will show them why it's really special to be at a small specialist arts institution.

This is about arts courses. I could see it also being applicable to arts courses or to other disciplines. So it's absolutely replicable across disciplines and it can be tailored to include other institutions.

For us a lot of the stats around NSS, how much do you earn when you leave the course, are not necessarily that applicable to art and design. Students want to know more, what are they going to be doing on the course, who's teaching them?

What sort of experience are they going to have, really intangible things. So we thought what students would really benefit from seeing was whose teaching them, what their art is like, what their experiences are and that's what we're showing

What we're trying to do is to give a 3D view to information that is currently 2D. So our students want to see the world in 3D. The Unistats information is just 2D and flat. So its adding to the Unistats its not taking away from it that's important but we want to give students a bit more.

Kim Catcheside

Joanne Cookley is a photography student at Plymouth College of Art who has been helping with the project.

Joanne Cookley

I became involved in the project as a photographer and bringing some other kind of ideas from the students as to what we could do with on the website as far as staff profiles went.

I did a lot of research into different international institutions and their staff profiles.

If you wanna be the best you need to learn from the best and how do you know you're learning from the best if there's nothing out there that tells you who you're learning from at all so I thought oh that's a really good place to start

a lot of staff brought along props and they came along and pulled random faces or things or just represented their own personality and they've all had a say whilst I took the photographs they're not necessarily wholly my vision because when you are taking you know when you are doing a photography portraiture shoot it is a contract between you and the sitter as the photographer what you don't want to do is impose anything on somebody that makes them feel uncomfortable.

If it's a more creative process, and you having put into that I think you're much more likely to engage and I think that engages the people that look at it as well.

And I suppose the teachers at the back of their minds it means that if I'm able to present myself what I'm really like, my art, perhaps I'll get students who are more engaging, even more engaging, who want to stay the course.

Kim Catcheside

As a senior manager at the college Tim Bolton finds this particularly important

Tim Bolton

As an art college we have a lot of practitioners who teach with us 2 and a half days a week or something and they then have a practice outside and they themselves see those as two entirely separate areas of their lives and therefore they don't necessarily tell us about what else is going on in the rest of their practice and this is a great way to bind those back together.

And of course it's those outside practices that students are looking for, they want to know that they are learning from somebody who does it.

And when you talk to the staff you know one of the things they'll say to you is that one of the reasons why I want this 50/50 portfolio career is because my practice helps my teaching and my teaching helps my practice but actually the two things in my life are kept so separate.

That's interesting because I hear back from students all the time that it's important to them that they're taught from someone whose successful in doing what they want to do.

Kim Catcheside

Surely, keeping this level of information up to date will take up time and effort – I'm with Elaine Garcia...

Elaine Garcia

That is the wonderful thing about this project and about the website. Through the website and throughout the project the important thing is that there is very little maintenance involved in this website because the information is coming from the XCRI-CAP feed and because that's auto generated and can be discoverable on the web. This website should be left alone and will just run and update from feeds that are being produced. Feeds are information that colleges and universities would have to produce anyway.

Kim Catcheside

Andy Youell, Director of standards and development for the Higher Education Statistics Agency is in no doubt that the adoption of consistent data standards will help HE providers make better business decisions and protect against the possibility that league tables or other published sources could misuse or misinterpret their information.

Andy Youell

The HE sector is incredibly complex and very dynamic. And the data that represents that sector is therefore also complex and dynamic. And it is very easy to analyse that data and come to a conclusion that is not true, that is not correct within that. So we need to understand how the data has been arrived at and we need to have a really in depth understanding of what that data means to stop people coming to false conclusions.

... historically a lot of the issues around data and the analysis of data have been confined or at least led by those with a sort of technical capability and that way of thinking. Increasingly people in more sort of policy and more strategic areas are starting to appreciate the value that this data stuff can bring to them and so a key part of the process is to help people make that journey from data to information ...

More and more we are seeing providers getting involved with benchmarking, getting involved in business intelligence, with analytics. And really starting to understand and exploit the value that is locked up inside their data as they move it to information and use it to drive key business decisions.

As the sector moves to a more market-based approach institutions will increasingly look for ways in which they can benchmark their performance against their competitors and find ways in which they can in presenting themselves to their potential clients find ways

in which they can differentiate themselves from their competitors and gain that competitive edge.

Kim Catcheside

So what is the future for the course data standard once the Jisc programme ends? Will we see institutions continuing to generate course data feeds so that they and others can undertake better analysis and build value-added services on top of them or will the initiative just fizzle out? Gill Ferrell...

Gill Ferrell

The programme that's been running for the last 2 years recognises that standards don't just happen by accident, or people don't always see the benefits because it is good practice – that it does need some kind of pump priming and some kind of promotion so the amount of money that Jisc was able to put into this was sufficient to get a large number of institutions interested in this and persuade them that they should some of their own resource as well into this and of course what they've really got from this is the economies of the programme, the support from Jisc and the peer support of doing it as a part of a programme with other institutions. There was a strong message that doing it collaboratively was more effective than any institution than doing it alone.

In some cases it's a bit chicken and egg – it's like being the first person to have a telephone – what use is it to you? and it's chicken and egg with the course data feeds so that once there's a lot out there, suddenly people can see the benefit of linking course information, aggregating in different ways for different markets, but there really needs to be a tipping point and a significant number of these feeds available before they become useful. That was the importance of the JISC funding and the pump priming – to get a lot of people working on this together at the same time so that we could have a critical mass of feeds at the end of the programme.

Richard Puttock

I really think it's in the sector's hands – the sector has an opportunity here to get value, to drive efficiency, by adopting this standard rather than reacting in an ad hoc way to a myriad of requests for information about the courses that they are offering.

Kim Catcheside

Richard Puttock

Richard Puttock

That would be very helpful, if institutions could join together to adopt this as a standard and become standard bearers for it, so that when they are communicating who wish to

consume their course information , they are clear that this is the way that we will provide it to you.

Kim Catcheside

If you would like more information about the Jisc course data programme or adopting the XCRI course advertising standard please visit our website www.jisc.ac.uk or email jisconair@jisc.ac.uk