Why the Sector Skills Agreement (2003-2008) failed to deliver employer led curriculum development

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A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Volume 1 of 2

The University of Huddersfield

March 2012

Abstract

This study examines the Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) policy initiative, which was instigated by the 'New Labour' Government in 2003. The policy was intended to create an employer demand-led system of curriculum development for education and training in the Learning and Skills Sector within the United Kingdom. Sector Skills Councils (SSC) were tasked with implementing this policy initiative. This study explores the reasons why the SSA policy initiative failed to achieve the ambitions that the Government had for it. The methodology utilised by this study was grounded in reflexivity, with the author acting as a participant/key informant in the primary data collection. The primary data underpinning this study was obtained predominantly from email correspondence and was complemented by documents emanating from the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) and the governments' of the 'devolved nations' of the UK and the then nine English regions, as well as the SSCs. The study argues that existing theorisations of policy fail to grasp the complexity of the processes surrounding the development of SSAs and consequently need to be developed further. Neo-pluralism provides a vehicle to advance theoretical understandings of policy processes in general and the SSA process in particular. The study concludes that a number of issues resulted in the failure of the SSA process, key amongst which was the involvement of the devolved nations and English regions of the UK in this process, whereby these constituencies appropriated the SSA to serve their own agendas, which were not those of the national government.

Acknowledgements

Copyright Statement

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This chapter commences by giving a justification for the study of the Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) at PhD level. The thesis argues that the policy failed to deliver what was intended for it, and it is this failure that is the basis for analysis within this study. The Sector Skills Agreement was supposed to 'usher' in an 'employer demand-led system of curriculum development', where employers had a more direct say in the curriculum that was offered in FE colleges and 'other' Government funded training providers. The purpose of this policy was to make the curriculum providers and curriculum provided more responsive to the employers' perceived needs. The belief of Government was that this would then lead to improved economic performance generally (DfES 2003).

This chapter also begins to identify the reasons why the policy failed, and the theoretical issues that this failure has potentially created for academic policy theorisation. This chapter introduces the reader to the critique and development of existing policy analysis contained within the subsequent chapters of this thesis. It is this critique and analysis of the development and failure of the policy process that is important about this study, and why this thesis should be interesting both to academics and policy makers.

The broad time span of the Sector Skills Agreement considered within this thesis commences in 2003 with the enunciation of the policy, and concludes with the effective completion of the SSA process in 2008. The more detailed time span of this

thesis is between 2006 and 2008, when the author of this study was involved in developing a Sector Skills Agreement for an SSC.

The chapter sets the scene for the whole of the thesis by identifying and justifying the rationale for the study. It continues by defining the development of the Sector Skills Agreements across the very diverse nations making up the United Kingdom. This includes an analysis of the various skills systems that were operating within each of the devolved nations when the SSA process commenced. The historical neo-liberal development of the post-16 education and skills curriculum is also described within this chapter. This is a key concept in understanding the theories underpinning the SSA as perceived by the policy makers within Whitehall who developed SSAs. Although as this thesis will seek to show, this notion became contestable as the policy was implemented across the UK.

The chapter also explores the role of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) themselves, and how they were integrated into the skills system at the time they were commissioned to produce the SSAs. In this way, the chapter seeks to emphasise how the SSCs were given the responsibility for producing SSAs, but not given the power to implement them.

Having explored the concepts that were existing at the time that the SSCs were seeking to implement the SSA policy, this chapter then sets out for the reader the original five constituent parts of the SSA. The SSA was divided into five stages from inception to completion, and these are explained. These were designed to lead the partners and stakeholders, including both public and private sector employers, along with the SSC into an agreement.

This chapter then goes on to state the research question upon which this thesis is based and explore the pre-supposition contained within it. This is that the SSA policy failed to deliver 'the employer demand-led system of curriculum development'. The justification for this presumption from primary literature sources is also set out within this chapter.

This chapter concludes with a description of the organisation of the rest of the thesis, to guide the reader through the subsequent chapters, and the main arguments contained within them.

Rationale for the Study

Why is a study on the Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) deemed to be important enough to be a topic for a PhD thesis? An analysis of academic educational search engines shows that with the exception of published work by the author of this study, no other academic writer has published work on the SSA. This suggests that the SSA has not been seen as important by academics as a driver of educational policy within the Learning and Skills Sector[1]. It also adds justification to the contention that the SSA policy failed to achieve the radical agenda that the Government had identified for it.

The analysis of this 'policy failure' will be informative for both policy makers and academics with an interest in the development of educational academic policy. The 'close-up' analysis of the mechanisms of policy transformation during implementation should enhance academic understanding of policy development. Throughout this study, the work of academics will be considered and critiqued from the perspective of

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[1] The Learning and Skills Sector is sometimes also referred to as the Lifelong Learning Sector.

looking at policy within the Learning and Skills Sector (LSS). This has proved to be a difficult exercise for the author of this study, because much of the current published academic work related to policy in the LSS sector is not directly related to policy implementations, but the effects of policy on definable groups and institutions within the LSS sector.

