Data Futures independent review

July 2024

Introduction

1. On behalf of the regulatory and funding organisations in the four UK nations, the OfS has procure an independent review of the issues with the delivery of the first phase of the Data Futures programme for the 2022-23 Student return. The review will look to identify the main issues for Jisc and providers that impacted the timely delivery of high quality data, and what lessons can be learned. The review will also provide recommendations on actions that can be taken in relation to the next phase of Data Futures including what needs to happen for confidence to be gained on any move to 'in-year' data collection.

2. The Data Futures programme was established in 2015 with the aim of reducing burden while improving the data quality. It represents the first significant change of student data systems and specifications in more than two decades. It is therefore a significant undertaking, within which we have anticipated that work is frontloaded: a significant initial transition and set up of systems, guidance and learning, followed by relatively smaller subsequent changes to deploy those new systems in ways that deliver longer term gains and burden reductions.

3. As the Designated Data Body (DDB) for England, under the provisions of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA), Jisc is responsible for collecting student data from providers to a specification and timescale agreed by the OfS (for providers in England). It is also responsible for delivering the Data Futures programme, which involves a new data collection model and, later, the submission of in-year data returns. These responsibilities were previously held by HESA but became the responsibility of Jisc when the two organisations merged and Jisc was designated, effective 4 October 2022.

4. In July 2022 we commissioned a review to understand the areas of good practice in the programme and to provide suggestions of actions in order to make improvements. Overall, the review reported that the programme had been well established and had embedded the control processes expected to deliver successful outcomes in technology-enabled change programmes. Minor areas for improvement focused on benefits realisation and business processes and transition planning. The report also highlighted, at the time, resourcing to be an ongoing issue for the programme but gave assurances that the programme was aware of this and responding. Overall, we took significant assurances from this review that the programme was on track. This was also supplemented by Jisc via engaging with providers and software suppliers.

5. The 2022-23 student collection is the first year of collection through the new format, involving substantial changes for both providers and Jisc to manage. In September 2023 it was reported that the risk in relation to provider readiness to make quality data submissions by the final sign off deadline of 20 October 2023 had increased. There were concerns from the sector that

despite good intentions, providers felt the timetable was too tight to deliver the appropriate quality of data. Further extensions were granted, as although we could see progress being made through late October and early November, that progress was variable

6. At the final closure of the collection on 12 January 2024, 300 providers had submitted and signed off a 2022-23 Student Record that is at least capable of supporting onward use in the operation of the Graduate Outcomes and National Student Surveys.

7. There has been a lot of history to the data futures programme, which is important context. As the programme has evolved there have been a number of changes of specifications and objectives. This has meant that institutions took different decisions on how and when to invest in their own data infrastructure. This was probably unclear until late in the programme.

Requirements

8. The review will look to identify the main issues for Jisc and providers that impacted a timely delivery of high quality data, and what lessons can be learned. The review will also provide recommendations on actions that can be taken in relation to the next phase of Data Futures including what needs to happen for confidence to be gained on any move to 'in-year' data collection.

9. To inform the review, the contractor will need to engage with the following stakeholders:

    a. Jisc and its statutory customers (representatives from each of the four devolved nations)

    b. provider representatives (between eight and 12 organisations)

    c. relevant government departments within each of the devolved nations

    d. other relevant stakeholders (likely one or two organisations)

    e. student records software suppliers involved in delivering Data Futures within providers.

10. The review will be overseen by a steering group. The steering group will:

    a. Monitor progress on the review and provide direction to the contractors

    b. Provide assurance the review is delivering what is expected, on time and on budget

    c. Supporting engagement with relevant stakeholders

    d. Oversee the drafting of progress reports, escalating issues to the funders and regulators.

11. The steering group will be made up of approximately ten representatives from the above stakeholder list. It is envisaged that the group will meet with the contractor three or four times.

Scope

12. The review will be expected to explore the:

    a. Programme rationale, roadmap outcomes and benefits

b. programme organisation and stakeholder relationships

c. programme governance including:

    i. funding methodology

    ii. previous assurance

    iii. sector consultations, requirements, changes, and objectives

    iv. approvals and timely decision making

    v. the tools used to monitor the programme (minimal viable product delivery, skills, resources), evaluate plans, budget, timelines and manage risks and issues and dependencies including external factors.

13. The review is expected to respond to the topics listed below (Governance, Delivery, Communications/engagement, and other areas). The questions listed are indicative and may not all need to be covered directly within the review. In all cases, we intend that the review should seek to summarise what has happened to-date, with a greater focus on drawing out any lessons that can be learned to inform future approaches.

