

Department for Education and Skills

Report on Stakeholder Views for a Unique
Learner Number

30 April 2003

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Client Confidential

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1. SUMMARY OF VIEWS

1.1 CONSULTING STAKEHOLDERS

The consultation exercise has sought the views of a very wide range of stakeholders across the learning and skills sector:

- ? The study has interviewed and held focus group sessions with learners in FE and HE
- ? The study has sought the views of providers throughout the 'learning lifetime' starting with sixth forms and including FE colleges, HEIs, private and work based learning providers, employers as providers, and distance and e-learning providers, including the University for Industry
- ? The study has included 'learning infrastructure' stakeholders, those who plan provision and provide supporting services for students or providers and regulate learning:
 - ? Learner service providers, such as UCAS, Student Loans Company and LEAs
 - ? Providers of support services, notably HESA and also the DfES ASD
 - ? Providers of guidance and advice, including Connexions partnerships
 - ? Exam boards and the views of the Joint Council
- ? The study has interviewed education and skills policy officials and organisations that fund learning, including HEFCE, ELWa and the LSC
- ? The study has sought the views of employers and employer groups.

1.2 THERE IS STRONG SUPPORT

There is almost universal support for the concepts and benefits of a ULN. Stakeholders readily distinguish between 2 possible concepts for a ULN:

- ? The use of an identifier for administrative and management information purposes, which would enable improvements through the sharing of a common identifier across the boundaries of the different education and skills sectors
- ? The use of a ULN, in addition to the administrative role, as the key to a record of learning and achievement. The record of learning would provide a central or apparently central repository of achievement data that could be accessed by learners and providers and provide a ready source of analytical and planning data.

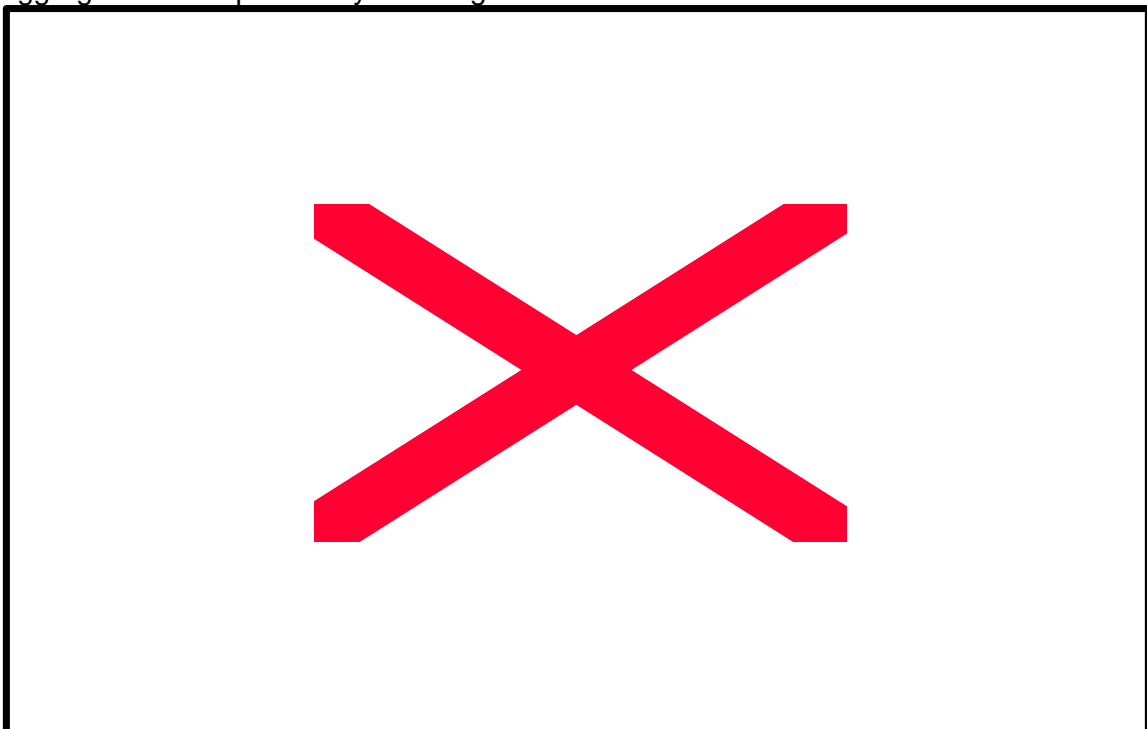
There are some exceptions to the support. In general, the strength of support grows the further away the organisation is from provision. Learners and providers do see benefits, but the organisations that use learner information to support, plan the provision or assess the effectiveness of delivery see the strongest benefits. The exception is employers. Discussions with employers' organisations and with employers have suggested that, in general, employers do not see the need for a ULN.

1.3 STAKEHOLDERS SEE FIVE CATEGORIES OF BENEFIT

The benefits expected from a ULN fall into five categories:

- ? **Administrative savings**, realisable from the reduction in identifiers in use in education and learning so that administrative processes, such as applications, admissions, enrolments and registering for exams is made simpler
- ? **Fraud and error reduction** by reducing or avoiding double counting and incorrect or fraudulent payments
- ? **The availability of longitudinal data** for policy formulation and evaluation, by enabling records in reports to be matched more effectively so that a statistical and management information view of progression and outcomes can be created
- ? **Enabling records of learning**, by providing the key on which learner data for progression, achievement and even aspirations can be pulled together to create a central or apparently central comprehensive record that can be accessed by learners as well as users of learning management information
- ? **Enabling joined up government** support for learners, including joint cooperation for meeting learner needs (e.g. Connexions and the YJB working together to meet their joint target for Young Offenders being in education, training or employment; the joined up delivery of student financial support; e-delivery of services).

This report describes the views of the stakeholders with regard to the potential for the ULN to deliver these benefits, while also discussing the concerns and issues that the stakeholders have. The figure below illustrates the level of benefits that stakeholders in aggregate see as potentially accruing from a ULN.



1.4 THERE ARE SOME PRACTICAL CONCERNS

Stakeholders do have some important concerns, most of which were raised at the operational level. These relate to:

- ? The potential for a ULN to increase the administrative burden on schools, colleges and institutions. They are particularly concerned that the ULN could be yet another number and lead to the generation of increased bureaucracy
- ? Concern that to be successful a ULN implementation project would be a major programme. A significant number of stakeholders believe that Government does not enjoy a good reputation for implementing complex programmes and the organisations that provide services direct to learners (e.g. providers and exam boards) would suffer from any shortcomings in the programme
- ? Existing number schemes outside the maintained sector have shortcomings. All colleges quoted the UCI as an example of an identifier that is too long to remember and where the definition of uniqueness differs between the exam boards and the colleges. Students not knowing or forgetting their ULNs is, therefore, a major concern, together with the necessity of clear and strong incentives for colleges and learners to use the number for it to be a success. Colleges don't believe that the incentives would be in place
- ? All providers want the ULN to have been generated in the sector that feeds into theirs. This means that learners must know their ULNs or there must be a readily available and fast lookup service to find out the numbers. Providers have concerns about both, and in particular that a look up service would be stretched at the times that the providers most need it. This is at enrolment.
- ? There is a prevailing view that if the number is to provide the benefits sought it must be used widely across the sector. There is a belief that the OIC will not look favourably on such a ubiquitous number
- ? Students have concerns over security of information relating to their achievements if wide access is possible to a centrally held store of learner records.

Most stakeholders expressed their concerns as reason for caution and careful design in implementing a ULN rather than as a reason for not having a ULN. Most stakeholders believed that a ULN would happen so that their concerns were associated with making it happen successfully.

1.5 THERE ARE SOME ASPECTS THAT STAKEHOLDERS SEE AS 'GIVEN'

There was a wide assertion, particularly in HE and among the service providers and policymakers, that the ULN would need to be UK-wide for it to be effective, and agreement that the ULN should be allocated as early as possible and that the allocation should coincide with a transition in the learner's career rather than being allocated, for example, on the learners 16th birthday. This is because association with a transition would make the number more meaningful to learners, and because increasing flexibility in provision means that progression is less formally age related than it used to be.

1.6 CONCLUSION

Overall, stakeholders are in favour of a ULN. Many stakeholders, particularly those engaged in planning and assessing provision, will soon not be able to operate effectively without a unique identifier that crosses sector boundaries. Stakeholders' strength of support is highly correlated with the use of the data for management planning and assessment purposes. Most stakeholders want the ULN to replace existing identifiers

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 PURPOSE OF THE STAKEHOLDER VIEWS STAGE

Some groups have already started to consider a 'unique learner number', albeit usually confined to their own and related sectors.

- ? The IMT's Student Identifier Working Group has assessed the need for a student identifier for HE, but which is generated in FE because of increasing flexibility of access to HE and in particular increasing cross provision. This group has at a discussion level considered many of the dimensions of a unique identifier for students, including its allocation, the extent of the need for central maintenance, its carrying and its use. Based upon examination of existing numbers in HE, the group has also discussed the nature of a possible number, including a debate on the use of real names. A particularly important contribution from the IMT is recognition of the importance of the number to cross sectoral boundaries.
- ? DfES and the LSC have reviewed existing numbers and have discussed the effect of false uniqueness and the resulting inability to match effectively across datasets. DfES and LSC recognise that currently this matching across datasets using identifiers that are not unique is the only way in which to carry out the analysis and that the shortcomings affect the ability to draw accurate conclusions. This in turn affects the quality of policy making and the effectiveness of provision. The importance of this debate has been that it has emphasised the benefits that may accrue from a ULN.
- ? The MIAP Group has reviewed the effectiveness of current management information and the role that a ULN could have in improving its collection, analysis and effectiveness in use
- ? FE colleges, particularly the principals actively involved in CMIS, have discussed a National Student ID, including a short discussion paper on the possible structure of an identifier for use across FE colleges
- ? JISC and the CRA are developing a pilot for a centralised record of learning, achievement and aspiration. This work is at an early stage and is at first concentrating on a discrete and narrow subset of qualifications. It is important because it reveals an active intention to explore the practicalities of a record of learning.