Work by Ainley, Avis, Ball, Gleeson, Hodkingson, Keep, Newman, Spours et al, while containing insightful comment and analysis of the way that these writers perceive that policy is created, is naturally limited, because the central thesis of the work for example is FE colleges, the FE curriculum, or the impacts of a specific policy on the recipients. This being institutions such as FE colleges, or learners receiving education and training under the 'Train to Gain' policy for example. For this reason it has been difficult to critique what are understandably limited and purposeful analyses of LSS policy, because they are underdeveloped and incomplete. They do however contain insightful analysis of parts of the policy development process, which complements the work within this study. The contribution that this thesis is therefore seeking to make to the literature is to facilitate further development of policy theorisation. It is hoped that this thesis will enable academic writers to underpin some of their insightful analysis on the 'grounded empiricism' contained within this thesis.

This study has also sought within this study to theorise the SSA within the context of existing academic theories related to political and class theory. So, for example, this thesis draws on Marxist thought on the concept of class and the role of skills and the 'polytechnic' worker (Gorz,1982), as well as analysing the increasing power exercised by the 'middle class' within the 'educational settlement' within the UK. This thesis also makes considerable use of the general concept of 'pluralism' as a framework and critique of the SSA, while seeking to define and expand Ball's (1993) concept of neo-pluralism. Neither pluralism, nor neo-pluralism, have sat easily as a

definition of the processes that re-structured the SSA during the implementation, which is analysed within this thesis. It is anticipated that this critique of pluralism and development of neo-pluralism will be of interest to academics, and contribute to a debate about refining the concepts of pluralism and neo-pluralism, particularly when analysing the period of office of 'New Labour' 1997-2010.

The strength that is argued for this thesis is that rather than looking at the policy from the 'outside' of the policy process as most academic research tends to do, the role of the author of this study in the implementation of the SSA policy, has allowed for academic analysis to take place within the process. This has allowed an analysis at close proximity to the actual processes of policy implementation that most academics would be unable to observe and analyse/critique. This has raised ethical and methodological issues discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis. It is the closeness to the process that enables this study to make an important contribution to understanding the development of policy within the LSS.

The Development of the Learning and Skills Sector, Sector Skills Councils, the Sector Skills Development Agency and Sector Skills Agreements in the United Kingdom

This section analyses the history of the development of the Sector Skills Agreement (SSA). The SSA was a special document, in that it covered not just England, but the whole of the United Kingdom. This meant that it had to deal not with one learning and skills sector, but with four, being initially[2] at least England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. There were traditional historical differences between the four nations and their education systems prior to devolution in 1997, and thus it is

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[2] Although England had one skills system, the transfer of responsibility from Whitehall departments to Regional Development Agencies (see chapter 4) effectively created nine different regional skills policies for SSCs to navigate in seeking to get approval for their SSAs.

important when reading this thesis to understand the differences. It is possible to think of these systems in the devolved nations when compared to the English system as being part (for want of a better analogy) of a policy and legislative evolutionary chain, between England and the devolved nations. This is without the intention of promoting the English system as being a superior evolutionary model. Entering the SSA it is argued there are three distinct historical systems of Learning and Skills implementation relating to the English model from which the skills systems of the devolved nations can be analysed, and these are as follows:

- Pre-1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Within this system, Further Education Colleges were funded and managed as part of a Local Education Authority (LEAs) in the same way that schools were. Budgets were determined by the local authorities, although terms and conditions for staff were negotiated nationally. College governing bodies were made up of local people often associated with the local authority, and local political parties within the area (see Coulson-Thomas, 1990). Within the Thatcher era the Education Reform Act (1988) signalled more powers for governors, and a weakening of Local Authority control on Further Education Colleges, which was subsequently taken further in England, Wales and Scotland by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

- The Further and Higher Education Act 1992: This act took power for Further Education Colleges away from Local Authorities and placed them in the hands of governors who were supposed to have business backgrounds and who were then expected to run colleges as business with a new funding methodology, managed through the creation of a separate funding council. Demand for learning was supposed to emanate primarily from the learner, and colleges were funded for whatever programmes they ran which had

learners on them, and which conformed to schedule 2[3] within the 1992 Act. There was also an intention on the part of the then Conservative Government that the FE sector would also be business facing. Although arguably demand was with the learner, it is argued that this ultimately meant that the supply side to some extent was able to determine the curriculum offer to learners.