Governance

a. How could the programme governance have been more effective such that it delivered the agreed outcomes to the agreed timeline? This includes exploring what worked well, what would have worked better and what arrangements are needed to make it work in the future.

b. How well did the programme oversight address the needs and challenges related to multiple customers and stakeholders, and multiple groups within those stakeholders (e.g., Boards and executive groups), and the need for alignment and understanding between them?

c. Did those in governance have appropriate and accurate information to understand the progress and issues? Did they understand their role(s) and escalate as appropriate?

d. What assurance, third-party, sector or other, did they have access to in order to calibrate the information they were receiving?

e. How was progress against key milestones identified, monitored and communicated to the programme board? Were contingency plans in place to be utilised in the event of key milestones being missed?

f. Were decisions about changes to scope, release of additional funding, effectively made and communicated? Did the programme board have appropriate levers to influence, prevent and resolve the issues emerging, and if so, did they use them effectively and timely?

g. What assurances were provided, by whom, and did they reflect the actual delivery of the programme?

h. To what extent did the funding and regulatory consequences of delivering the data collection influence the willingness of providers and Jisc to identify issues early and to share a full assessment of risks.

i. With hindsight, are there other approaches that may have been more effective and should be considered in the future that were not considered at the time?

j. Did Jisc have the information they needed at each of the relevant stages to complete the required work? If not, what did they not have and why?

Delivery

a. What was supposed to happen versus what actually happened? What are the reasons for these differences and how were any of these points reflected in risk assessments?

b. Were Jisc's internal project management controls and escalation channel well aligned to the needs of this work? How well did they work, and why?

c. What level of testing were statutory customers able to do at different stages? What level of testing were statutory customers able to do against resolutions of the challenges identified?

d. What level of testing were providers able to do at different stages? What level of testing were providers able to do against resolutions of the challenges identified?

e. Why did bugs materialise at point of go-live and what was the impact on providers?

f. Could anything have been done to prevent or reduce this?

g. Where planned deliverables were not achieved, were these issues identified and then communicated in an effective and timely manner to providers and funders?

h. How well designed were quality rules in practice? Where quality rules fully designed and was the monitoring of completion rates appropriate? How might this have been more effectively resolved and what assurance process should be adopted for future collections around quality rules?

i. How were assurances from software suppliers sought – given the reliance of many institutions on a small number of suppliers? What lessons can be drawn from knowledge of the suppliers of the readiness (and operating model) of their customer base?

j. What role did funders and regulators play in supporting delivery of the data collection?

k. Was this clear and does anything need to change for future collections?

l. How were any estimates of the scale of data issues, errors and warnings after running the trial phases used to inform future planning and how did they then compare with the live phase?

Communications/engagement

a. How effective were communications within and between Jisc, its statutory customers across the UK and technology partners (including the funders/regulators for IRIS, software suppliers etc), particularly about the nature and resolution of issues. To what extent did the comms approach help to resolve issues?

b. How effective were communications to providers across the UK and did they receive what they needed through the programme? Were communications timely and accessible? Did the correct people receive these directly? Was there clarity in timescales especially when things changed?

c. How did the programme assess the effectiveness of communication with providers and identify any gaps? As part of this, how effectively were communications from providers captured and addressed? Did statutory customers support effective communication about the programme with providers?

d. Were decisions about changes to scope and the release of additional funding, effectively made, and effectively communicated?

e. What support was in place for providers and was this appropriate? If so, were providers made aware of that support? If not, what else could have been done?

f. How effective were the communications of known issues such as changes and bug fixes, and related guidance?

Other questions

a. What work is outstanding that needs to be delivered?

b. Has the programme been sufficiently resourced for its scale and ambition? Have Jisc staffing estimates for workstreams proven accurate for what was actually required and, if not, how has this affected project deliverables? Were there opportunities to reprioritise and review staffing allocations, and were they taken in a timely manner? Did the available staff have the relevant skills and experience to deliver the requirements. Did providers have the correct expectations of resource needs and were they sufficiently resourced?

c. How can funders be assured that providers have the right data capability and capacity for the next phase of the programme?

d. What assumptions were made about student system set up, approaches and processes for data input and was the level of variation (and current state of manual intervention in institutions) assumed an accurate reflection in the live phase?

e. To what extent does the delivered platform solution have technical longevity? How much work needs to be revisited for longer term sustainability for the platform?

f. Is there a reasonable likelihood of the programme delivering effectively if it proceeds to in-year data collection? What would need to be in place for this to happen effectively?

g. (If not covered elsewhere) What lessons do the funders and regulators need to learn from all aspects.

h. Extensions to the contract will be considered in line with the outputs delivered to date, the value added from outstanding deliverables and the reasoning for the additional time.