

MAKE YOUR PLANNING WINDOW COUNT:  
**HOW HR AND PAYROLL  
CAN SUPPORT STRATEGIC  
CHANGE IN THE NEW  
ACADEMIC YEAR**



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The weeks before the autumn term are your last, best chance to fix the issues that slow your teams down all year. Discover how HR and payroll leaders in higher education are using this period to streamline processes, reduce risk and start the new academic cycle fully prepared.

## SECTION 1

# CAPITALISING ON YOUR PLANNING WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

As teaching winds down and assessment begins, higher education HR teams like yours start the real work: delivering projects that will shape the coming academic year. It's all in the planning. During this critical time, the decisions you make – from preparing for regulatory changes to identifying skills shortages and building flexible staffing models – determine how confidently your institution can respond to next year's demands.

This period isn't just about risk management. It's also a rare opportunity to unlock meaningful operational gains, including:

- **Recovering time** by removing manual processes and reducing administrative load
- **Reducing costs** through more accurate forecasting and streamlined workflows
- **Strengthening continuity** across HR, payroll and workforce planning
- **Improving staff and student experiences** through clearer communication and fewer errors

Institutions that have modernised their HR and payroll systems – moving away from manual processes and legacy on-premises set-ups – are already seeing the difference. With automated reporting, real-time calculations and upgrades delivered seamlessly out of hours, they're:

- **Eliminating downtime**
- **Accelerating payroll cycles**
- **Freeing up hundreds of hours** that can be reinvested in strategic work rather than constant firefighting

## SECTION 2

# MOUNTING PRESSURES MEAN MODERNISATION IS A MUST

The changing nature of higher education institutions – how they deliver education and what students as well as staff expect – is pushing HR to evolve from an administrative back-office function into a real-time, data-driven, intelligence-led engine for workforce decisions.

Tightening budgets, unpredictable domestic student numbers, the need to recruit more international students to plug income shortfalls, and the growing reliance on casual, seasonal and hourly paid staff – all these challenges create complexity for HR and payroll teams at a time when resources are already stretched.

→ **Financial and cost pressures**

Higher-education institutions are facing rising employer National Insurance contributions, increasing financial complexity, as well as the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on staff. HR teams have to do more with less, while also managing the operational implications of tighter budgets. With spending required in other strategic areas, operational costs must come down, placing additional pressure on HR and payroll to streamline processes and drive efficiency. Automating manual work, improving cost visibility and reducing payroll errors helps teams work efficiently within tighter budgets.

→ **Workforce agility and flexible staffing**

Universities have highly cyclical staffing needs, with exam periods, term times and seasonal peaks requiring a sharp rise in workforce capacity. Managing large volumes of transient, fixed-term or hourly-paid staff adds significant administrative burden for HR and payroll teams. Complexity increases further when individuals have multiple roles or contracts, making accuracy, coordination and compliance more challenging. Teams need systems that are designed with the higher-education sector in mind, which support complex pensions and academic-specific contract structures.



→ **Wellbeing and retention issues**

Education is a sector well-known for its retention issues, where stress is high and burnout common. Performance pressures, job insecurity and shifting expectations all take their toll. HR and payroll are central in supporting staff wellbeing – from ensuring timely, accurate pay to delivering recognition, reward and the operational stability that creates a positive employee experience. This increasingly means providing earned wage access, financial education and insight-driven analytics that strengthen support, reduce financial stress and improve retention.

→ **Compliance and audit complexity**

Compliance requirements continue to evolve in higher education, and the process involved in maintaining audit-ready records are time-consuming but essential. High levels of safeguarding and regulatory scrutiny demand a clear, accurate and accessible HR and payroll paper trail. Ensuring data integrity, consistency and transparency is critical to meeting institutional and statutory obligations, with compliance built-in through automated checks for right-to-work, visa tracking, pensions, National Minimum Wage and audit-ready reporting.

## THE OPERATIONAL REALITY

These pressures show up in very real operational ways. Certain events – from organisational change to shifts in workforce composition or sector-wide pay updates – can amplify the strain on HR and payroll teams. During Transfer of Undertakings – Protection of Employment (TUPE) transfers or mergers, for example the King's College London and Cranfield University merger, teams must reconcile legacy contracts, identify inconsistencies and support staff through periods of uncertainty. As the casualised workforce grows, accuracy and transparency become even more important for managing sessional and hourly-paid staff. And when wider regulatory or pension changes take effect, institutions need instant clarity on their impact.



