Lord Hill of Oareford CBE
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

27 October 2010

Dear Minister,

<u>Department for Education Interoperability Review</u>

I write to you as the Chairman of SALTIS, an association which was founded in 2007 to help improve the interoperability of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and other learning services, following Becta's flawed procurement of VLEs in 2006/7.

I refer to the summary of the Cap Gemini Interoperability Review which was recently published on the Department for Education website[1]; and to the letter of 17th September which was sent to you by the SIF Association in response to this review[2].

My purpose in writing to you is not to comment on SIF's particular history or capabilities but rather to contribute to the DfE's more general deliberations regarding the management of technical interoperability standards for learning, education and training (LET) in the UK. In particular, I ask you to consider the following points.

1   **SIF offers an incomplete solution for LET interoperability**. SIF addresses requirements for the circulation of administrative data but does not address the interoperability of learning services such as VLEs and e-portfolios. The government's narrow focus on administrative interoperability has contributed to a succession of policy failures in the delivery to schools of new technologies for learning, including Curriculum Online, BBC Jam, VLEs, e-portfolios and real time reporting.

2   **Standards for the interoperability of administrative systems and standards for the interoperability of learning systems are interdependent**. Both administrative systems and learning services need to exchange data about learning activities, students, their performance and competencies. It is vital that both can share common data formats and that the requirements of learning services are taken into account when these formats are agreed.

3   **Standards must be global**. A purely "national interoperability capability"[3], will be quickly superseded by more widely implemented global standards, whose adoption is also likely eventually to be mandated by the European Community. In the meantime, purely national standards are likely to disrupt markets, to the cost both of UK exporters and of UK educational users who wish to purchase software from foreign suppliers.

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[1] http://publications.education.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DFE-00523-2010&
[2] http://www.sifassociation.org/uk/upload/news/6F22A2_Response%20from%20SIF%20Association%20UK%20Management%20Board%20to%20DfE%20Interoperability%20Review%20summary.pdf
[3] This phrase is given prominence in the Interoperability Review on page 3; and in the letter from SIFA of 17th September on page 1.

4   **An effective framework of interoperability standards will never be wholly owned by a single organisation**. The UK government should not endorse a national monopoly of any single specifications development organisation. It should instead use its influence to work for a set of complementary and convergent standards, based on the most technically capable and most widely recognised specifications available, drawn from many different sources.

We are concerned that current deliberations within the DfE may:
- place too much emphasis on the interoperability of administrative systems at the expense of the interoperability of learning systems;
- give too much influence to public sector bodies at the expense of industry, which requires appropriate standards to function efficiently and which will ultimately determine which standards prevail;
- place too much emphasis on the creation of a national capability without ensuring that this is consistent with (and can influence) emerging international standards.

Consistent and flexible interoperability standards will not only achieve rapid efficiency savings for the public administration but in the longer term, and ultimately more significantly, will provide the foundations for an innovative market for learning technology. Only such a market will provide appropriate technical solutions to endemic problems in many of our schools. Such an outcome will require a closer relationship between government and industry than has been supported in the past by the ESCS ISB.

I would therefore ask that the DfE should view the current disagreement between the authors of the Interoperability Review and SIFA-UK in this wider context; and I would urge the Department to use the offices of the British Educational Suppliers Association (BESA) to consult closely with the learning technology industry before coming to a decision on its future management of interoperability standards for UK education.

Yours sincerely,

Crispin Weston
Chairman of SALTIS