This stakeholder views exercise has sought to build upon those discussions and broaden the views to provide a picture of stakeholder views across a wide part of the full learning environment.

This report consolidates and summarises the views of the stakeholders in order to identify the main benefits and associated issues that affect the options for a ULN. The report is not a consolidated meeting note. Its value lies in the conclusions rather than the process or detail of individual interviews

2.2 SCOPE AND STRUCTURE

This stage of the feasibility study has sought the views of a very wide range of stakeholders across the learning and skills sector. The scope has been wide because it is important to know that the final recommendations of the feasibility study have been based upon an understanding of the views, needs and benefits of a sufficiently large group of

stakeholders to provide weight to the conclusions. It has also had to be wide because provision and management of learning is to a significant extent fragmented, so that an overall view has to be pieced together from individual, sometimes discrete, views. However, the study has found that there is widespread understanding among stakeholders of the needs and issues of other stakeholders. The analysis has included:

- ? **Learners.** The study has interviewed and held focus group sessions with learners in FE and HE. The views of learners are important because the balance of benefits against issues such as data protection and any perceived loss of individual rights as perceived by the OIC will be important in proposing realistic options for the ULN. Also, as the customers of all the other stakeholders, the voice of learners is very important.
- ? **Providers.** The study has sought the views of providers throughout the 'learning lifetime' starting with sixth forms and including FE colleges, HEIs, private and work based learning providers, employers as providers, and distance and e-learning providers, including the University for Industry. Providers are important because a ULN will directly affect the administration of provision so that the balance of practical issues against benefits is important in ensuring the effectiveness of learning provision and, therefore, of the service to learners
- ? **Service providers.** The study has included 'learning infrastructure' stakeholders, those who fund and plan provision and provide supporting services for students or providers and regulate learning. These stakeholders are important because they 'enable' learning, are responsible for the long term effectiveness of provision and provide the background support necessary to ensure the provision of effective learning. The study has consulted with:
 - ? Learner service providers, such as UCAS, Student Loans Company and LEAs
 - ? Providers of support services, notably HESA and also the DfES ASD
 - ? Providers of guidance and advice, including Connexions partnerships
 - ? Exam boards and the views of the Joint Council
- ? **Policymakers and funding bodies.** The study has interviewed education and skills policy officials. Their views are important in situating the study in the wider policy context and to understand the outcomes sought. The funding bodies provide the link between policy and provision. The study has sought the views of:
 - ? Officials in DfES, the Scottish Executive and DEL(NI)
 - ? Funding agencies including HEFCE, SHEFC and ELWa and LSC
- ? **Others.** The study has sought the views of employers and employer groups and other bodies such as regional development agencies and stakeholders with related interests, such as the Connexions card.

When complete, the stakeholder views will have interviewed more than 80 representatives of stakeholding organisations and around 50 learners.

2.3 INFORMATION SOUGHT

At the simplest level, the consultation has sought to understand:

- ? Whether stakeholders are in favour of a ULN
- ? What benefits a ULN would provide, in terms of:

- ? Improvements in current work
- ? Enablers, both enabling the organisation to do things that it currently finds difficult and whether there are any known future developments that will require a unique identifier to be effective
- ? How the ULN would need to be implemented in order to achieve the benefits, including:
 - ? Concepts for a ULN
 - ? Learner groups and age ranges
 - ? Allocation methods
 - ? Carrying methods
 - ? Geographical coverage
- ? An understanding of whether there would be any costs involved (to be followed up later in the business case stage)
- ? Any issues the stakeholder would face in implementing or using a ULN.

These aspects varied across stakeholders depending upon their involvement in the learning process. The only significant differences in approach were with providers and learners:

- ? With providers, questions included an understanding of the enquiries, admissions, enrolment, administration and examination processes. This included the role of existing identifiers and the scope for a ULN to improve efficiency
- ? For learners, the discussion concentrated on the personal advantages that a ULN might have. The benefits were then balanced with issues such as:
 - ? Whether the number should be compulsory or optional
 - ? Their concerns about agencies holding their personal data
 - ? Their desire to access the data themselves and methods for doing so
 - ? Freedom of information and human rights and the balance between potential benefits and any perceived loss of individual rights associated with compulsory use and the maintenance of a central repository of achievement data.

2.4 CONCEPTS FOR A ULN

The identifier stocktake review proposed five possible concepts for a ULN.

- ? **No ULN.** This is not based upon an existing scheme but on the current situation in the UK. This would see the continued use of snapshot and aggregate data. It would offer no benefits other than avoidance of potential infringements of civil liberties from increased amount of personal data held by government departments and agencies
- ? **Internal identifier number.** This is based upon the Unique Pupil Number scheme in the UK. The ULN would be allocated by a provider or centrally and either at a predetermined time or on the first occasion that a learner enrolls for an accredited course (i.e. a transition point). The ULN is thus associated with each episode of learning and providers may be able to pass details of the learner's record of learning to other providers on request when the learner enrolls with another provider. Here the ULN is used for organisational purposes only.

Learners do not use the number and in some implementations may be unaware of its existence. Management information data related to the individual learner is passed to DfES at an individual level in a way similar to PLASC. It would result in improved accuracy of management information. There would be some benefits to providers where a full Learner record can be passed on upon enrolment for a further phase of learning. But there would be little direct benefit for learners.

- ? **Learner identification number.** Here the ULN used as an identification number only, possibly in conjunction with a physical form of identity such as an ID card. This most resembles the Danish scheme. But in Denmark the use of a citizen identifier for multiple integrated purposes makes the identifier more effective than would be the case for a stand alone identification number.
- ? **Record of learning.** The ULN is used to pull together a record of learning for an individual learner. This would have the benefit of enabling providers to confirm existing qualifications. Learners can also prove eligibility or qualifications based upon their history of learning. Individual data can be the starting point for aggregation, providing much more useful and accurate data for planning purposes. This concept is drawn from the New Zealand scheme
- ? **Attendance and incentive card.** This concept is based upon the Connexions card but would also include a record of learning. The ULN would be contained on a card used for attendance registration, so that a comprehensive record of attendance as well as achievement can be created. Attendance could be linked to incentives to stay in learning.

2.5 CONCEPTS DEVELOPED

During the stakeholder interviews it became very quickly apparent that there were only two concepts that stakeholders considered valuable. These are:

- ? ULN as an administrative identifier. This most closely approximates the concept of the internal identifier number, but stakeholders felt that learners would need to know and carry their ULN at enrolment times
- ? ULN as a key to a record of learning. The record of learning won strong support as the ultimate target to be achieved, but also raised the most issues about practical implications. Discussion of a central record of learning also very quickly enters into the discussion of feasibility of a data warehouse to hold a national scale of learner records. Data warehousing is an important but separate issue from the feasibility of a ULN, albeit that the two elements may be interdependent.

2.6 CAVEATS

The scope of the stakeholders analysis has been extensive. But the study has not consulted everyone with a direct interest in a ULN. The scope of learning and the number of organisations and groups involved is very wide. There are also diminishing returns on further interviews with stakeholder groups once a pattern of views starts to emerge.

Interview notes have been shared with some interviewees to clarify some points, but confirming meeting notes has not been extensive. Where the team has been content that our understanding of the points from an interview has been correct, the interviewee's views have been considered to be a valid point of view because of the person's position. We have not sought concerted to corroborate views with other stakeholders.

3. **STAKEHOLDER VIEWS**

3.1 **LEARNERS**

3.1.1 **Learner groups**

The study included the views of:

- ? Sixth form college students
- ? Further education college students
- ? Work-based learners
- ? Recent graduates from higher education
- ? Nurses entering higher education as mature students and for whom credit accumulation through continuing professional development is important.

The views of learners were consistent across sectors.

3.1.2 **Current experiences**

The further through the education and learning process are the learners, the more they complain of:

- ? Having to produce evidence, sometimes repeatedly and always for new episodes of learning
- ? Issues with proving qualifications where they have lost certificates. It was quite common for learners not to be interested in the certificates themselves, which they see as something that may be lost, but they are concerned only to have proof of achievement. Most frequently these are the results slips from examination boards
- ? Not necessarily remembering courses or training that, if not directly resulting in a qualification may still demonstrate knowledge or capability. These may have been courses at work, for which a record was not maintained or was not passed on when changing employment, or they may be academic or skills courses.

3.1.3 **Benefits perceived from ULN**

Most learners need prompting to consider benefits, because they are not looking for or expecting them. However, in group sessions, once a debate was sparked, the discussion was relatively wide ranging and in some cases surprisingly perceptive.

Learners saw some, but very limited, benefit in a ULN as an administrative number. Benefits would accrue to learners only if it meant that providers could obtain information or proof that would smooth administrative processes. But they are not excited by the idea.

Learners are keen on the ULN as a key to a record of learning. If the record of learning were up-to-date and accurate, the ability to use a central source of data to prove qualifications and progression and provide a comprehensive view of their achievements is seen as a real benefit. The greater the accumulated progress and achievement, or the

more complex the credit accumulated, the more value learners place on the ULN as a key to an effective record of learning.

