

New Student Finance Service

HEI Course Database 2008/09 – Frequently Asked Questions

Business Users – Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why are these changes being brought about?

The changes to the course database are being brought about under the New Student Finance Service to enable simpler and faster communication of course information between the HEIs and the SLC. A web-service will benefit HEIs as data can be passed over quicker and easier, and any validation issues will be resolved earlier.

2. As these changes will be from May 2008, presumably you are expecting the return in January 2008 to be undertaken in the normal manner?

Yes, course information should be returned to SLC as per the current method in January 2008 for academic year 08/09. The database will go live from the end of April / beginning of May 2008 when it will become available to make ad hoc changes as required. The collection of course data via the new method will be moved forward to September 2008 for AY 09/10.

3. Do we have to change to this new system or can we continue using the CD Rom method?

Use of the current CD Rom System will cease after the normal return of course data in January/February 2008. After this every HEI will be expected to return their course information by either one of the following methods: the web services option or completion via the SLC online portal (or a combination of the two).

4. Will we have to purchase additional IT equipment?

Some HEIs may require to update their system interface to ensure compatibility with SLCs system for the Web Services option. There will be no need for additional IT equipment over and above this. Staff will require instruction on how to use both the Web Services and the Portal Screens. However instruction will be provided by SLC in due course.

5. Will HEI staff require training to use the new system?

We believe that an overall awareness of the forthcoming changes is essential at this stage in the implementation of the changes to the database. Specific training will be included as part of the overall roll-out with e-learning modules being included to ensure a thorough understanding.

6. Is there a demo model of the two systems we could see and compare before we decide on the best option for our particular institute?

We demonstrated early layouts and designs of the Web Services system at the IT Forum for HEI IT Suppliers held on the 6th November in Glasgow. This session provided more detailed information and

guidance on the Web Services Option in particular. Further communication on the SLC Online Portal method of completion will be issued in due course.

7. We are a very small institute with a limited number of courses. Which option for the completion of the return of database information would be best for us?

We believe that institutes with a smaller number of courses (say fewer than 30) may be better suited using the online portal screen method of providing their course data information to SLC. However, longer term under the New Student Finance Service it is envisaged that such reports as the Attendance Confirmation Report (ACR) and Tuition Fee Position Report (TFPR) will be issued via Web Services so this may be a consideration for HEIs in the longer term.

8. Could you please provide more information on the methodology required to submit our institute's return of information via the Portal Screens method.

SLC will be issuing further instructions on how to use and manage the portal screens in due course.

9. Which HEIs were invited to the HEI IT Planning Forum?

With over 500 HEIs across the country it would not be feasible to host a forum to accommodate every single institute. All the companies supplying IT to HEIs and their associated colleges across the country were invited to represent the institutes that they cover. We extended the invitation to the ten largest HEIs that currently manage their own IT systems in house. Further to this if any institute expressed a particularly strong desire to attend we accommodated them also. The majority of the Forum covered the Web Services option of returning the course data information. The second part of this paper covers the FAQ's that arose on the day.

10. Are there any intentions for the SLC to work closer with UCAS?

SLC and UCAS are joining the Higher Education Concordat on data sharing (a sector wide agreement to minimise the burden on HEIs). We recognise that approximately 75% of course information data is common between the requirements of SLC and UCAS, and will collaborate with UCAS to consider options whereby course information is supplied only once by HEIs for use by both organisations.

11. Will SLC be publishing feedback from the recent HEI Opinion Survey?

We have had a very good response to the HEI Opinion Survey and are currently working through the responses. Once complete we will be publishing the results via the HEI Services website.

12. Are you doing any other enhancements in connection with the HEI Course Database?

We envisage a rolling programme of enhancements from September 2008 onwards in connection with the course database that will be communicated to all HEIs in due course.

Technical Section - Frequently Asked Questions

1. Should some high level 'requirements document' be issued to the HEIs / IT Suppliers outlining how the Student Loans Company think their portal screen system may function?

Further information and guidance on how to use both methods of data provision will be issued to all HEIs in due course. Product Specifications on both the Web Services system and the SLC's Online Portal Screens will be issued via email once available.

