



# **DEVELOPING RECORDS MANAGEMENT IN FURTHER EDUCATION**

**Responding to the requirements of the  
Freedom of Information Act 2000**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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As part of the JISC national programme, Supporting Institutional Records Management, a team from the Information Management Research Institute at Northumbria University was commissioned from April to December 2003 to investigate and support the development of records management and the process of achieving compliance with the Freedom of Information (FoI) Act 2000 in Further Education colleges in the Northern Region. The project aimed to establish how realistic it is to apply the Model Action Plan (MAP) (JISC, 2002a), to uncover difficulties and obstacles to compliance and identify alternative methods of achieving compliance. It also aimed to combine practical support and awareness-raising with qualitative fieldwork designed to help understand the perspectives of college staff and their preparations for FoI. Between April and October, 15 colleges large and small were visited, and 47 interviews *conducted with 56 staff*.

Key findings included:

- despite JISC mailshots to Principals, colleges were not initially well-informed of the requirements of the Act and of the documents, including the MAP and the draft Model Publication Scheme (JISC, 2003a), available to help them (Section 1.2)
- colleges were generally confident of the quality of their management of well-audited central records, including personnel, finance and student records, but less sure of what else was being held throughout the college (Section 2.1)
- in some colleges, investigation of the requirements of FoI and preparation for compliance were being handled by just one or two staff; in others, a team meeting of those responsible for key records had been the starting point (Section 2.2.1)
- while co-ordination of the management of corporate information appeared easier to achieve in small colleges, most felt they had room for improvement. Several highlighted other initiatives, such as development of their intranet, structures for compliance with data protection legislation or improvements to control of their electronic data, which were tending to improve co-ordination (Section 2.2.2)
- roles and responsibilities had not always been allocated, but only one college planned to appoint a records manager, four planned to adopt a team approach, and the other ten planned to give FoI as an additional responsibility to someone in post (Section 2.2.3)
- only one college had a records management policy statement prior to 2003, but all the others were planning to develop one, using the model in the MAP (Section 2.2.4)
- some planning for training and awareness for all staff was underway: the need for awareness-raising for FoI was widely recognised, but there was less consensus about the need for general records management training (Section 2.2.5)

- most colleges could identify ways in which their records creation, maintenance and disposal could be improved, and were planning to make changes in 2004 (Section 2.2.6)
- considering deadlines for December 2003 in the MAP (JISC, 2002a p.8), most interviewees felt the first three actions relating to the records management function could be achieved, but there was considerable concern about availability of adequate resources (Section 2.3.1)
- strategic responsibility for the records management function had been allocated in each college, but there was still some uncertainty about arrangements at operational level, particularly in smaller colleges adopting a team approach (Section 2.3.2)
- although the senior staff member taking overall responsibility for FoI preparations was identified, in some colleges it was not yet clear where the responsibility for the operational role of putting together the publication scheme would lie (Section 2.3.3)
- the most frequently raised concerns about FoI were about costs (financial and staff time); understanding the requirements and implications of FoI; and ensuring that all staff would see records management as a priority (Section 2.4)
- having concerns about implementation of FoI did not prevent some college managers from seeing the potential benefits of improved records management, although they did not always have time to take full advantage of this potential (Section 2.4)
- the MAP, model publication scheme and JISC case studies (JISC, 2003b) were welcomed as helpful to colleges preparing for FoI (Section 2.5)
- both at strategic and operational level, further support and guidance will be needed in the year ahead and after the Act becomes law in January 2005. (Section 2.5)

In conclusion, although the MAP appears to have been found useful in preparation for compliance with FoI so far, it is not yet clear whether colleges which have used the MAP will achieve full compliance in 2005 more easily than those which have not. Colleges face ongoing difficulties in resourcing their preparations, and anticipate difficulties in raising awareness of FoI and records management amongst all staff. Where external assistance will be helpful is in raising knowledge and skills in records management for those leading the preparations, and in providing tools, models and checklists. No alternative methods of achieving compliance were found, and although several key differences between colleges and their approaches to FoI were identified, none of these factors has proved critical to success so far. Most colleges still have a lot of work to do before January 2005.

Finally, the following questions are offered for consideration by JISC and any others supporting colleges in their preparations for compliance:

1. The MAP and other models have proved useful to those who discovered them in time. What more could be done in future to ensure that such tools are brought to the attention of those who could benefit? Although some MAP deadlines have now passed, is there value in reissuing a checklist of the action points, or even a 'fast-track' approach for late starters?
2. What additional models and tools can be provided to help the work which lies ahead in 2004: electronic records management training packages, retention schedules, such as those in the lifecycle study (JISC, 2003c), adapted for further education colleges, model documents for setting up a system to handle FoI queries in future?
3. Those managing change in colleges in preparation for FoI have appreciated opportunities to network, sharing ideas and experiences with their opposite numbers. How can this networking be supported in 2004 and beyond, as these people may face on-going difficulties in awareness-raising and gaining commitment of colleagues to improving records management?