- The Learning and Skills Act (2001): The Labour Government was unhappy with a number of issues that were becoming apparent within the LSS system in England (which is discussed in more detail later in this section) and determined to 'wrestle' back some of the power from FE colleges towards the centre, without returning to the pre-incorporation days pre-1992. The creation of the Learning and Skills Council was supposed to develop a more planned system of FE to meet the needs of the economy, productivity and the neo-liberal concept of globalisation (see methodology chapter) and the needs of industry and employers.

The chronological evolution of FE described above refers to England, the SSA as already stated within this chapter was a UK wide system, and therefore had to take account of a slightly different funding and political system of LSS in each of the four nations making up the UK, and these differences are set out below:

Northern Ireland

Within the province, a power sharing Government between Unionist and Republican communities has been in power, and has put an emphasis on skills policy and economic competitiveness. The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) is

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[3] This applied to the Further and Higher Education1992 Act in England and Wales, as will be shown later within this thesis; in Scotland these clauses were enshrined within the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) 1992 Act themselves in Section 4.

responsible for FE and Skills and, as will be seen within this thesis, had considerable power and control of the direction of SSAs within the province. During the SSA process, the FE colleges were becoming incorporated in the way that FE colleges were incorporated within England, Wales and Scotland in 1992/3, as well as the number being reduced from sixteen to six. In essence the FE and skills landscape in Northern Ireland was similar to the pre-1992 landscape in England, moving towards the post 1992 landscape.

Scotland

The Scottish Learning and Skills Sector mirrored that of England and Wales post 1992, with the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act (1992) taking FE colleges out of local authority control. Although 'New Labour' held power in Scotland from devolution till 2007, no attempt was made to legislate in a similar way to the Learning and Skills Act (2001) in England and Wales. SSCs therefore faced a post 1992 'learner demand-driven' model in Scotland, which presented a number of significant challenges described within this thesis. Although project boards were controlled by civil servants from the various Government arms of the Scottish Executive, ultimately this thesis argues control of curriculum remained within the prowess of the provider networker. This difficult situation was significantly 'aided and abetted' by the pre-existing legislation in Scotland relating to skills, dating from 1993.

Wales

During the SSA process the SSCs dealt with a number of Government departments including the Welsh equivalent of the LSC, ELWA. Towards the end of the SSA

process the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) announced that former agencies except the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales were to be absorbed into the WAG. Post SSA therefore, DCELLS received responsibility for policy development, delivery and implementation, and engaged directly with providers, with a strong role for Local Authorities. This later structural change is only interesting in relation to subsequent implementation of SSA agreement, but is not important to the work within this thesis, as the process analysed within this thesis was effectively completed before the demise of ELWA.

The Development of the Neo-Liberal Settlement within the Learning and Skills Sector Post-1992

The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) and the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) that it created, were designed to mirror the neo-liberal new market philosophies that were developed by the Thatcher Conservative Party whilst in opposition (Russell, 1978; Gamble, 1988, Thatcher, 1997). Thatcher believed that the state required 'rolling back' and public sector managers should be free to manage without interference from government or trade unions etc. The Conservatives believed that the creation of quasi markets would produce financial efficiencies and increase quality, not just in FE, but in the public services generally (Levitas, 1986; Hall, 1998; Grocott, 1989; Clarke, 1991; Pollitt, 1993 Clarke and Newman, 1997). Many of the philosophies of management enunciated by Thatcher and her disciples came from the work of Tom Peters the American management guru (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Pollitt, 1993; Dunleavey and Hood, 1994).

From 1990 onwards however, (having been in power since 1979) the Conservative Government were becoming concerned about the skills gap[4] that they re-discovered within British industry. They were worried about the effects that this skills gap could have on the potential competiveness of UK companies in international markets. Skills gaps have been blamed for productivity problems many times before, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s (see Keep, 2006a). In this sense the globalisation arguments that will be 'well rehearsed' within this thesis were beginning to capture the political imagination in the early 1990s. These concerns at that time were also being raised by both business and trade unions (Confederation of British Industry (CBI), 1989; Royal Society of Arts (RSA), 1991; Coldstream, 1993; Macfarlane, 1993). Government concern though, actually represented a policy change from what had been early Thatcherite thought, in that Thatcher believed that pure market forces would dictate the need for training (Lawson, 1992; Hutton, 1995).