3.2 ISSUES

Learners' issues focus on the record of learning:

- ? The record of learning should enable learners to access it, probably through a web interface, but security levels must be high to prevent incorrect access. Their concerns over access are from:
 - ? Employers, whom learners would want to see their record only with permission and possibly with some control from the learner. Control is an issue where the record contains the result of a failed exam which is not relevant to the job application, or of a history of failed attempts before eventual success for a qualification that is relevant
 - ? Mischievous users seeking to find information about learners as individuals
 - ? Individuals who inadvertently use someone else's ULN, through a typing error or because they have been told the wrong ULN
- ? Learners are concerned about the extent of personal data that would need to accompany the ULN, whether as a record of learning or as an administrative number in order to verify the identity of the individual claiming to own a specific ULN. But their concerns relate to secure storage of name, address and possibly telephone number rather than simply that the data is being held
- ? Most learners who expressed a view think the scheme should be compulsory. This means that learners must have a ULN to enter an accredited episode of learning. There are two separate reasons for this:
 - ? Some learners see its being compulsory as necessary to make the scheme work. If it were voluntary, perhaps there would be insufficient learners to create a critical mass that would justify the investment so that learners would be denied the benefit. Within this view, others also pointed out that making it voluntary would make the scheme messy so that there could even be incomplete records for individuals who had not offered their ULN on entry to some of the courses they have attended
 - ? Some learners felt it should be compulsory because if it were voluntary some learners would choose to opt out at first. Employers and providers might positively discriminate in favour of learners who have a verifiable record of learning. Opting in at a later stage might mean that the record could be created only from the point of entry into the scheme, so that learners would inadvertently disadvantage themselves by not having opted in at the earliest point
- ? Learners are not enthusiastic if this number is one more in a series that they are expected to carry around or remember, particularly if they do not need to use the ULN very often. So, learners would be keen for the ULN to replace institution numbers or exam board numbers (UCI). Some favoured using a number already in existence. Amongst these, only the NINO was suggested as a candidate. Some students, particularly those in FE Colleges or who have worked extensively, know their NINO
- ? There are very few concerns about civil liberties. This is partly because many learners believe that this and other personal data is held efficiently by large government systems anyway. But also, in an age when supermarkets hold

significant data on consumer and therefore lifestyle patterns through loyalty cards, most learners see a system that also provides them with a potential benefit is more important than the theoretical risk of unexpected uses of the data. Some also stated that this is, after all 'only' education data.

Learners are not enthusiastic about a ULN. They do see the potential benefits but do not actively seek a ULN. Overall they see the benefits, particularly of an accessible central repository of their achievements outweighing any concerns about centrally held data. Access to a record of learning would provide some incentive for learners to use the number, but if the number were for administrative use only, learners would see little benefit and would not actively cooperate if it meant inconvenience to them.

3.3 PROVIDERS

The study included :

- ? Sixth form colleges
- ? Further education colleges
- ? HEIs
- ? Private providers
- ? Work-based learning providers
- ? E-learning providers
- ? A distance learning provider

Because providers are a heterogeneous group, specific experiences and problems differ.

School sixth forms see little advantage in a ULN, because the UPN works satisfactorily, entry and exit is well regulated and usually orderly and there is only minor complexity in dealing with examination boards. This minor complexity arises because most students sit their AS and A2 exams with more than one board, but the complexity is manageable.

Opinion in the FE sector is overall in favour of a ULN, and most people believe that learner tracking is a good idea and for which a ULN is necessary. A ULN would help people to assess data from past achievement and know the needs of learners for the next stage. However, individual college opinion varies. For example sixth form colleges did not provide a consistent message, with a split between enthusiastic proponents and reluctant acceptors. One college, that was strongly in favour, was a pilot EMA area and saw value in a ULN for supporting the administration of EMAs, particularly since management of the scheme involves an increase in staff and a ULN that replaces the EMA number could reduce the need for extra staff.

Opinion in the HE sector is that a ULN that does not increase the administrative burden would be acceptable but offer few benefits for admissions and examinations, which for universities are managed in-house. HE administration is coping but creaking, so that HEIs would oppose a ULN if it threatened to add stress to an already strained system.

For private and work-based learning providers, the perceived benefits of a ULN seem to relate to the size of the provider, the range of courses provided and the type of course. Type of course is important where prerequisites are necessary.

3.3.1 Current experiences and problems

The main issues for providers are:

- ? The multiplicity of existing numbers, because there are different numbers for each aspect of learning administration
- ? The inconsistency of use of existing numbers. The UCI, for example is currently used by different examination boards in different ways
- ? The need to chase relevant learner details often based on name only, which creates problems with common names, especially in the Asian community
- ? What is seen as an increasing burden for reporting and administration without a universal and consistent means of readily identifying students across boundaries with other organizations.

FE colleges reported that dealing with a large number of awarding bodies, each with different candidate identifiers, and some with more than one identifier for each student creates the potential for errors and seems unnecessary. This is further complicated by the fact that students rarely know their UCI, and some exam boards use the UCI uniquely for a student, while others use it uniquely only within each module. Both models present colleges with issues: the former requires work to find the student's UCI; the latter results in a proliferation of numbers. The Joint Council bodies are moving towards the latter model, but colleges see advantages in replacing the UCI with one number – as long as the student brings it with them when they enrol or the college can readily and quickly access a database of ULNs.

Ufi has an issue with extending its skills for life material into FE colleges. Ufi sees the absence of a consistent and unique identifier for learners in full time education as preventing it from working outside its existing model. This is because a ULN is a requirement for the success of CollegeOnline and placing skills for life materials in FECs. Currently a college can buy one copy of the Ufi materials and use for multiple students because there is no reliable way of uniquely identifying the students. In this way colleges are avoiding paying site licences for LearnDirect materials and Ufi is restricting the release of its materials to the full time education sector because of the risk it runs in losing the repayment for its investment. This has arisen because the original payment model for LearnDirect courses, where the individual (outside of a formal college environment) registers and downloads the material, was not designed to cater for provision by colleges to classes of full time students. There is great potential value in doing so, but without a ULN, the delivery models and charging structures are confused. Ufi's consequent reluctance to run the risk of losing its investment means that the minimum £10 million invested in developing the materials is not being put to use.

3.3.2 Current developments and plans

DfES Ministers have declared their intention to establish a national scheme for providing weekly Education Maintenance Allowances for all 16-18 year-olds from September 2004. This scheme will replace the various pilot schemes run with local authorities over recent years. The new scheme will be run on through a new national service provider, and will depend on attendance and progression information from all schools and colleges. **Clearly there could be scope for using the ULN as a means of combating identity fraud. However its usefulness in the application process would need to be measured against how it would be used in application, which will largely be done before a student enrolls with their chosen school or college. It might have more impact within the EMA process in the area of reducing administrative burdens were it to be defined to be the key identifier; combined**

into attendance monitoring systems, such as the Connexion Card; and electronic links developed.

HEIs and FE colleges recognise that the increasing future flexibility of FE and HE will require increased exchange of information across the FE/HE boundary. Specifically, the introduction of foundation degrees, the increase in credit accumulation for entry to HEIs and use of the vocational route to HE will require better information on the learner and his/her achievements that will be facilitated by a ULN. Also, the increasing cross-provision, of FE in HE and HE in FE will require effective information exchange facilitated by a ULN. Some stakeholders have stated that a ULN may be a prerequisite for success in achieving the aims for flexibility in HE provision.

3.3.3 Benefits perceived from a ULN

A. FURTHER EDUCATION SIXTH FORM COLLEGES

A ULN that replaced existing identifiers would simplify cross-boundary administrative processes. In general FE colleges see greater benefit than sixth form colleges as a result of the heterogeneity of their student cohort. On admission and enrolment, colleges send for the school reference. If students arrived with their ULN, the identifier would assist in obtaining the reference, particularly for students with common names, with special needs or who are exceptionally talented. Management of examinations with external bodies would be made easier by reducing to one the number of identifiers associated with the student. FE colleges' views on the benefits of a ULN assume that it would replace existing numbers. They would not support an identifier that was used in addition to existing identifiers, because they believe that it would be unlikely to deliver the benefits while adding to the existing administrative load.

A ULN would help data transfer from schools and other colleges and to the LSC and other organisations, including:

- ? UCAS
- ? ALIS
- ? Connexions
- ? DfES
- ? EMA teams
- ? The schools from which the students came

Data transfer is not a particular problem when transferred in bulk, because matching becomes the problem of the recipient. But where specific records are passed, identification can be an issue. Colleges know that fuzzy matching or human guessing of matches results in errors that contravene the data protection act by creating incorrect records for students.

Having a record of learning attached to the ULN would bring the highest benefits to colleges because it would save time in enrolling students. Procedures differ, but currently the colleges ask the students about their personal details and previous qualifications and spends 5-10 minutes for each student (and two of the FE colleges included in the analysis each had 30,000 students) keying in general information. If this information was available from a national database so that colleges could easily download it from there, it could save them time. But doing this requires infrastructure that allows easy and quick access to the data. Colleges stated that it currently takes about 30 minutes to process a single

person for the LearnDirect scheme. This sort of response time with a ULN service would actually add more time instead of saving it.

It would also be important for these records of learning to be updated as soon as possible. This is especially important for the GCSE results which colleges would need to have on the systems the same day they become available to students, because students will start coming to the college for registration the next day after they receive their results. Having the ROL could also cut down the levels of fraud.

B. HIGHER EDUCATION

A ULN would assist in the marketing of university services. Linking the enquiry stage to the admissions record is a problem. Looking at progressions and sorting out marketing effectiveness would be a good use for a ULN. Most universities are only just getting into marketing. Some of the new universities may have a handle on marketing costs. Universities are now keeping information about who enquired, which departments, which courses and should be able to track through the effectiveness of departments in selling their own courses.

C. PRIVATE PROVIDERS

Small providers anticipated very few benefits from a ULN, but the larger providers saw the ULN as offering opportunities based upon building an effective customer relationship.

