

Letter from the Minister for Higher and Further Education to the Education, Children and Young People Committee, 20 March 2026

Dear Convener,

In the Committee's Widening Access to higher education inquiry report, published on 15 May 2025, the Committee recommended that the Scottish Government commits to implementing a Unique Learner Number (ULN) and outlines how this can be achieved.

As a new Minister to this portfolio, I subsequently committed to considering this issue afresh on 4 December 2025 at the debate on the findings of the inquiry. Following my further consideration of this work I am writing today with an update.

I am very conscious of the need to address a number of important issues that have been raised with me by various stakeholders and covered in the Committee's report. These include data linkage, tracking of learning journeys and better identification of individual learners throughout the system.

A ULN is often proposed as a solution to many of these problems, although it is perhaps important to note that there is no one singular conception of a ULN. A ULN often means different things to different people and part of the challenge to date has been to understand what exactly a system would look like if it were to achieve the range of desired outcomes called for by stakeholders over the years.

To provide clarity on how we have attempted to address that, it may be helpful if I begin by providing a brief overview of how a ULN has been conceptualised. The common understanding is that a ULN would be a unique identifier allocated to each individual at some point in their life – ranging from birth to some point in their school years – and which would follow them through their educational journey. This would then provide several analytical and/or operational benefits to a number of different parties or organisations.

For example, suggestions have been made around operational use, e.g. a learner using their ULN to access all of their qualifications via an online system, or an admissions staff member at a university searching a database to understand the equalities or widening access characteristics of an individual in order to make an admissions decision. Other suggestions which focus on analytical purposes include public sector organisations or universities being able to track an individual throughout various parts of the education system to understand their journey or being able to evaluate the impact of particular access programmes in which they have participated.

Work on a ULN to date

I now want to focus briefly on the work that has been carried out on a ULN so far by the Scottish Government.

Following the Commission on Widening Access recommending that a single student identifier be introduced in its 2016 report, the Scottish Government undertook work to

scope whether any existing identifiers could be expanded to meet this objective. Initial work focussed on an expansion of the Scottish Candidate Number (SCN) which was already widely used across education settings. However, detailed work was not completed and was subsequently deprioritised due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Expanding the use of the SCN has since become more problematic due to [advice](#) from the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) around the use of SCN without additional steps to anonymise the identifier further. The ICO have been helpful in offering to discuss further work on the ULN and we will continue to maintain dialogue around the suitability of SCN as one indicator.

I appreciate that in recent months, there has been a renewed focus on the potential benefits of a ULN, and my officials have undertaken further exploratory work as a result. As part of this work, my officials undertook to learn more about the ULN in place in the rest of the UK, run via the Department for Education's Learning Records Service (LRS). The UK ULN, while having run successfully for a number of years, is more limited in scope than the ULN which has been called for in Scotland and would therefore potentially not meet some of the requirements the calls are premised on. It is allocated to pupils at the age of 14 and is primarily used to share GCSE results with colleges, with no other stage of education currently featuring in the LRS.

Additionally, the cost to set up and manage the UK ULN and LRS are significant, with an initial outlay of upwards of £5million and ongoing costs of around £2million annually to run. Any system which coordinates credentials and technical systems of this kind requires particular data and IT expertise as well as ongoing customer support and maintenance.

There would also be significant data protection implications arising from the expansion of other individual identifiers, which have been created for a specific purpose, and which would therefore require further exploration and careful consideration. This is particularly sensitive in the context that these identifiers involve the recording and sharing of sensitive data relating to children and young people.

Next steps

Having considered afresh the work undertaken on a ULN, both in previous years and during my tenure as Minister for Higher and Further Education, I can now set out my views on next steps.

Given the potential impact of this work, including the scope for significant new funding requirements, I am of the view that further decisions are for the next administration to take. I am, however, setting out my consideration of this issue and the immediate actions I have asked my officials to set in train over the coming months.

In light of the options considered; I have therefore commissioned my officials to undertake the following work in order that they can present the findings to incoming Ministers:

- To continue to explore, by the summer period, existing identifiers and whether any of these could be expanded;

- To produce a report outlining the good work we are already undertaking to analyse and understand learner journeys and outcomes, including use of the Skills Development Scotland (SDS) Participation Portal and the Scottish Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data, and what improvements we can make to these linked datasets to provide outputs that meet our need;
- To carry out external engagement with relevant stakeholders over the summer period to better understand the outcomes they envisage a ULN would deliver, and the extent to which these could be achieved through the expansion of existing identifiers or datasets; and
- To continue to engage with the ICO to ensure any proposals are compliant with data protection legislation, particularly in the context that unique identifiers involve the recording and sharing of sensitive data relating to children and young people.

My expectation would be that an update will be provided to the Committee following the summer recess on the above.

For clarity and completeness, therefore, with reference to all of the above, the Scottish Government is not minded, at this time, to pursue the creation of a new, specific ULN, for the reasons set out below:

- From discussions with the Department for Education, we know that this would be a high-cost, multi-million-pound undertaking which would require new systems and ongoing management and maintenance. When considering appropriate use of public funds this does not seem to be a value-for-money option at this time.
- Additionally, given the wide range of identifiers already allocated to individuals it does not seem helpful to generate a new identifier to add to an already complex and muddy landscape.
- A ULN in and of itself, without linking to additional datasets, is not particularly useful. There is potential to expand and better link datasets without the creation of a ULN. This work may bring us closer to achieving the intended outcomes of a ULN but this will only become clear once further work is undertaken.

However, I hope you will welcome the work I have commissioned officials to undertake – I have had a constructive discussion about this with the Commissioner for Fair Access.

I thank you and the rest of the Committee members for all your work on this issue.

Yours sincerely,

Ben Macpherson MSP
Minister for Higher and Further Education