



HEI Records Management

Guidance on Managing Student Records

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Introduction

The creation and maintenance of records relating to the students of an institution are essential to:

- managing the relationship between the institution and the student;
- providing support and other services and facilities to the student;
- controlling the student's academic progress and measuring their achievement, both at the institution and subsequently;
- providing support to the student after they leave the institution.

In addition, student records contain data which the institution can aggregate and analyse to inform future strategy, planning and service provision.

The number of students in HEIs has increased rapidly in the last twenty years. An institution's relationship with an individual student has also become increasingly complex because of the range of support services institutions now provide to students and life long learning initiatives. Consequently, the volume and complexity of student records have also increased, as have the resources required to create, maintain, use, retain and dispose of them, irrespective of the format in which they are kept. Ensuring that the personal data contained in student records is controlled and managed in line with the principles of the Data Protection Act 1998 creates an additional complication.

Institutions should, therefore, establish a policy on managing student records to ensure that they are handled consistently and effectively wherever they are held and whoever holds them. This policy should ensure that:

- records relating to an individual student are complete, accurate and up to date;
- duplication of student data is deliberate rather than uncontrolled and kept to the minimum needed to support effective administration;
- records are held and stored securely to prevent unauthorised access to them;
- records relating to the academic aspects of the student's relationship with the institution are clearly segregated from those dealing with financial, disciplinary, social, support and contractual aspects of that relationship. This will enable differential retention periods to be applied to each of these to meet business and regulatory requirements.

What are student records?

Records are documents or other items which:

- contain recorded information;
- are produced or received in the initiation, conduct or completion of an activity;
- are retained as evidence of that activity, or because they have other informational value.

The recorded information may be in any form (e.g. text, image, sound) and the records may be in any medium or format.

Student records – records associated with managing the relationship between an institution and its students – can be organised into three broad categories, each of which may be additionally divided:

1. Records documenting the contractual relationship between the student and the institution
e.g. records documenting admission and enrolment, payment of tuition fees, non-academic disciplinary proceedings.
2. Records documenting the student as a learner
e.g. records documenting programmes undertaken, academic progress and performance, awards.
3. Records documenting the student as an individual and consumer of services provided by the institution
e.g. records documenting use of accommodation services, counselling services, library and IT support services, careers and employment services.

Most records in categories 1 and 3 have specific retention periods triggered by the formal end of a student's direct relationship with an institution, although the information they contain may be aggregated and analysed to provide data requested by third parties¹ or to support the institution's planning and development activities. An institution will need to retain some of the records in category 2 to provide confirmatory information to potential employers, professional bodies and associations, and to bodies which regulate entry to medical and other professions and which assess and maintain evidence of 'fitness to practise' in those professions.

Who is responsible for managing student records?

HEI organisational structures vary considerably. As a result, it is difficult to specify exactly where these responsibilities should lie in any one institution.

Responsibility for managing student records should be clearly defined and documented. It is important to define the responsibilities of staff involved in:

- managing the institution's general, contractual relationship with the student;
- managing the institution's relationship with the student as a learner;
- providing technical and personal support services to the student;

for creating, maintaining, using, retaining and disposing of records documenting those activities during the student's time at the institution.

Institutions should also designate one clear point of responsibility for maintaining complete, accurate and up to date records on every student, covering all aspects of the relationship. They should also define the minimum content of the 'core student record'² so that the institution can, if required:

- demonstrate, within the provisions of limitation statutes, that its implied contract with the student has been fulfilled;

¹ e.g. the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE), Scottish Funding Council (SFC)

² One institution's definitions of the data to be included in the 'core student record' can be found in *What Is a Student Record? A Case Study by King's College London* - Pilot project compiled for the JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) Supporting Institutional Records Management Programme) November 2003 Appendix 3 which can be found at

http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme_supporting_irm/project_studentrecord.aspx

- provide information on the student's academic performance and award(s) to potential employers³, to licensing/regulatory bodies (normally first registration only)⁴ which control entry to professions and to other organisations (e.g. those providing chartered status) as well as to the student;
- provide information on the student as an individual as a means of enabling the institution, or others acting on its behalf, to analyse and aggregate student data for planning and developing its future programmes, recruitment activities and the facilities and services required to support future students⁵.

Where and how should student records be stored?

The nature of student records and the personal information they contain demands that they should be stored in facilities and equipment ('hard copy' records) or electronic systems (digital records) which are, above all, secure and accessible only to authorised staff whose work requires them to have access. In addition, the facilities and equipment should provide:

- **adequate space** for all the records which need to be produced and retained;
- **appropriate environmental conditions** for the record media used.