Some private providers would like to be able to track learners who move from one employer to another, particularly where the provider does micro-marketing to target the expected development needs of specific people. Related to this, they would also like to track people who take separate courses from a larger programme that eventually might lead to a qualification. In this way where providers attempt to create customer loyalty through a long-term relationship where learners have a choice of provider, a ULN might assist the providers by enabling the linking of learner records across courses.

Providers see that a ULN could assist in demonstrating prequalifications for entry to courses so that they could tailor services to individuals based upon the existing level of experience.

D. WORK-BASED LEARNING PROVIDERS

The study included Protocol skills, the largest private work-based learning provider. Most students are referred to Protocol Skills (formerly Spring Skills) by Connexions. Many come straight from school and most are 16-17 with no interest in furthering their education but cannot find employment. Protocol Skills works with Connexions, the schools and colleges from which the Young people leave and with employers. Protocol Skills assesses the suitability of what in some cases are reluctant learners and then either trains the learners, usually in vocational qualifications, on site, or more usually sends tutors to the employers. Protocol skills' main problem lies in trying to gather all the existing learning, progression and achievement information for the young people and see a ULN as helping to overcome this so that they can offer the best advice and training to young people.

E. UNIVERSITY FOR INDUSTRY

Beyond the issue with full time FE discussed above, Ufi/LearnDirect can track learners within their own schemes. Within its current model Ufi would benefit from a ULN primarily as a link to a record of learning, the provision of which would result in a reduction in

bureaucracy. This in turn would help the learner and allow more time and money to be allocated to the learner rather than to administration functions – to reallocate funds away from admin and towards learner-focused activities. In a quick calculation, Ufl estimated that 60% of the costs associated with adult learning relate to administration. Moreover, learners get very frustrated, saying ‘You have my information already, why do you want me to fill out a form with the same information again?’

3.3.4 Issues/caveats and conditions/requirements

Colleges cite the current situation in which students do not know their UCI as revealing the likelihood that learners will forget or fail to carry their ULN, even if it is on a card

Providers see the possible claim that a ULN could reduce barriers to learning and so increase accessibility as unfounded. They believe that a ULN will not break down barriers to learning. People train because they see the need for the training and not because of any increase in the efficiency of administrative processes

The ULN would need to be available to the learner before the first time that a student is admitted to a course by the provider. Providers do not want the responsibility of generating a nationally unique number and recognise that decentralised allocation would result in duplication, especially where it is easier for a provider to generate a new number than try to find an existing number.

Providers, particularly FE and sixth form colleges are not confident that the government can implement a significant ULN project well, particularly if linked to a record of learning, without detrimentally affecting the colleges’ routine operations.

To provide benefit, the ULN would have to:

- ? Be mandatory, with students unable to enrol for courses or examinations without a valid ULN
- ? Be accepted by all providers and the organisations with whom they deal
- ? Replace existing numbers. Providers have a significant concern that a ULN would force yet another identifier on them and bring with it administrative and reporting requirements in addition to those already in place
- ? Be generated quickly and centrally for students/learners who do not have a ULN. FE colleges, for example, contrast their situation with that of schools. Schools usually know significantly in advance the pupils who will join them. But potential students often apply to more than one Fe College and several programmes. The FE college often has relatively short notice of the students who will actually enrol
- ? Be allocated to learners early in their learning career, certainly before sixteen and by the time that a learner enrolls for their first national qualification examination or course where the course is modular and/or partly assessed by coursework. This implies commencement at around 14 for most pupils and earlier for some advanced students. This raises issues over the relationship of the ULN with the UPN and means that the ULN could face the same Information Commissioner issues as did the UPN.

3.4 INFRASTRUCTURE / SERVICES

The study has included the views of a wide range of infrastructure, service and learning support organisations.

3.4.1 Providers involved

- ? LSDA
- ? OFSTED
- ? HESA
- ? LSC
- ? ALI
- ? QCA
- ? Connexions partnerships
- ? LEAs
- ? Joint Council awarding bodies (AQA and OCR)
- ? JISC
- ? UCISA
- ? CRA
- ? Sheffield First for Learning (Learning partnership)

3.4.2 Current experiences and problems

The main issues for infrastructure providers are:

- ? Tracking patterns of participation, retention, achievement and progression
- ? The inability to create longitudinal views of progression. This is common across all sectors, but presents specific problems for individual organisations, some of which are:
 - ? LSDA
 - ? OFSTED
 - ? HESA
 - ? LSC
 - ? ALI
 - ? QCA
- ? Planning for future provision
- ? Assessing the quality of outcomes by matching subsequent learning progression with past enrolments, to identify what works

These issues as they affect some of the stakeholders are discussed below.

LSDA

LSDA has a particular interest in identifying the characteristics of learning provision that result in widened participation combined with good rates of learner retention, achievement and progression, enabling learners to maximise their potential. In fulfilling this and other elements of its remit to provide independent advice for policymakers and support for practitioners, the Learning and Skills Development Agency undertakes a wide range of

research and analysis. LSDA currently finds it difficult to perform analysis of learner progression, which is something that they are increasingly being asked to provide, and for which experience has shown fuzzy matching to be inadequate for the data provided to LSDA. LSDA needs a better understanding of patterns of participation, retention, achievement and progression across the sector. Without this, LSDA cannot be effective in tracking learners – where learners have come from and where they go next – in order to better monitor progression from age 14 and onwards.

The consequence of the current situation is difficulty in analysing progression and issues that can affect successful progression towards effective outcomes (at the aggregate level) for the individual learner and economic benefit for the UK.

OFSTED

Determining value added (the distance travelled for learners) is key for Ofsted. Ofsted inspects post-16 providers as part of its remit, with 16+ being the most difficult to achieve given the data available. Ofsted uses mainly ILR data provided from LSC which does not link prior attainment at Key Stage 4 with post 16 achievement. Ofsted also uses ALIS or ALPS reports obtained from colleges (if colleges provide them) and which cover mainly A-levels/AVCEs only. Fuzzy matching across this data is not done, because it is too difficult to achieve acceptable levels of accuracy.

Currently Ofsted cannot examine achievement of 16-year olds at the end of school and compare this with the qualifications they've achieved at 18, at end of college, because it is very difficult to track where the students have come from. This is because there is a huge migration of students at 16. Ofsted cannot track the 14 ? 16 ? 18 transition at present. Thus, they cannot easily judge distance travelled currently.

The consequence of issues with measuring distance travelled is shortcomings in determining effectiveness in education and learning provision and difficulty in advising on the targeting of resources on the learner groups.

Learning partnerships

Learning Partnerships (LPs) advise/influence LSC how to better spend its money on a regional level. Therefore they need much better micro-level learner performance information. Targets are set nationally, but have to be met, and money is spent, on a local level. Data available at present is inconsistent, old, and incomplete, targeting very specific segments.

In general, the LPs are watching out for issues with the learners rather than with the providers, and at present they lack accurate enough information to understand the weaknesses in learners. Local Education Authorities, colleges, and Connexions all collect information on learners. This information includes the proportion of the cohort achieving qualifications and levels and areas of participation. But the LPs are unable to assemble the data coherently because it is all different, and also when it comes to them, it is already 18 months to 2 years late. So LPs spend a lot of time reconciling data on learner performance and participation.

At present, LPs can quite reliably know what happens pre -16, but the problem lies post-16 with data being slow and difficult to work with. Better information could help better impact particular target groups, and can provide better information on how learners are moving forward.

The consequence of current data matching issues is that the LPs find it hard to advise the LSC on effective targeting of funding at the regional level.

QCA

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) works to uphold standards in education and training. Working with other organisations, QCA maintains and develops the school curriculum and associated assessments, and accredits and monitors qualifications in schools, colleges and at work. There are, therefore, three strands to the QCA's work:

- ? Schools curriculum and assessment (national curriculum assessments)
- ? Qualifications development
- ? Monitoring standards, QA and assurance (for all qualifications except HE).

The data QCA collects is at an aggregate level. But for policy development formation QCA needs data at the individual level and which is then grossed up.

In the 14 – 19 age range, it is difficult to build up a picture of what individual year groups are currently doing in order to offer curriculum advice. Currently QCA can use:

- ? ILR (colleges only) – an annual snapshot
- ? Candidate achievement records
- ? PLASC.

QCA is commonly asked to determine things such as the number of pupils doing a particular course or achieving a particular level at 14 who proceeded to achieve a particular result. QCA can pick up the pupils at GCSE, but it is not possible with current data to establish the patterns on a national basis. So QCA cannot track an individual learner from 14 – 19 and create a profile.

Nor can QCA create a national picture of how people use their qualifications. For example it is not possible to tell who earns a degree and then also achieves an NVQ. It is possible to identify only the number of degrees attained and the number of NVQs achieved at each level, so that determining the value of vocational qualifications is undermined, which affects QCA's and other organisations' attempts to promote vocational qualifications as an acceptable route to progression, including to HE.

But in another area, QCA do need to know the individual candidate. The unit credit framework opening up of NVQs to look at common units with pathways through them cannot currently be adequately monitored and assessed. Identifying pathways is not straightforward because post 16 people dip in and out and move around. Fuzzy matching works when you are fairly confident that the two sets should match, but this data set commonality is absent in post 16 learner data.

Outside the compulsory school age, QCA finds tracking very difficult. This difficulty also extends to the design and approval of new qualifications. In trying to design a qualification, it is necessary to know the characteristics of a learner, although there is no need to know the individual candidate.