## TOP-THREE WAYS INTELLIGENT PLATFORMS SUPPORT HR AND PAYROLL TEAMS

**1 Modern automated systems** can instantly detect anomalies and provide clear, personalised explanations of pay, roles and deductions, giving transferred colleagues reassurance and significantly reducing onboarding-related queries.

**2 Advanced modelling** helps institutions understand downstream cost and compliance impact of sector-wide changes. Complex adjustments, including back-pay calculations, can be broken down clearly for staff, preventing confusion and avoiding the query spike that typically accompanies these events.

**3 AI-driven validation** ensures variable and hourly pay is correct at scale, while instant explanations of hours, rates and payments dramatically cut the number of payroll queries from transient staff groups.


The shift towards more strategic, insight-led HR is imperative. Institutions need the ability to plan, analyse and predict with confidence, but fragmented, outdated, disconnected HR systems make this far harder than it should be. The reality is that modernisation is almost impossible during the academic year, when HR, payroll and IT teams are already stretched and can't absorb the disruption of major system changes. The quieter period before the new academic cycle is therefore one of the few times when institutions can upgrade their platforms, embed new capabilities and give teams the time they need to familiarise themselves with modern tools and integrate them into their working days.

## SECTION 3

# PUTTING TECHNOLOGY TO WORK IN THE PLANNING WINDOW

As lectures come to an end, exams begin and summer edges closer, the daily workload of people teams shifts. Attention turns to laying the groundwork for successful HR and payroll in the year ahead. As our customers know, technology is the engine of this – enabling teams to rethink how they operate and support staff and students smarter in the coming year. So, what are their major priorities at this point in the year?

- **Gaining visibility of data.** In a tough financial climate, usable data is essential to drive operational improvements that reduce costs and free up budget for transformation programmes.
- **Making payroll real time.** Real-time payroll gives staff access to their earnings as they accrue them and simplifies the handling of complex pay scenarios, including contract, temporary and hourly-paid staff.
- **Implementing automation and AI.** With limited routes to growth for higher-education institutions, productivity gains and overhead reductions are vital. As HR and payroll teams look to increase efficiency and cut costs, automation and AI are their key tools, allowing them to speed up admin and liberate staff for higher value work.
- **Building a strategic, flexible staffing plan.** Using data to understand workforce needs and costs – from hourly-paid to teaching-only roles to casual and student workers – helps institutions identify gaps from the past year and shape a resilient workforce plan for the year ahead.



Many institutions have already taken these steps, moving from strategic intent to practical change before the autumn term begins.

The following examples highlight how universities are modernising their HR and payroll operations to work smarter in the new academic year.



## THE UNIVERSITY OF LINCOLN (UOL) USES CRITICAL PLANNING TIME TO IMPROVE PAYROLL EFFICIENCY AND IMPLEMENT AUTOMATION TOOLS

**PROFILE: 17,500 STUDENTS; 1,900 STAFF**

When teaching is in full swing, there's limited time for UoL HR and payroll staff to put new ideas into action. But Claire Kennedy, Head of Reward and Recognition, had big plans to improve operations. Priorities included automating complex, manual payroll processes, including handling core and contract staff, to increase efficiency and better support staff. An additional challenge was the need to change employees' mindsets around automation tools as a positive factor, helping boost productivity and assist in daily work. The time UoL had in the planning window meant it could roll out Zellis HCM Air to make payroll faster and more accurate. Now, there's no longer a huge backlog of claims for temporary workers and associate lecturers, and year-end payroll takes half a day rather than nearly a week. With the time to focus on implementation and enable a cultural shift, automation tools have been incorporated successfully, meaning Kennedy and her team can focus on the roadmap for the future.



With automation, you can't just load it up and go – you need to time implement the tools, understand them and ensure people know how to use them.

Rich Battenbough,  
Head of People System and Data,  
University of Lincoln



Running payroll is a lot quicker now. For example, we don't have to raise emergency payments outside of the payroll because a starter's been missed.

Claire Kennedy,  
Head of Reward and Recognition,  
University of Lincoln



Real-time payroll has been the biggest contributor to our transformation. Whenever I walk into the payroll room, everyone seems happy, so it must be working.

