

# Mistaken identity



**Edgar A Whitley** explains how his academic study of the technology behind identity cards swiftly turned into a political football

**W**hen the LSE Identity Project began work on its independent analysis of the government's proposals for identity cards, we explicitly sought to provide a comprehensive review of the implications of the bill as presented, and did not address the underlying principle of the scheme.

Our main report, issued in June 2005, provided a detailed review of many aspects of the legislation, and our findings supported – or conditionally supported – 79 of the 91 conclusions drawn by the home affairs committee's report on the bill. Despite this, our research was received with considerable scorn by the government, which labelled the 'so-called' research as 'technically incompetent'.

Academic policy analysis aims to ensure that large and controversial policy proposals are subject to properly informed scrutiny, and I believe that the LSE report played such a role in the case of the identity cards scheme. However, in the face of such high-level and repeated criticism, I began to wonder whether we, as a group of academics drawing on the limited publicly available information, had totally misunderstood the detailed work that a team of civil servants had undertaken (by February 2006, this team consisted of over 180 civil servants, consultants and interims). Perhaps our concerns that the resulting scheme would be high-cost and high-risk were misplaced.

As I prepared to appear before a science and technology select committee on ID cards earlier this year, I reviewed the other written submissions to the committee. It became clear that our report was, if anything, too cautious, and the way the LSE report was treated was less about policy and more about politics.

I have recently become concerned that there are many aspects of the scheme that could seriously hamper its effectiveness before it comes online in 2009. Four examples illustrate this:

The distinction between identity-verification (who are you?) and authentication (what are you entitled to do?) is widely understood in academic and industry circles, but does not appear to have

informed Home Office policy. An example of how identity cards will work in practice (on the UK Identity and Passport Service website) talks about freely disclosing a person's date of birth (which is often used in security checks) rather than simply confirming whether they are they are old enough to undertake particular activities. Making sensitive personal data available in this way is likely to increase, rather than reduce, identity fraud.

Another key feature of the scheme is the use of biometric identifiers and biographical information to identify individuals uniquely (thus preventing someone from enrolling for more than one identity card). These biometrics are intended to include face-recognition, fingerprints and probably iris scans. However, the newly formed Identity and Passport Service only anticipates piloting the recording of fingerprints as a second biometric from volunteers in late 2007, yet the full scheme anticipates enrolling between 30,000 and 50,000 individuals every working day from 2009.

Although the formal procurement process has yet to begin, industry is already expressing concern about its engagement with government. For example, on the one hand the government is talking about 'level one' requirements that describe, in not very detailed terms, what the scheme is to do. Yet on the other hand, the Citizen Information Project has agreed design features of the National Identity Register to enable contact data-sharing benefits to be delivered.

At the other extreme, there is already talk of adding extra functionality and data to the National Identity Register, such as health information. One only has to look back to the introduction of online tax returns for the Inland Revenue to appreciate that late additions to the specification of a system can have major implications for the overall cost of the scheme.

My final issue relates to the politics of the scheme. The opposition parties have already said that they will scrap it if elected, so there is a sense of urgency in government to get the scheme running as quickly as possible. Yet if government has learned one thing about large IT projects, it is that rushing a complex project will inevitably lead to problems.

For all these reasons, I now have little confidence that the identity cards scheme will be delivered on time and on budget. ●

Dr Edgar A Whitley is a reader in information systems at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He is research co-ordinator for the LSE Identity Project



John Reid in the spotlight: the distinction between 'who you are' and 'what you are entitled to do' does not appear to have informed Home Office policy