Development of qualifications to support work force development needs is also an issue. QCA develops some qualifications, accredits others, and also encourages awarding bodies to develop new qualifications. QCA assesses awarding bodies on the need and distinctiveness of their proposals to reduce duplication in qualifications. At the moment

QCA has to accept on trust when a sector skills body says it needs a new qualification. To verify this, QCA needs to know:

- ? Whether there is a skills shortage in the area
- ? There is already no qualification that meets the need.

When sector skills say that this is the case, QCA cannot check thoroughly because only overall volume data is available. So for example, you can tell how many people have a level 2 qualification, and how many have a level 3. But you don't know how many people fall into both groups. Nor is it possible to age profile the workforce, so that you cannot for example tell whether the people achieving qualifications are coming into or leaving the workforce. These difficulties mean that it is not possible for QCA to be confident that the decisions made about qualifications and courses designed to achieve them are actually in the best economic interests of the learners.

The consequence is that the lack of information means that citizens as learners are not being served well. As guardians of standards, QCA cannot determine whether the individual's investment of time, effort and sometimes money is an effective investment that will result in skills that match a demand in the economy. This is because under the current arrangements the information available relates to total volumes of qualifications achieved and not to learning undertaken or to the application of the learning in the workforce

Awarding bodies Joint Council for General Qualifications

The Joint Council for General Qualifications (JCGQ) was established in January 1999 and comprises the Unitary Awarding Bodies:

- ? AQA (the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance)
- ? Edexcel (incorporating BTEC and London Examinations)
- ? OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations)
- ? CCEA (the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment)
- ? WJEC (the Welsh Joint Education Committee).

The Joint Council covers the following range of qualifications:

- ? GCSE
- ? A Level
- ? GNVQ
- ? Certificate of Achievement
- ? Key Skills
- ? Advanced Extension Awards.

The Unitary Awarding Bodies report few data related issues and use the Unique Candidate Identifier to identify learners who are candidates in examinations. There has in the past been some differences in the way in which the bodies used the UCI. Most used it as a unique identifier only within one particular course, using the UCI to link together, for example, modules within the one course. AQA attempted to use the UCI for an individual candidate across courses. This difference of handling and issues with students

remembering their UCI across courses has caused some issues. But AQA is now moving towards the same model of usage as the other bodies.

Increasing flexibility of learning may present some issues for the JCGQ bodies. Learners who change colleges part way through a course, particularly a modular course cause problems, because the new college will generate a new UCI for the learner. The awarding bodies then need to match the data to a very high degree of accuracy to make certain that the record of achievement for both parts of the modular course apply to the same individual. As with many other organisations who need to match learner data, common names present a problem. The bodies see this as an increasing issue as modularity becomes increasingly common in GCSE and as the focus moves away from separate pre- and post-16 to the age range 14-19. This will require 6th form colleges and FE colleges to find out the existing UCI of students, causing administrative issues for the colleges and increasing the risk of data matching errors and the creation of inaccurate modular progression records for students.

The Joint Council would welcome a ULN if it could replace the UCI and if the learner was able to bring the identifier with them when they first enrol for a qualification and carry the number across modules and course. A successful ULN could replace the UCI because the awarding bodies do not use any of the information contained in the UCI, so that any successful identifier could be used.

JISC

There is also an issue with managing students cross sector boundaries when the student's learning crosses the boundaries. At present, if a student enrolled in FE is taking a course in HE, they won't automatically have access to HE resources. The student will have to register at the HE institution for that, but then there is confusion whether the student is registered in FE or HE. If there was a ULN, this would be managed much more easily, because one would only need to assign the correct permissions to the given ULN and not have to worry about registering the student in the HE, or whatever else needs to be done.

3.4.3 Developments and benefits perceived from a ULN

For the learning infrastructure providers, the potential benefits of a ULN relate to the ability to overcome current issues caused by difficulties in effective data matching. They also relate to making it possible for the providers to support effective provision in the context of increasing demands born from changing and cross-sectoral and cross age range provision and the inherent flexibility that this brings.

The potential benefits are discussed below, using illustrations from some of the stakeholders consulted.

LSDA

The demand for research involving analysis of patterns of progression is on the increase. In particular, policy making concerning the qualifications and the curriculum would be better informed if the LSDA had a clearer picture of how particular patterns of course and qualification were linked with subsequent employment.

Without a ULN, the only other alternatives for LSDA would be either fuzzy matching (assuming receipt of name and address data from LSC), which would still have drawbacks because, for example, names and addresses change. Fuzzy matching would also monitor progression at too high a level of aggregation to give much information. At

present, LSDA can do a reasonable job on the transition from school to college, but it becomes much more difficult to track after 18. For agendas such as life-long learning or effective work-based learning, it would be very useful to check if assumptions about progression and success are correct. Too little is known at present about progression from qualifications below degree level, and the predicted future growth in e-learning is likely to make it even more difficult to track learners in the absence of any unique identifier. LSDA also supports improved credit transfer arrangements for learners, and a ULN could be potentially very helpful in that respect, so that providers can track and reliably accept credits already accumulated.

If the ULN were linked to the NINO, the transition from learning to type of employment would enable a truly effective assessment of the economic outcome of learning and skills development in learners.

OFSTED

One of the limitations of the ALIS and ALPS reports that Ofsted currently receives is that they only deal with A-levels and AVCEs, and to some extent, some level 2 GNVQ qualifications. However, the proportion of A levels compared to vocational qualifications in some colleges may be very small. This makes it difficult to extrapolate to measure the true value-added (distance travelled) of most students in FE colleges. But if there were a ULN, LSC or DfES could produce value-added reports that would be more consistent and apply across qualification types.

A ULN would:

- ? Reduce the data collection burden to providers and learners
- ? Enable Ofsted to measure attainment quality of provision through value added (distance travelled)
- ? Reduce Ofsted's collection demands on colleges.

Even where Ofsted receives LSC data (from ILRs), the need to have matched and analysed the data before it is passed on means that the data is usually old so that Ofsted has to go back to colleges and ask for latest data. Because a ULN would speed up the data collation process, returning direct to the colleges to update out of date data would be unnecessary.

Learning partnerships

The partnerships have similar objectives to LSC, and therefore they will have similar benefits from a ULN. However, partnerships are more interested on a regional level, and therefore they need much more detailed regional information and less aggregated than LSC. Hence, a ULN might prove to be even more important to these partnerships than to LSC, because it will enable the more accurate and disaggregated data that the partnerships need.

Fuzzy matching might be good on a national level (e.g. can see that Sheffield is not doing well post-16), or for policy making, but when money is actually spent to fix the problems and meet the targets, it is spent on micro-level in individual schools, or on particular problems. Fuzzy matching does not work satisfactorily at the micro level. Therefore, there is a need for a micro-data to best direct resources, and ULN can provide much better micro-data. Better support of the micro level means that a ULN will also help on the macro-level since much better micro-data could be aggregated to get the macro-level trends.

Adult learning Inspectorate

The real benefit of a ULN to ALI will be that it will enable them to receive data about learners' qualifications before they started their learning at the inspected institution, and compare this with their skills and qualifications at the end of their training and thereafter, enabling ALI to determine a better (and hard-evidenced) assessment of the provider's performance.

A ULN could help ALI in terms of the statistical data used in inspection rather than in the process of inspecting. Statistical data used in inspections includes data about providers' performance, whether learners have achieved what they intended, whether learners stay in the course or drop off, and what learners do afterwards. ALI wants to establish whether this learning has improved their skills and attitudes in the long term. A ULN could therefore, help ALI to:

- ? Establish where learners come from and what qualifications they have in order to compare qualification level when started with the achievement level on completion. This is especially important for older learners, where the learners might not have full recall of everything they had done till then. One aspect of inspection is to see how many people have achieved what they had intended, and currently there is no hard evidence for that. Also, it is important to see how much the provider has contributed to the learners reaching the state they are at the end (i.e. distance travelled). It is important to distinguish between somebody who has improved a great deal, and someone who needed only small encouragement to reach the same end point
- ? Establish what learners proceed to do after having completed the learning, and in particular whether they subsequently progress further
- ? Assess long-term benefits – whether learners' attitudes and skills have changed positively for the long-term; whether they improve their position after their training in the institution being inspected.

Overall a ULN could help ALI in the “fine tuning” of assessing the success of providers.

UUK

Within IMT, UUK has supported moves towards a common student identifier as a prerequisite for easier student administration and for providing student-centred services. Specific applications of a ULN which would generate such benefits include:

- ? Credit accumulation and transfer schemes, which are a mandatory requirement on the UK HE sector following the Bologna Agreement. The Scots already operate such a system (SCOTCAS)
- ? Student movement between institutions, and the transfer of associated records of achievement
- ? Administration of local hardship schemes, where information sharing with SLC could be very beneficial.

A common student identifier already exists in the form of the HESA individualised student record, although UUK believes that the robustness of this is doubtful. Moves have been made to integrate UCAS data into the ISR, which will provide some continuity from the schools end and reduce data duplications. The sector is interested in the proposals from SLC to use the student loans identifier to replace the HESA identifier because it is more

robust. Wider use of the SLC number might imply needs for an independent issuing authority.

HESA

HESA already carries out effective analysis of qualifications within the HE sector. Linkage is carried out looking for a match on the HESA number but then also on the name of the student (which is held by HESA but not passed on to any of its customers), DoB, gender etc. But the process is very laborious and not very precise. Therefore, a benefit of the ULN would be:

- ? A more reliable process for analysing the results of HE
- ? Where an individual does not apply through UCAS, institutions would no longer be under an obligation to search whether an individual has been to HE and already has a number. Currently the HESA look up service allows HEIs to look up possible students who may have already been in the system. But institutions need to know which of their many students may have been in the system before and then use the look up service. It is easier to provide a new number. This makes it currently difficult to track students.