Storage facilities and systems should meet the same standards irrespective of where they are located and who is responsible for managing them.

Authorised staff should maintain a record of:

- the content, format and location of all student records;
- the names and designations of all staff with access to student records, and any limitations on that access;
- student records which have been transferred to another part of the institution, particularly after the student has left;

³ Using student records to provide personal references should be limited to a maximum of 6 years after the student leaves the institution, in line with other contractual obligations. The author of a reference has a duty of care to its subject to ensure that it is both accurate and complete. The passage of time makes this problematic and, consequently, references should be limited to statements of verifiable fact

⁴ A query was raised, during the consultation phase of this project, on the requirements placed on universities by medical and other statutory registration bodies to retain records on the health and discipline of students as part of demonstrating their fitness to practise. Some published HE retention schedules include information on Fitness to Practise records in the 'core student record', though St Andrews University explains that 'State Licensing Authorities in the United States commonly ask for information...concerning former students, who are now practising in the United States'. <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/foi/recordsmanagement/Studentrecorddiscussion>

We contacted a number of UK bodies (see Attachment) about their requirements. All expected the Deans of Schools or their equivalent to provide information on fitness to practise as part of the initial process of registering UK graduates. None placed any obligation on universities to hold this information beyond the initial registration period, preferring to follow their own fitness to practise processes and procedures once registration had been completed. This would suggest that these records should be treated in the same way as records relating to student health and discipline generally and deleted in line with applicable limitation legislation and the Data Protection Act 1998.

⁵ Each individual institution should decide whether it wishes to retain core student records permanently to support wider academic and personal research. From a purely business point of view the institution need only retain records which allow it to provide a transcript showing when a student attended the institution, what courses they followed while they were there and the grades achieved, the final degree awarded and any academic distinctions achieved.

- organisations, professional bodies, statutory regulators to whom personal data relating to the student has been provided.

Student records should be stored and indexed so that they can be identified and retrieved quickly and easily.

- Paper records should be housed in durable containers which carry only an impersonal code number related to a restricted-access list or index to prevent casual, unauthorised access. These containers should be stored in locked equipment or rooms when they are not being used to ensure that the personal data they contain is protected in line with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998.
- Digital records should be uniquely identified and protected with passwords and other electronic security measures. In all cases, access should be limited to those staff who have 'a need to know'. If electronic systems are not centrally managed, designated staff should make back-up copies to prevent loss of records through accidental or intentional damage.

Whatever its format, the 'core student record' should be treated as a vital record⁶ and action taken to protect it from disaster or systems failure by copying and dispersal.

Student records will become relatively inactive once the student leaves the institution. They may then be transferred to other storage facilities or systems. At this point, duplicates of records created for administrative convenience should be destroyed so that only the designated official records survive.

Who should have access to student records?

Institutions should tightly control access to student records to prevent unauthorised use, alteration, removal or destruction of the records themselves and unauthorised disclosure of the information they contain. Only those members of staff who need them to do their work should have access to student records and, their access should be restricted to records of the direct relationship and not to the content of the whole file.

Student records contain personal data and are therefore subject to the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998, including the provision that the student, as the data subject, should be given access to personal data held, whether in digital or hard copy form. In addition, the 'core student record' as defined by the KCL study includes personal data on the student's parents which is also subject to the provisions of the Act.

How long should student records be kept?

In general, student records should be kept only for as long as is necessary to:

- fulfil and discharge the contractual obligations established between the institution and the student, including the completion of any non-academic disciplinary action;
- provide information on the academic career and achievements of the student to employers, licensing/regulatory bodies and other organisations, as well as to the student as part of their lifelong learning record;

⁶ Vital records are records which, in the event of a disaster, are *essential* to maintain business continuity by continuing or resuming operations, recreating an institution's legal and financial status and preserving the institution's rights and fulfilling its obligations to its stakeholders.

- record the activities of the student as an individual and as a consumer of student support and other institutional services as a means of managing those services and planning and developing them in the future.

The nature of the activities which give rise to these categories of records drives their retention.

