

UniForum Project at Birkbeck Q and A

1. What is UniForum and what does this project involve?

UniForum is an international benchmarking programme for higher education run by Cubane Consulting. It has been developed to enable universities to compare the administration and support activities that they provide with similar institutions.

The UniForum programme involves using an 'Activity Framework' which has been developed in over 50 HEIs in the UK and further afield. The Framework is used to capture data about the distribution of support services.

The programme begins with the Activity Data Collection phase, during which staff with admin line management responsibilities in professional services and schools enter data on the activities of all administrative staff across the College over the last 12 months. This will help to identify the amount of time spent supporting different administration and support activities, as well as how much resource is contracted in to provide support services. This information is benchmarked against other higher education institutions.

The second phase of the programme explores how effective the College's administration and support services are and looks at ways in which they could be improved, for example: by reducing duplication; by devolving or centralising tasks; and by increasing or refocusing resources. In this phase, all College staff will be asked their views on the effectiveness of administration and support services through a Service Effectiveness Survey.

2. Why is Birkbeck taking part in the Uniform programme?

The College is taking part in UniForum as part of its Effective Administration Project to ensure that administration and support services are properly resourced, effective, efficient, and consistently delivered to a high quality.

The Effective Administration Project, forms one of the College's Recovery Plan projects and will also aim to reduce overall spending on administration and support.

The data collected through the UniForum programme will help the College to compare its services with other HE providers and to make decisions about the future levels of resource for our various services.

3. What are the timescales? How long does the process take?

Organisations usually take part in the UniForum programme for four years, committing to collect benchmarking data annually.

In the initial year, the Activity Data Collection part of the programme will begin with staff briefings in early July and the data collection exercise will run from 29th July – 4th September. Sense-checking will then be carried out by senior managers (4th – 13th Sep) and/or Directors (13th Sep – 11th Oct).

The second part of the programme, which includes the Service Effectiveness Survey is scheduled to take place during November.

4. Who is involved?

The programme is sponsored by Keith Harrison, the College Secretary, and led by Richard Every, Director of Strategic Programmes, and a wider project team. Staff across the College with line management responsibilities for professional and support staff will be asked to collect and submit data as part of the programme.

5. What will we learn from participating in the UniForum programme?

Birkbeck will be able to gain an accurate understanding of where administrative activities take place, including how centralised or devolved activities are and where unnecessary activity may be taking place. This will help the College to determine where it could improve, perhaps by changing processes to reduce bureaucracy or the number of times information is exchanged to get a job done.

In addition, the data will be benchmarked against 50 other universities that have taken part in the programme so far.

Birkbeck will be given data which:

- shows how our spend on a given activity compares with that of participating universities
- benchmarks, for each major administrative activity, the proportion of our resourcing that is within the central administrative function and the proportion that is distributed across academic divisions/departments and other administrative functions
- shows how our spend on staff versus external suppliers compares with other universities.

Together, this data will enable us to identify areas of lower and higher than average spend. We will then want to understand why the levels of spending differ from other similar organisations and whether a given activity is delivering good value for money.

6. What has the impact of UniForum been in other universities?

A number of universities in the UK, Australia and New Zealand have taken part in UniForum. The outcomes in these organisations have included such things as: the development of programmes for the continuous improvement of service delivery; investment in systems; and skills upgrades for service delivery teams.

7. Will UniForum result in a reduction in/centralisation of administrative support?

The aim is to ensure that administration support services are well-resourced, robust and effective. This could change the way support is provided in some areas **but this would be some way down the line and only following extensive consultation.**

8. How much time will it take me to collate data that I need to provide?

It is anticipated that respondents will need to set aside around two hours to familiarise themselves with the different activity codes and to enter the data in the online tool. Note that it could take longer than this if you line manage more than 2 or 3 people. Briefings during July explained in detail what staff need to do to complete this task.

9. Which other universities have taken part in UniForum?

A number of higher education institutions have already taken part in UniForum in the UK and abroad. In the UK, these include: Birmingham; Cambridge; Cardiff; Durham; Exeter; Glasgow; Kings College; Leeds; Liverpool; London School of Economics; Manchester; Newcastle; Oxford; Queen Mary College Oxford; Southampton; and University College London.

10. What does the UniForum Activity Data Collection phase involve?

The data collected for UniForum covers all administration and support service staff. It identifies how much time is being spent supporting different administration and support activities such as: finance and human resources management; student recruitment, marketing and support; information technology; estates and facilities management and the administration of teaching and research, as well as how much resource is contracted in to provide support services.

The data covers:

- all non-academic and non-teaching staff on payroll during the last 12 months, whatever their role or employment arrangements
- contracted services and contractors, where the service provider is supporting day-to-day operations that could be provided by in-house staff
- selected academic staff whose roles are almost exclusively administrative.

Staff with admin line management responsibilities in professional services and schools (known as Respondents) will be involved in the Activity Data Collection phase which captures data on all staff.

During the collection period, Respondents will be required to allocate staff time to activities (activity codes) for the financial year 2018/19 using a web-based data collection tool.

A separate survey of managers of contracted services - the Supplier activity collection – will also be carried out.

Senior managers (known as Primary Contacts) will provide a local review of the information supplied by Respondents in their area, and approve the data collections before they are submitted.

The processes will be managed by Birkbeck's UniForum Programme Manager.

11. What are the activity codes?

The activity codes have been developed through recording the activity of support staff in a number of HE institutions. There are around 158 activities in the tool, which are categorised under 14 functions: governance; finance; human resources; information technology; facilities management; student support and services; external engagement; teaching support; research administration; research facilities; research support; library; general administration; and complementary activities.

Primary Contacts will review and approve all data input by their Respondents before submission. This part of the review process is estimated to take around three hours overall.

12. Guidance on coding tasks

To ensure consistency of coding activity across different areas, please be aware of the following:

Line management of staff should be coded as GO03 – this is found in the Governance function of the list of codes.

Business World should be considered as a Finance and HR system and work involved with using this should be coded as such: it is not an I.T. function UNLESS you or your staff were involved in the implementation of this system.

If you log in as a “Respondent” and see a member of staff on your screen that you think you should not be conducting the coding task for, please email uniforum@bbk.ac.uk to let us know.

If you think your staff are performing activities that do not correspond to any of the existing list of codes, please email uniforum@bbk.ac.uk to let us know.

13. Will other universities be able to see Birkbeck’s data?

Only anonymised data about Birkbeck will be shared as part of the benchmarking process.

14. How will the outcome of the benchmarking process impact on job security?

Data collected on the distribution of service activities and the benchmarking data will not on its own tell us how to deliver support at Birkbeck. It will help us understand how individual activities are distributed and allow us to decide whether services are adequately resourced and provide value for money, or are under- or over-resourced. Demonstrating that Birkbeck spends more or less on an activity than other universities will not in itself mean that it needs to make changes, but it will want to understand the reason for this. Birkbeck, like any other organisation, already make judgments on value for money, but it currently does so without the benefit of good data in many cases. The UniForum programme will help it to make better-informed decisions. However, the College will want to explore ways to improve efficiency in services which are over-resourced and which do not provide value for money.

15. Will the results be shared with Professional Services staff?

Yes. Birkbeck is aiming to share as much information as possible about the programme through appropriate channels. Staff who attended briefing sessions in July 2019 on the data collection phase will be invited back in spring 2020 to be talked through what the data set is initially showing us.