QAA

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. QAA works in partnership with the providers and funders of higher education, the staff and students in higher education, employers and other stakeholders.

A ULN could enable a fundamental reassessment of QAA's ability. Currently QAA scopes what it can do from what data is available rather than being able to define the scope of its role from the needs of ensuring quality. A ULN linked to a person, linked to the programme, linked to personal aspects, would enable assessment of success of the underlying participation.

With a ULN, QAA could examine why and how a person went from A to B and then investigate why this could be. This could be used for example to assess outcomes for disabled people in an institution as one of the ways in assessing the effectiveness of widening participation and inclusion in HE.

QCA

QCA sees a ULN as necessary to develop the skills force in the population, through effective development of appropriate qualifications, matching of supply to demand in the economy and tracking of progression towards achievement of increasing levels of qualifications. In particular being able to associate specific data with a ULN, for example gender, current employment, ethnicity, would add even greater value.

Importantly, a ULN that crossed sectoral boundaries would enable the tracking of where entrants into a skills area are coming from. It would also enable policymakers and other planners to know whether the population is carrying particular skills but people are choosing not to use them.

Student Loans Company

The Student Loans Company, working with the DfES and LEAs, is currently piloting new systems and processes for a streamlined, e-based service for the provision of HE student support. This will integrate the currently fragmented procedures for applications, assessments, payments and collection of student loans and other support, supported by a series of paper, web and telephony based systems available for students, their parents, LEAs, HEIs, SLC and other agencies involved in the support process. It is clearly vital that each student involved with this service has a unique and secure personal identifier, that can be readily linked to their UCAS and HEI identifiers (possibly for multiple or interrupted episodes of study, and also with their subsequent PAYE identifier for repayments. SLC has been developing a new scheme for a Unique Student Identifier which will satisfy these requirements, which could possibly provide a basis for a more widely used ULN (or would otherwise need to be linked securely to any other ULN).

3.4.4 Issues/caveats and conditions/requirements

Infrastructure stakeholders represent the group most likely to realise the most direct and focussed benefit from a ULN. Benefits from this group of stakeholders can also be passed on to policymakers through the use of better information, assessment and regulation and an understanding of 'what works' for learners. To achieve this, though, the ULN:

- ? Should start at or before 14 and continue through to adult learning
- ? Be brought by learners or available through a rapid look-up service (for awarding bodies)
- ? Be allocated, managed and controlled centrally (to avoid the situation where it is easier for providers to generate a new identifier than check whether a learner has an existing ULN)
- ? Be UK-wide
- ? Cater for foreign students in the UK (for the HE sector)
- ? Cross education sector boundaries and be used universally as well as uniquely.

3.5 POLICYMAKERS AND FUNDING BODIES

3.5.1 Stakeholders involved

The policymaking and funding stakeholders interviewed were:

- ? Department for Education and Skills
 - ? Learning and Skills Partnership Unit
 - ? E-Learning Strategy Unit
 - ? Learning and Standards Delivery Group
 - ? Analytical Services Division
 - ? HE Performance
 - ? Connexions Service National Unit
- ? Education and Learning Wales
- ? Scottish Executive

- ? Department of Employment and Learning Northern Ireland (who, in response to the initial meeting commissioned their own specific analysis within the ULN project)
- ? Higher Education Funding Council for England
- ? Learning and Skills Council (including a Local LSC)

3.5.2 Department for Education and Skills

A. LEARNING AND SKILLS PARTNERSHIP UNIT

The Learning and Skills Partnerships Unit (LSPU) has a significant interest in ensuring the success of the LSC. Both the LSPU and the LSC need to track qualification achievement so that they both can demonstrate to the Treasury how well money invested in further education is being spent. They both have targets for the percentage of people in the UK who should achieve certain levels of qualifications. Without a ULN, it is difficult both to track all people who achieve the qualifications, or to track all the credits a learner has accumulated that could enable him/her to achieve a qualification. Therefore, LSPU's view is that if a ULN helps the LSC it too is in favour.

LSPU also has an interest in ensuring that individuals and groups of learners receive the best possible service and advice. It is possible that a ULN could help here. Colleges and other providers may be able to select the best possible programme for that person where the learner's achievements are easier to identify through a ULN.

LSPU would be keen to use a ULN to build upon the operational aspects mentioned above, using the data to measure the performance of the LSC and LSPU itself and monitor their success in achieving targets. This could provide assurance to ministers that the large investment in the LSC is having a beneficial effect on the outcomes for learners.

LSPU believes that introducing the ULN to support the administration and assessment of learning will have advantages. But the ULN alone is insufficient. Effective and well planned and implemented MIS to process the data will be important in order to reduce bureaucracy in assessing effectiveness. A ULN will facilitate the development of effective MIS, and the MIS will support the maximum benefit from a ULN.

B. E-LEARNING STRATEGY UNIT

The ULN has a strategic importance to e-learning. The e-Learning Strategy Unit envisages that in the future, all learners will have access to e-learning. Therefore, it will be very likely that learners will have e-portfolios with all their learning record, and a ULN is very important for these e-portfolios to be "portable" and the learners to be able to take the portfolios with them from one learning episode to another.

Therefore, the ULN is very important to the unit and its plans for e-learning. The ULN provides a strategic opportunity. For there to be e-courses, e-assessments on a national scale, there needs to be a way of identifying the learners. Therefore, a ULN could be a key element of successful e-learning on a national level

The e-Learning Strategy Unit would need a ULN to be 100% accurate. The purposes it will be used for cannot afford errors:

- ? Funding for institutions – to track what students have done

- ? Assessments (there are already on-line assessments provided – for driving tests and teaching training, and Ufl is experimenting in the Adult Basic Skills area which is required by the government)
- ? Support a credit framework – to collect credits from different places to accumulate for a qualification
- ? Support a learning log – Ufl and NHSU would like to be able to maintain such a record.

C. *LEARNING AND STANDARDS DELIVERY GROUP*

The Department and learning and guidance providers are currently constrained in their ability to provide advice. Better individualised data to focus delivery on individuals needing most help with, for example, basic skills, NVQ Level 2 targets and employer training would enable more effective targeting and therefore support for learners.

If the ULN could be linked to records of achievement it would allow better targeting and better policy evaluation. For example, at present a large proportion of basic skills efforts go to learners who already have the target levels of achievement

Related to targeting, the ULN could enable more rapid evaluation of policy impacts and hence better use of resources. Current approaches using survey, research data and fuzzy matching produce data several years out of date.

One important element of targeting is the ability to target financial support, especially for those people who may accumulate learning in small packets (e.g. the 20,000 learners a week coming into LearnDirect). Being able to identify them as learners across schemes and, based upon this information, ensuring that the right financial support is available will assist learners. Currently this is difficult to achieve consistently.

D. *HE GROUP*

The HE group in DfES is concerned to know that a ULN will not be an unwelcome addition to the burden on HEIs. Registrars' staffing levels are low. At enrolment and graduation everything needs to be exact. This combination makes the registrars and their staff very risk adverse. With the system under strain, they have found a way of muddling through. The system holds together at the moment, but there is a major concern that changes to it could cause it to fail. The Department wants to reduce the burden on the sector. A ULN could help to do this. But if the HE sector does not want a ULN, the HE group won't push for its implementation in HE. This is because although a ULN could reduce the complexities of the future, in the short term it would be a cost to fix something that is not broken at the moment.

The potential future needs for a ULN relate to the moves towards more flexibility in HE. This will make the ability to track students more important, especially where credit schemes are involved. Other developing aspects of HE that make a ULN potentially useful are:

- ? Foundation degrees, where there is a foot in FE and one in HE
- ? Flexible modes of learning, including:
 - ? Distance learning
 - ? On-line learning

- ? Stand alone modules
- ? Increasing numbers of mature students

These aspects will combine to make it more difficult to track students in the future without a ULN. There are two possible HE advantages in a ULN:

- ? Reducing risk in widening participation, through a joined up identification system from FE and adult learning and which maps into HE. Admissions tutors would be helped
- ? Retention figures. A lot of students go on to another institution rather than completing at their current institution. The ULN may make it easier to track drop out students and distinguish those that have transferred. It may also be possible to track back to identify where issues lie more with the student (or common factors across students within a group) rather than with the institutions.

If there were no ULN, the impact would not be felt immediately. But within the next 10 years the flexibility agenda will suffer because it will become harder to manage the increased collaboration between institutions, part time provision, stand alone modules, etc. HEIs will be under increased pressure in the future. For example, the introduction of fees, especially variable fees, makes it important to know that you have the right person, especially where someone transfers between courses.

E. ANALYTICAL SERVICES

Overall, Analytical Services (AS) role is about impact and evaluation of what the Department does. AS already know for example that someone is doing LSC funded level 2 training. The ILR will tell that. But it is difficult to find out what the person subsequently did – in terms of learning or employment. In this way, by enabling better tracking, a ULN would assist in the evaluation of DfES' effectiveness.

There is a significant risk that the Department does not know if the targets for qualification levels will actually be reached because some of those who achieve a certain qualification already have one. Snapshot information will not distinguish the repeat achievements from the first time achievements. In the absence of learner numbers, AS have fallen back on fuzzy matching. AS thinks that it is possible that fuzzy matching is good enough for the broad AS uses, but knows that matching must be easier using a ULN. Even with a ULN, you would still want to match on other data (e.g. dob) in order to assure the match.