- The contractual relationship between the institution and the student is subject to the same statutory limitations on action⁷ as any other contract. This will include records of disciplinary action taken against the student. The records should be disposed of accordingly. The date at which the student leaves the institution normally provides the retention 'trigger'.
- The records relating to the student as a learner need to be retained for longer than other student records. Institutions accept that they have an obligation, during a student's working life, to provide factual information on what they have studied and achieved, i.e. a Transcript⁸. The proposed lifelong learning record or progress file⁹ would also include additional data on relevant non-academic achievements and activities (e.g. voluntary work). The retention period for these records should reflect the need to fulfil this obligation over long periods of time, perhaps for the lifetime of the student. It is important to segregate these records from those relating to other aspects of the relationship so that non-academic records are not retained for unnecessarily long periods, consuming storage resources and creating potential breaches of the Data Protection Act 1998.
- Records relating to the student as an individual and as a user of student support and institutional services are relatively short term and should be retained for a short finite period once the student leaves the institution. This period should be shorter than for records relating to the wider contractual arrangements.

The KCL study proposed the development of a 'core student record' which would contain, in addition to the formal transcript, data relating to the background of the student, including parents' address and occupation, schools attended, first employment, etc. In addition to providing academic information on the individual student, KCL suggested that the availability of this data facilitates its analysis for institutional business planning and development purposes, as well as supporting subsequent academic historical, sociological and demographic research. Individual institutions should decide whether they wish to retain this data for research purposes once immediate institutional business needs have been met. In doing so they will need to take account of:

- the cost and technical difficulty of maintaining records, even in summary form, permanently;
- the security and subject access implications of retaining personal data relating to named individuals;
- the need to create and maintain finding aids so that individual records can be easily and quickly retrieved when required, particularly to meet subject access requests.

⁷ e.g. Limitation Act 1980, Prescription & Limitation (Scotland) Act 1973

⁸ The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education outlines the content of a Transcript at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressfiles/guidelines/policystatement/default.asp

⁹ For information on this see Dearing, Sir Ron. *National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education*. (The Dearing Report). 23 July 1997 and *ibid*.

How should student records be destroyed?

Student records should be destroyed in line with agreed retention periods. Destruction should be authorised by staff with appropriate authority and it should be carried out in accordance with the institution's procedures for the destruction of redundant records containing personal data.

The authority for destruction and the date of destruction should be recorded and held by the section of the institution with final responsibility for the student record.

Requirements of Professional Licensing/Regulatory Bodies

The following organisations were contacted to request information on any specific requirements that they might have for the extended retention of student records to support the registration or regulation of students entering specific professions, particularly the healthcare professions.

- The General Medical Council
- The General Dental Council
- The Nursing and Midwifery Council
- The Royal Pharmaceutical Society
- The Law Society

In each case, they responded that they give no specific advice or instructions on the retention of student records and that they assume that student records would be subject to whatever rules were applied by HEIs in the normal course of business. Those bodies regulating entry into medical professions require applicants for registration to complete a formal self-declaration that they are fit to practise. They also expect the deans of university schools providing medical, dental, nursing and other health care professional education to notify them of fitness to practise concerns about individual students at the time of first registration so that they can be assessed as part of the registration process.

A report produced for Universities UK and the Council of the Heads of Medical Schools in 2001 recommended that Universities should establish formal structures and procedures for dealing with fitness to practise issues. The question of data retention was addressed in this report. The general conclusion was that, where action was taken, the records should be treated in the same way as those relating to general disciplinary matters and retained for a minimum of 6 years. Where no action was taken, the data should be destroyed at the end of the relevant hearing. The report is available by following the link below:

[*Fitness to Practice in the Medical Profession, A Report to Universities UK and the Council of Heads of Medical Schools \(Eversheds, July 2001\)*](#)

More information about the approaches taken by individual bodies can be found by following the links below (accessed on 31st January 2007):

- **General Medical Council**
 - [Application Form – Full Registration](#)
 - [Recommendations on undergraduate medical education \(February 2003\)](#)
 - [Recommendations on General Clinical Training \(January 2005\)](#)
 - [General Medical Council Regulator Study \(March 2005\)](#)

This is a study undertaken by MORI on behalf of the GMC into the approaches taken by other regulatory bodies in connection with student health and conduct issues.

- **General Dental Council**
 - [The First Five Years, A Framework for Undergraduate Dental Education \(August 2002\)](#)
 - [Application for Registration as a Dentist \(UK Qualified\)](#)
 - [Application for Registration as a Dental Care Professional](#)
- **Nursing & Midwifery Council**
 - [NMC Guidance 06/04 *Requirements for evidence of good health and good character* Standards of proficiency for pre-registration nursing education](#)
- **Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain**
 - [Pharmacy Education Policy – Fit for the Future, Preregistration Training](#)
- **The Law Society**
 - [Student membership of The Law Society](#)

It is clear that such organisations may need to ask for information contained in a student record when following up fitness to practise concerns which are identified in the self-declaration or registration process.