Rich Battenbough,  
Head of People System and Data,  
University of Lincoln



## HOW THE UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA (UEA) PLANNED FOR HR AND PAYROLL MODERNISATION

**PROFILE: 18,000 STUDENTS; 3,600 STAFF**

A globally recognised centre of research with a 360-acre campus housing 26 specialised schools, 18,000 students and 3,600 staff – running a university of this scale is no small feat for Linda Cole’s people team. “The need to modernise processes and technology to underpin our future ambitions,” was the People and Culture Division Associate Director’s priority when she took over the position in 2023. There were several challenges to address under this banner – from manual processes and siloed data to disparate reporting and a patchwork infrastructure. Plus, the requirement to entirely rethink HR’s role in delivering services in the medium and long term to align with and deliver on UEA’s wider vision. All of which required Cole

to step back and view the bigger picture. Using the time before the autumn term was critical for getting the HR team on track, implementing and setting up systems, and showing HR and payroll staff how digital capabilities can improve their experience as well as deliver a better service to employees across the university. The results of Cole’s careful planning have seen her department reduce several manual HR and payroll processes, increase employee access to key HR information and strengthen performance management. More importantly, it has put the team on the “front foot,” so it can now make the most of software and unlock the possibilities of automation.

We don’t want to be left behind – we’ve been there before where everything has moved on without us and we’re still running to catch up. We’d like to be on the front foot with that as much as possible. I’m excited about what the future holds.

Linda Cole,  
Associate Director,  
People and Culture Division,  
University of East Anglia

It’s not just about saving time – it’s about improving the experience for staff and supporting a culture of clarity and accountability.

Linda Cole,  
Associate Director,  
People and Culture Division,  
University of East Anglia



## A LONDON UNIVERSITY SEIZES THE OPPORTUNITY TO TRANSFORM

**PROFILE: 9,000 STUDENTS; 2,000 STAFF**

As the term starts winding down for a busy, London-based university, its HR and payroll leader knows it's time to work on the projects that will set it on the right course come September. "Last year, we failed to deliver a long-planned overhaul of payroll for our most complex groups, including casual, hourly-paid and sessional lecturers. We don't want to make the same mistake this year," says the university's People Lead. The difficulty is that during term time, there's little capacity for realising transformational ambitions. For the university, this was compounded by recruitment freezes but no reduction in workload. Regulatory obligations continued and the usual firefighting of restructurings, back-pay calculations, pension queries and

compliance reporting. Moving from reactive issue management to proactive planning is taking priority this year. "We want to achieve a genuinely integrated HR and payroll data environment," says the People Lead. "Payroll accuracy has become a visible institutional risk – if we don't take the time to address it, our reputation will suffer." So as the team heads into summer, it aims to build a system that delivers one source of the truth, reflecting how the university operates today. "An integrated system will give us real-time visibility of workforce costs, compliance risks and pay anomalies across faculties, campuses and departments. Among other things, this will lessen the firefighting we're required to do in the new academic year."



In term time, every week brings another immediate demand. Transformation feels risky and workarounds feel safer.

People Lead,  
London-based university



Our single greatest threat is the relentless, unpredictable reprioritisation that defines working in UK higher education. Even a well-resourced plan can be derailed overnight. It's essential that we ring-fence capacity and budget to deliver on our roadmap.

People Lead,  
London-based university



## FIVE STEPS TO STRENGTHEN HR AND PAYROLL AHEAD OF THE NEW ACADEMIC YEAR

**1** Establish HR's role in delivering your institution's priorities and ensure your transformation projects are aligned with wider strategy.

**2** Prepare for new employment legislation and regulatory changes.

**3** Strengthen wellbeing initiatives to build resilience and reduce churn during the new academic year.

**4** Build an agile staffing model that supports fluctuating demand.

**5** Integrate your HR systems to improve data quality and support strategic workforce planning.

# FIX WHAT'S SLOWING YOU DOWN BEFORE AUTUMN COMES AROUND

Zellis helps higher-education organisations move beyond today's operational constraints, giving them greater clarity, accuracy and control. With more than 60 years of payroll expertise and deep sector knowledge, we enable institutions to modernise with confidence. Our real-time payroll engine, Power BI analytics integration, secure Azure hosting and open architecture seamlessly interoperate to create a more connected, resilient HR and payroll environment. With Zellis, your teams gain the flexibility and insight to support your institution effectively and prepare for what comes next.





# YOUR NEXT STEP...

If you're a higher education HR and payroll leader looking to make the most of your planning window, find out how Zellis can help you.

**Discover more at [Zellis.com](http://Zellis.com)**

For more information,  
visit [www.zellis.com](http://www.zellis.com)

UNLIMIT  
WHAT'S  
NEXT 