Analytical Services:

- ? Does not need to identify people in real time
- ? Does not need to identify people in an interventionist way (so accuracy is not paramount)
- ? Does have to track people over potentially a very long time. And the further apart in time the learning episodes, the less likely fuzzy matching is to work. So where a ULN could help to match data across time, it would be very useful. This makes it a very useful addition to matching

3.5.3 Learning and Skills Council

The LSC is concerned to improve its ability to track progression, assess distance travelled, know that it is using its funding for FE well and be able to assess its own performance in managing meeting the needs of learners in FE. Currently the LSC can:

- ? Through the ILR identify learners within an individual college. But there are problems where the learner attends more than one college. Learner numbers are currently those within the providers and are unique only within the one provider. Where a learner changes colleges it can distort the figures because it can cause double counting or create an erroneous drop out record
- ? Use fuzzy matching for value added to get back to achievement at entry. But this is not accurate. The process can delay significantly the publication of data. A ULN could help in getting achievement data earlier, a ULN would enable the use of real matching.

Currently the LSC has a moderate picture of what happens in LSC funded provision, but a poor picture of what went on before and a poor picture of what students proceeded to do. For example the LSC is finding it difficult to bring together the data from schools, school sixth forms and all the different colleges and patterns of provision and progression and e.g. destination of HE. The LSC would like to be able to match the HESA data back to LSC data, in order to see which learners proceeded to higher education.

The LSC would like to be able to improve the planning of provision nationally. Locally, the LLSCs examine provision across an area. This is to determine what provision is in place and where, including the levels of provision and whether there is over provision for some learners and under provision for others. The LLSCs then match this to local employers' needs. Where there may be under provision, the LSC actively works to ensure provision of that learning. Where there is under provision but more than one possible provider, the LLSC will prefer to encourage and fund the better achieving provider. The LLSCs and LSC report that there is a lack of suitable information on which to base informed decisions, including decisions affecting the investment in the provision of learning opportunities. The LSC relies on the Labour Force Survey and local household surveys, both of which suffer from significant sampling errors. The LSC seeks a way to provide an effective basis for decision making and investment in understanding and meeting the needs of learners. The quality of information available significantly restricts the current level of advice, guidance and support that the LSC can offer individuals. It also restricts the LSC's ability to work to improve the standards and levels of provision. Consequently, the LSC believes strongly that a ULN will permit far better advice and guidance, particularly where the ULN could link episodes of learning.

The LSC sees benefits accruing to learners and to the LSC's own work:

- ? Benefits for learners could include:
 - ? Ease of enrolment
 - ? Keeping a track of unitised learning (especially e-learning) where people can move about and add bits to their record
 - ? Providing a record of achievement
- ? Benefits to LSC:
 - ? Planning. One big role is to plan provision in a geographical area. This means bringing data in from different sources. Identifying where the data refers to the same learner is difficult
 - ? Tracking progression and matching progression to outcomes
 - ? Assist the process and targeting of funding
 - ? A link to the Connexions service. Colleges' view is that any information about the learner should come from the colleges. For Connexions, if a learner leaves their area, they may lose contact and think that the learner has left

learning. Where the ULN is held by colleges and Connexions, a check could be made to find out whether a learner is now in an institution outside their current or previous Connexions partnership area.

3.5.4 HEFCE

For HEFCE, a ULN would significantly enhance the accuracy of some evidence-driven policies, such as widening participation performance indicators. However, HEFCE believes that the only real justification for a ULN should be the operational benefits to HEIs and providers in other sectors. While statistical information is important, any statistical uses should be based on operational data and not on separately imposed requirements. This means that for HEFCE, meeting the needs of HEIs is more important than meeting the statistical and analytical needs of HEFCE itself.

At present, HEFCE ASD use a range of available data sources and fuzzy matching techniques to develop longitudinal student-centred data sets. One key source is the HESA student identifier (names and dob), which they receive in a coded form, but this is a flawed data set, and does not carry forward robustly to support “muster checking” from year to year. For this reason they are very interested in the proposals to integrate the SLC student identifier, which they expect will be much more robust, with the HESA and UCAS data sets. However, even this will not provide a complete solution for their data analysis needs, and they would continue to use fuzzy matching approaches. A ULN that crossed these organisations would make matching much easier, and if the number were allocated in a way that made it unique to an individual and comprehensive across HE, the resulting analysis would be improved. The ULN is not essential to HEFCE but would be welcomed if it met the needs of HEIs.

For HEFCE, the cross border HE-FE aspects of student ‘careers’ is at least as important as the HE-specific elements. They would ideally like to see a ULN which links back to FE colleges, sixth form colleges and schools data and which also links to the exam boards.

3.5.5 ELWa

ELWa are working to introduce a Unique Learner Identifier (ULI) to commence later in 2003 as an element of their larger project to establish a Life Long Learning Record (LLLLR) for all post-16 learners in Wales. The LLL Record database will comprise a learner data set (including personal data such as name, dob, NINO, year left school, etc.), a learning programme record (courses undertaken), and learning activities record (modules, etc.) and awards. The intention is that the LLL Record will be linked to a national credit scheme, but this is for the future.

The learner data record will be set up by the first provider dealing with the individual after they are 16 (including schools). The provider will complete an on-line (web based) return as part of their funding compliance. ELWa will then issue either a new ULI, for first time post-16 learners, or confirm an existing identifier. The new scheme will be launched on a trial basis in August, and ELWa expect it will take 2-3 years before the ULI is relied upon as the only form of individual identifier.

ELWa would be willing to adapt their ULI requirements to any UK-wide ULN if and when that became available, subject to having confidence in its administration. They would like the transition from the ULI to a ULN to be made as soon as possible, because it would become more difficult the longer their own system is developed.

3.5.6 Department of Employment and Learning Northern Ireland

DEL declared early in the feasibility analysis that they were in principle in favour of a ULN and commissioned their own analysis to examine the issues as they affect Northern Ireland. This study is reporting at the end of August.

3.5.7 Credit Accumulation Schemes

A number of stakeholders raised the importance of a shared learner identifier as a prerequisite for national schemes for credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) systems. There are already CAT schemes operating in the further education systems in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and a scheme embracing all 16+ provision below HE is about to be introduced in Wales. In England, the LSC is embarking on a feasibility study for a national CAT system to integrate and subsume the numerous local schemes already in operation. While a ULN is not essential for credit frameworks which simply enable alignment and movement between different learning programmes and episodes, it becomes essential if the scope of such schemes is extended to enable individual learners to accumulate and carry with them the credits earned from different programmes and episodes. Given the increasing blurred relationship between school, FE, 16+/WBL and HE provision, and the policy aim of opening learner pathways through different modes of learning, it will be important that the current and planned national credit schemes are joined up across the UK and moreover that they cover all modes of learning.

Without a ULN, each national and sectoral CAT scheme will have to generate its own learner identifier – as indeed the Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish systems already do. This will proliferate the number of identifiers and data repositories held, and exacerbate the problems which led to the current study.

3.6 OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

The analysis included organisations not directly involved in learning but who use learner information or encounter individuals as the products of the learning systems. This included:

- ? Employers
- ? Employers organisations
 - ? Institute of Directors
 - ? Confederation of British Industry
 - ? Local Government Employers' Association
 - ? Regional Development Agencies
- ? Connexions Card

A. EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYERS' ORGANISATIONS

In general, employers and employers' organisations see no real benefits for them in a ULN. There might be an indirect benefit if any related potential record of learning improves the quality of students coming out of education (e.g. by enhancing their self-management skills if they take control of their learning).

Many organisations are now approved under the Investors in People standard, which means they are committed to training and development, and every individual in these organisations has her/his own action plan that employers monitor and evaluate. Where

employers want to keep these records themselves, or where employers are not confident in the quality of training undertaken with prior employers or expect training to be done their own way, there would be little operational benefit for employers. Many employers will also see an incentive for employees in maintaining their CVs up-to-date, and, so believe that there is little marginal benefit in a centralised record of learning linked to a ULN.

Employers' organisations stated that employers can already find out about an employee's learning record by requesting and examining his/her CV. A ULN would not really tell an employer anything that he/she did not already know or could find out about. Also, many firms don't need to verify candidates' degrees (unless they have large HR departments), because they can judge from talking to the person whether they are appropriate or not. But there could be some recruitment benefit through the validation of degrees and qualifications of candidates, but for employers it would not be a significant benefit. Often, for many candidates, and particularly the more experienced ones, qualifications may not even be an issue, as experience matters more. Employers will still want to take up references to validate experience.

Thus, from recruiting point of view, the ULN would be helpful only if it lowers the validation costs for qualifications, although this is not seen as generally important

B. REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES

RDAs need aggregated information about learners for strategic purposes and trend analysis and would be customers of any data facilitated by a possible ULN. It would allow them to get accurate enough aggregated data across different learning sectors (HE, FE, vocational learning, etc). The difficulty at the moment is compiling this data across learning sectors.

RDAs need data about learners on strategic level, particularly trends in learners' behaviour. They need to know who is learning, what sectors, what skills, what transitions in learning are there, so that they can promote skills needed by organisations in the region. Therefore, RDAs would be supportive of any initiatives that would make it easy to access information about learners' behaviour, and a ULN would meet their need.

C. TEACHER TRAINING AGENCY

A ULN could make teacher and retention-tracking easier, but this could be achieved with the unique teacher reference number from GTC. However, a ULN could enable this tracking for teachers who do not have HESA numbers. It could also save time in gathering general information and qualifications for the teachers.

D. CONNEXIONS CARD

Connexions Card would welcome a ULN, which it would seek to carry on the card. Doing so would contribute to the card's plans for auto enrolment. If a ULN is in use, enrolment data could be carried on the card and information transferred between institutions. Achieving this would be dependent upon achieving a mass of learners. The card would want to work with LSC and Connexions partnerships to achieve this.