2. How will any changes to the Technical Specification for the implementation of the changes be communicated out efficiently and effectively to the HEIs and the HEI IT Suppliers?

All updates to Technical Specifications along with any other relevant documentation in relation to the HEI Course Database changes will be sent via email to the named primary point of contact at each HEI and IT Supplier already established. Further to this, all relevant information to the changes to the course database will be posted on the New Student Finance page of the HEI Services website (www.heinfo.slc.co.uk). The most recent Technical Specification will always be available on this website: this may be worth communicating round all relevant parties within each HEI in the event that the primary contact point has for whatever reason not circulated any information sent from the SLC.

3. It was mentioned in the course database presentation that the expectation is for the 3rd party testing environment to become available one month prior to the system go-live date. Does this give enough time to ensure that all issues can be adequately identified and addressed?

It is currently perceived that the 3rd party testing environment will be available at least one month prior to the 'go-live' date. It should be highlighted that the expectation of SLC is that not every HEI is expected to be ready for the live date and the testing environment will be available past the initial go live date increasing the window for testing. SLC should be notified of all issues identified within the 3rd party testing period to ensure resolution.

4. Can more information be provided on the roll-out of the Web Services and how SLC expects training on the new system will be carried out?

We are of the belief that an overall awareness of ongoing developments is key to ensuring an in-depth understanding of the changes. A complete User Guide and eLearning Modules will be issued along with further training updates as and when necessary during roll out of the new service.

5. What are the different features of Oracle 9i v 10g and does this make a difference to the development path?

SLC has no governance on 3rd party solutions of HEIs in terms of what specific software they should be using and therefore we cannot directly advise on which systems HEIs should use. With reference to the Oracle systems mentioned in the original question both types will satisfactorily comply with the Web Service system for the course database.

6. When will the online portal screens become available?

This has been scheduled to become available from the end of April / beginning of May 2008.

7. When using the new 'get information system' will this be blank year on year or does the information roll-over continuously?

The information will roll over each academic year. This has been designed to work exactly the same as the current CD Rom.

8. Is there a 'freeze point' for the course data that is provided (i.e. does it have a specific time frame when the information is no longer able to update)?

With the new method HEIs can provide their data by piecemeal, but to do this they need the ability within their system(s) to indicate which courses are ready to be promoted to live. Updates can be made to course data at any time (as long as it's not live) and in line with the current assessment cycle. In terms of updates, the new course database will be equally capable of updating 200 changes simultaneously as it would with updating one solitary course change. If an HEI requires to make a change to live course data the existing business process remains unchanged. HEIs & supplier organisations should be aware should be aware that as it is not necessary to provide all course data at the same time, they must ensure their systems have the functionality to indicate which courses are to be promoted to live.

9. If a particular course is being closed but the HEI does not inform the SLC how will the SLC team become aware of this?

There is still an obligation on the HEI to inform SLC of courses being closed in the same manner as before. It is important to remember that although there are large changes in terms of the way in which course data is provided from the HEIs, the actual information that SLC require is no different to what was provided via the CD Rom.

10. Can users shut out courses to any new applicants when the situation arises that the course is still live but fully subscribed by students and there are no places left?

This is not currently possible as the Student Finance Service has no method of knowing which students have been offered places on their courses and students are free to apply for finance at any given time.

11. HEIs are required to send the main HESA Student Record each December in composite files in XML format; this could potentially be a technical implementation risk. Further can the SLC advise on XML training?

The timings involved would suggest that there would be no direct conflict of interest between the HESA return and the provision of the course data. We recognise that XML is a growing 'language of choice' but due to the number of XML training packages available we cannot directly advise on which option HEIs should opt for.

12. Can you clarify the delivery dates for the Fees Attendance Confirmation Reports moving to Web Services in line with the Course Database changes?

The interim solution (i.e. web service with web interface and on-line solutions) has a targeted delivery date of November 2009. A full solution will be delivered in July 2010. Details can be found on the HEI Services Stakeholder Engagement Presentation which is on the HEI Services website (www.heinfo.slc.co.uk).