

## Key Issues

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## Can You Trust Your Data?

### 15 Operational Strategies for Success in CIS

**Putting data to work in the institution means  
it is constantly checked and evaluated  
Increase the accuracy and completeness of your  
institution's CIS data by getting people to use it and  
keep it up to date**

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#### Of interest to:

Principals, Heads of Information Services, CIS Managers in further  
education.

#### **Few, if any, institutions would claim to be totally satisfied with their CIS data, yet there are ways to increase its accuracy**

We set out 15 ways in which data can be re-used time and again,  
giving more staff the opportunity to amend any inaccuracies.

#### **How many times are CIS staff asked for the same information by different departments?**

We suggest ways of linking core data for various purposes that will  
improve data quality as well as saving time and money.

#### **Is CIS data simply a means of drawing money from funding bodies or is it the source of information for decision making?**

Making the accuracy of CIS data matter to people by linking it with  
things that they see as important.

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#### Introduction

After Halton, Bilston *et al*/ how can anyone have confidence that a college's records tell the truth? In 2002 there were reports of a college having been found to be "creating" enrolments by falsely creating data records. With increased use of VLEs to support students at a distance, funding bodies need reassurance that the students enrolled actually exist.

A traditional student numbers audit is necessary, but not sufficient. It looks in only two directions – back to source and for internal consistency - but misses the Third Dimension: how much a college's data is put to work.

#### You Can't Fool All Of The People All Of The Time

If data is put to daily, routine use it will clean itself. If a decent percentage of those uses are operational it will clean itself all the more quickly. Operational use of data is when one area of the institution uses central data as a measure of control. Inaccuracies in data that is used on a daily basis by a number of teams and departments around the college will quickly be highlighted

Examples of operational applications using central data include:

- gain admission to the library only on proof of enrolment
- obtain exam entry forms only if printed from current enrolment data
- obtain student grants only on proof of attendance
- claim in-service training expenses only on proof of having completed evaluation questionnaire
- allocate consumables resources only according to proven student attendance
- obtain data for the college prospectus from the course file.

The more such systems a college has, the more trustworthy is its data, as such a college has not one auditor once a year, but a hundred knowledgeable ones every day.

#### Avoid the "My Data" Syndrome

Note that this approach negates the need for several databases each holding similar data. How many libraries, for instance, hold student data complete with addresses, separately to the main Student Record data? How many enthusiasts within academic departments or course teams create their own database of students to hold records of assignments, progress, attendance, or simply addresses for mailing labels? And where these exist, how many are secure and backed up and how many meet Data Protection requirements? Where data needs amending does it get amended in "my data" only, leaving central data out-of-date and inaccurate?

Where an institution has a policy of using central data for whole college needs, advantages soon become apparent – interlocking systems means Fred's corrected address benefits everyone else who has dealings with Fred. A lecturer's registers retrieved from central data (rather than the boot of his car) lend evidence to support asking student Jimmy to leave, and so on. Furthermore, fraud is deterred by lack of a hiding place, and ignorance is exposed and can be dealt with. A virtuous circle is generated, which can become self-sustaining.

Another path to righteousness is to study how colleges deal with bad news. The classic case, head and shoulders above all others, is student withdrawals. Traditionally, students were presumed present unless some twit blabbed. A college with robust data turns such things on

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their heads and acts upon the worst case scenario: students are withdrawn unless shown to be present.

## Operational Strategies for Success in CIS

Here are 15 example operational strategies for improving the accuracy of data with example questions to test whether they are in place and suggested answers showing both sides of the coin:-

### 1. College Information is right, even if it is wrong:

How does the college (i.e. senior management) respond if manager Fred says CIS figures are wrong?

- a) "Show me the back of your fag packet, Fred - ah yes that looks more like it..."
- b) "...then get the data corrected – we get funded on what's in there!"

### 2. College Information is open ("Ours", not "Mine"):

Can one Head of Department see another's student numbers?

- a) "It's nothing to do with anyone else what my numbers are..."
- b) "Blimey! (or equivalent) my retention rate is well below the average!"

### 3. College Information is everybody's responsibility ("Ours", not "Theirs"):

What happens if a lecturer says withdrawing a student is not his job?

- a) "Absolutely right, that's an Admin task."
- b) "He's withdrawn from a Mech course too – they'll report it..."
- c) "You'd better find another job then, we're not having Audit pick us up for falsifying figures!"

### 4. Capture clean, stay clean; capture dirty, stay dirty:

What happens if students apply to enter for an exam at the last minute but aren't enrolled?

- a) "Just turn up it will be ok..."
- b) "Here's an enrolment form, hand it in with your paper..."
- c) "Mr Jones, please explain why we've lost £2500 funding for this student over the year?"

Note: **in this case the needs of the student are paramount!** Get this one wrong and the student's entire career may be affected. But it should not have happened in the first place!

### 5. Seize the moral high ground:

Does anyone defend entering students for an exam in a subject they haven't studied?

- a) "You could go in for the stage 1 / Pitmans award too – this stage 2 course covers the same ground!"
- b) "Mr Jones, why have we paid five exam entry fees for each student for your course?"

### 6. Interlock College Information at every opportunity:

Can (not merely "may") anyone enrol on a non-existent course?

- a) "Just send the details later..."
- b) "Your course has to be approved by Academic Board and a signed form produced showing all details inc. Guided Learning Hours etc."

### 7. Tie things people care about to things they don't:

Can a lecturer claim payment for teaching without proven register evidence?

- a) "I tell you, Pat, it's money for nothing!"
- b) "Mr Jones, you've sent in a claim for teaching a cancelled course!"

### 8. Put College Information to work, affecting as many people in as many areas as possible:

Do tutors use the system to find recent absentees and contact them by phone?

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- a) "Only two of mine turned up this morning – makes life much easier..."
  - b) "Mr Jones, let's review your attendance levels and retention rates..."

**9. Run regular, frequent data hygiene checks:**

Does anyone use the system to find highest Funding earners, students on highest GLH etc.?

- a) "We're on budget, who cares?"
- b) "Without checking deeper we'd never have found this!"

**10. Invest, train, educate, stimulate, promote and enforce using College Information:**

What happens if a junior manager says "I didn't know Maths enrolments were low"?

- a) "I know, I know, this data confuses me also..."
- b) "But your figures are sent out every week!"

**11. Audit data with breadth of vision:**

Does the college examine trends, patterns and tendencies as well as technical breaches?

- a) "Where did that come from???"
- b) "There's a shift from course A to course B. I don't think we'll be offering course B next year."

**12. Generate a responsibility culture, not a blame culture:**

What happens to a manager who exposes problems then deals with them?

- a) "It's not my job – it's their fault..."
- b) "Well done Gwen, now let's look at how to avoid it happening again."

**13. Give value added, enable users to find things they didn't know or couldn't know:**

Do people use the system to find un-enrolled "visitors" to classes?

- a) September: "Graham Smith doesn't appear on my register..."
- b) June: "What do you mean he's not enrolled, he's been attending my class all year!"

**14. Make College Information "default painful":**

If a manager leaves a course's Target Numbers blank is it automatically filled with a high number?

- a) "Oh I don't need to bother with that!"
- b) "I must do that, otherwise..."

**15. No News is Bad News:**

What happens if a weekly report isn't generated? Does anyone scream and shout?

- a) "They never send us anything..."
- b) "I haven't received my retention figures – can you send me a copy?"

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