Connexions Card is aiming for 80% of 16-19 year olds to be carrying the card. With these numbers it would be possible to implement auto enrolment, which could be linked to the ULN. In this way, there could be mutual benefit:

- ? Increasing the value of the Connexions Card

3. Stakeholder Views



- ? Using the Connexions Card and its acceptance, combined with the ULN, to carry learner information with the card for the benefit of the learners, the institutions and the success of the Connexions Card and its role within increasing participation and inclusion.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 SUPPORT FOR A ULN

This study has pulled together the views of stakeholders across learning in a more comprehensive way than has been done before. This has enabled a detailed understanding of the views of stakeholders and the areas in which the views and needs are strongest. In doing this it has found that there is widespread support for a ULN. The most common reason for support is the ability to join information across episodes of learning and across sectors. Overall, reasons for support differ and are related to the nature of benefit sought. The benefit streams that the study has identified are described below.

Pre 16 is well supported, but post 16, it is very difficult to track progression and assess effectiveness. This is particularly so in the FE sector, where support for a ULN is the strongest. There is less of a problem in HE, although a ULN could improve accuracy of reporting. Increasing flexibility in HE provision and cross-sectoral provision is making it more important to have an effective identifier that crosses the FE/HE boundary, so that all stakeholders who recognise the issues introduced by this boundary support a ULN.

There is wider and stronger support for the concept of a record of learning accessed through a ULN than there is for the ULN itself as an administrative identifier. The record of learning attracts the strong support of learners, who would otherwise be equivocal about the ULN.

In general, the strength of support is softer at the operational end of the stakeholders than with those who use learner information to plan and support provision. This is because disjointed information directly and adversely affects their ability to work effectively. Increasing flexibility in provision and an increased emphasis on demonstrating successful outcomes will make this situation worse in the future.

Most stakeholders can describe the benefits they would see from a ULN, but very few are able to quantify it

Most stakeholders describe a potential ULN in the context of existing national level identifiers. Here the UPN is a continual reference, both in terms of what a ULN could do and in terms of the difficulties associated with getting permission from the OIC. Many stakeholders propose extending the NINO as a solution. People are not concerned that the ULN carry any meaningful data. The main concern is that learners should be able to remember the number, supported by a look up service for providers.

4.2 BENEFIT STREAMS

From our analysis of views expressed by stakeholders and of ongoing developments, we have identified five distinct streams of potential stakeholder benefits from a ULN. They are:

4.2.1 Administrative savings from simplified registration and entitlement processes

Until the end of compulsory education, learner identification and records are relatively simple, based on the UPN. After learners progress into the 16+ and HE domains, they can quickly accumulate numerous different identifiers and associated data files. This generates work for individual learners and for providers and service agencies at every

transition point during their learning ‘career’ to register for new learning programmes and to verify their identify, past learning and attainments, past financial support, etc. For the most part the efforts involved are tedious rather than onerous, involving form filling, data entry, checking, error resolution, and similar administrative chores. The associated costs are mostly quite low at the individual and organisation level, perhaps amounting to a few hours for individuals and fractions of a FTE staff member for most providers. They can be more significant for learning service agencies: UCAS told us, for example, that they have 20 FTE staff working to check, match and correct applicant data, sending out over 50,000 clarification letters each year. The accumulated incidence of these costs is impossible to measure, but probably occupies several hundred FTE staff across all learning provision, perhaps costing between £5m - £10m or more each year. A ULN issued once and used for all subsequent learning episodes and transitions would eliminate most of these costs.

4.2.2 Reductions in fraud and mispayments from duplicated and erroneous learner registrations

As more flexible learning pathways are created, so the scope for mispayment of learner-centred funding is growing. Sometimes mispayments can result from fraudulent provider claims, as in the case of ILAs (the PAC report on which was published during our consultations). Less pernicious but possibly more pervasive is the potential for mispayments from double counting of learners being registered for different elements of learning at any one time – school pupils also undertaking modules at local FE colleges, FE students registered for different courses at different colleges, WBL customers also following for example e-learning courses, etc. We have no data on the amounts of public funding at risk in this regard, or on the proportion of that funding currently felt to be misspent. It was nonetheless an issue raised as a concern by several stakeholders, including the LSC and DfES, which a ULN would largely eradicate.

4.2.3 More effective targeting of funding to encourage participation and progression

A major difficulty recognised before the current review began (and indeed one driver for the ULN review) is the lack of detailed longitudinal data on individualised learner participation and progression after 16. This causes problems in statistical analysis of learning patterns, which can be partly offset through fuzzy matching techniques – at the cost of expensive data processes. It also makes it difficult to evaluate policy programmes and funding schemes designed to encourage greater participation and individual progression in learning. There is known to be a significant element of financial “deadweight” in such programmes, that is, spending which either has little impact on individual behaviours or funds individuals for something they would have done anyway. But we have seen no assessment of the amounts judged to be involved. Given that total DfES and other spending on schemes to promote and support wider and greater participation in learning must total several hundred million pounds each year, the value of better targeting is likely to equate to tens of millions of pounds a year. A national ULN would enable much more accurate and timely management information to be provided on schemes to promote and support wider participation, and hence reduced programme deadweight.

4.2.4 Enabling the collation, maintenance and use of learner-centred achievement records

Many stakeholders raised with us the desirability of a national system for collating, maintaining and making available to legitimate users some form of individualised record of learner achievements. The preferred form of such a record varies among stakeholders, from centrally held learning credit records (linked to a national credit framework, as

already applies for FE learners in Scotland and Northern Ireland), to a central or virtual individual record of learning (formal provision completed and formal qualifications attained), to a more open personal record of achievements in which a learner could register and maintain their “learning CV” in one authoritative repository. There is widespread support for some national system of this kind, which is most tangible among the stakeholders working to establish national credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) systems. Clearly a ULN is a prerequisite for any national system of learner records, although it would not be sufficient in itself to create such a system. The benefits of any such system appear to be more qualitative than economic, and are generally expressed in terms of providing learners with an easily available record to present to new providers and/or employers.

4.2.5 Enabling “joined up government” services for learners

Looking forward, the ULN could enable better joined up government support for learners, including joint cooperation for meeting learner needs (e.g. Connexions and the YJB working together to meet their joint target for Young Offenders being in education, training or employment; the joined up delivery of student financial support; e-delivery of services).

4.3 SOME IMPORTANT CONCERNS

Principal concerns relate to the achievability of implementing a ULN. Stakeholders, particularly providers, are concerned that implementing a ULN could cause disruption to their ongoing administrative work. There is also a major concern that a ULN could be simply another number added to the existing array rather than replacing existing numbers.

Most stakeholders believe that a central service would be necessary to allocate and manage the ULN, including providing a look up service. The look-up service would be necessary because providers all report that many learners do not know or carry their existing identifiers. There are concerns that the service levels of a central supporting body can be sufficiently responsive. If it is not and if the ULN has to be used, there could be significant delays at enrolment time. People are sceptical that learners will remember or carry their numbers and that the look up service will work

There is a concern among the main direct beneficiaries (the infrastructure service providers) that while the need is strong, the case will not be sufficiently strong to convince the OIC. Support for the ULN is softer amongst the learners and providers, whose needs the OIC is likely to see as more important. Moreover, the benefits are mostly diffused and difficult to quantify.

4.4 SOME COMMON REQUIREMENTS

Some requirements recur across significant sections of the stakeholders. These are that:

- ? The ULN should be UK-wide for it to be effective. This is particularly strong in the HE sector and with the stakeholders who plan and support provision
- ? Most stakeholders believe that the ULN should be generated before learners enter their sector and that learners should bring the identifier with them. When extended, this means that the ULN should commence before 14, with many stakeholders believing that it should start at the very beginning of education
- ? Most stakeholders see the need for a central organisation to allocate ULNs and manage their use

4. Findings

- ? The ULN should be very accurate for administrative and reporting purposes and certainly more accurate than current numbers. The ULN and associated data must be essentially 100% accurate for a record of learning accessed by users.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The effective management of education, including reviewing the effectiveness of provision, planning future provision and management of issues introduced by increasing flexibility is at risk without a ULN. This could affect the future ability to meet the needs of learners and prevents the level and detail of planning necessary to ensure the competitiveness of the UK and the matching of skills to demand. At the individual level, this could result in individuals missing opportunities for employment where future demand exceeds supply. On the other hand, it increases the potential for individuals to be unable to find employment in their chosen field where supply exceeds demand.

Human rights and data protection have been mentioned as concerns by every stakeholder group involved – although learners themselves are the least concerned. There is the potential for some loss of individual rights where extensive learner data is held for management of education and learning, but there are countervailing aspects. With a ULN, there is an increased possibility of:

- ? Better informed and targeted careers guidance
- ? Better informed and targeted education progression guidance
- ? Increased levels of employment relevant to training and education

Further, the significantly improved matching ability would reduce the incidence of incorrect records being created or maintained through reliance on fuzzy matching. This inaccuracy has the potential to contravene the Data Protection Act.

At the operational level, providers and learners could continue without a ULN. Learners are not enthusiastic, although they would welcome a ULN that provided them direct benefits through a record of learning or indirect benefits through improved administrative efficiency. Amongst providers, support is strongest in the FE sector although soft across providers in general. Softer support at the operational end will make the case with the OIC more difficult.

Most stakeholders will support a ULN that reduces administrative burdens, and would be willing to fit in with requirements it generates. But no-one is willing to take the lead, so that to be successful, a ULN would need new prime mover or champion. If the overall need is high but there is an imbalance across stakeholder benefits, ministers may need to decide that the ULN is sufficiently important to the long term needs of the UK and be willing to take a robust stance with the Information Commissioner.

Benefits are diffused across very many stakeholders, making the quantitative element of the business case difficult. The business case should concentrate on key areas of cost and benefit and may need to make sensible assumptions based upon the indications of scale that stakeholders are able to provide.