The new agenda for the Learning and Skills Sector (LSS) was therefore a bold one, particularly as it was determined that the cost of expanding the LSS would take place through efficiency savings, and not through an input of new money from the Treasury (FEFC, 1992; Smithers and Robinson, 1993; Bradley, 2000; Smithers and Robinson, 2000). The Act proposed that FE colleges were to be removed from local authorities and were to be managed by boards of governors in corporations. These governors were to be predominantly from industry, and thus support the business focus of the college (FEU, 1994; Coulson-Thomas, 1990). The business focus of the FE colleges juxtaposed against funding following the learner appeared to create a tension in the system in relation to meeting the needs of business as opposed to meeting the

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[4] Skills gaps have been accepted as a "fact" by Government, and SSCs were and remain responsible for seeking to address them, by up-skilling the existing workforce to meet the needs of global competition. National surveys such as the National Employers Skills Survey (NESS) seek to identify employer skills gaps by sector. Essentially skills gaps are not relevant to the analysis of the SSA policy, except as a justification background, and therefore this thesis does not engage in any detailed analysis of the debate around skills gaps.

needs of learners. The tension between providers supporting primarily either the needs of learners or employers has continued both during and post the SSA process, and it still appears to remain unresolved. This issue is discussed within the concepts of 'social justice' later within this study.

In 1997, the Conservative Government of John Major fell, and a 'New' Labour Government was elected on a landslide. Since the creation of the FEFC, however, a number of problems had ensued. FE Colleges had sought to get their staff on new more onerous contracts of employment, and a considerable number of redundancies within FE colleges had caused significant industrial unrest (Kimberley, 1997, p 249). Many FE colleges were unhappy as the dispute between trade unions representing FE college staff and the Colleges Employers Forum had begun to set their own pay rates (Burchill, 1998). Added to this chaotic position were the allegations of bullying in some FE colleges by management (Evans and Robinson, 1998, p326).

Principals within the incorporation world were encouraged to see themselves as 'captains of industry' with salaries to match these ambitions, with the result that principals' salaries rose disproportionately to those of 'other' staff within colleges (Reeves, 1995; Tauberman, 2000). Because FE colleges were distanced from forms of effective accountability, some college corporations (despite being allegedly made up of business gurus) failed to control their senior managers properly, and as a result public money was in some instances misappropriated on 'personal items', inappropriate hospitality and/or marketing trips abroad to give just a few examples (NAO, 1999a; NAO, 1999b).

As intimated in a previous paragraph, the Conservatives' 'great idea' for FE was to be funded through efficiencies, rather than through additional money, and therefore FE colleges had to grow in size significantly just to stand still in relation to the funding

that they received. To try to address this, FE Colleges began to engage in franchising of their courses to private training providers and community groups, often based at a significant distance from the FE College itself. The FE college would claim the funding from the FEFC at the unit rate, then pay the actual provider of the education or training a reduced amount for the learning, the difference (profit) being used to support the core business of the college (Rospiglosi, 2000). Because in some colleges the actual core business stayed the same or indeed declined, and the growth targets set by the FEFC continued to rise, then the percentage of franchised business within the FE colleges got so large that it began to distort the work of those colleges (Atkins, 1998, p93).

These issues led the Labour Government to conclude that a new system was required, with Blackstone[5] berating both the FEFC and the former Conservative Government for creating a system that allowed sleaze and mismanagement to thrive without a method of controlling it (Blackstone, (200b), column 799). The Learning and Skills Act 2001 therefore created the Learning and Skills Council through the amalgamation of the Training and Enterprise Councils and the FEFC. The LSC became the main organisation for planning training with inputs being received into this from the Sector Skills Councils and the National Training Organisations (Blackstone, 2000a, column 879). A second fundamental purpose of the LSC was the intention by Government to use planning mechanisms to rationalise the FE sector, creating specialist FE colleges, and merging general FE colleges (Blunkett, 1997; DfEE, 1998; DfEE, 1999; DfEE, 2000a; DfEE, 2000b; DfES, 2002). The LSC was also tasked with sorting out issues of sleaze in the FE sector (Kingston, 2003).

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[5] The then Minister for Further and Higher Education within the first term of the Labour Government.

The LSC soon come under criticism however for its management style and the way it related to FE colleges, and was accused of being 'high handed' by colleges (Crequer, 2001a). Concerns were also expressed at the inception of the LSC, about the actual effectiveness of the LSC model in relation to planning skills needs for the economy (Hammond 2003). There were also concerns about whether the targeted tasks given to the LSC conflicted with a further requirement of the LSC to give impartial advice (CBI, 1999, p12; Mager, 2000, p10; Robinson, 2000a, p19; Robinson, 2000b, p89).

By November 2001, the LSC was beginning to come under further criticism by Parliament, with the LSC receiving criticism for bureaucracy and with Sheerman[6] accusing the LSC of costing £45MN more than it predecessors. The then Chief Executive of the LSC John Harwood refuted this statement, and claimed that the LSC was actually £100MN cheaper than the FEFC/TEC predecessors had been and employed 6,000 fewer staff. Sheerman then also reportedly told the LSC to start punching *"above its weight and lose its fuzzy image"* and start showing its mettle by *"baying for resources"* (Crequer, 2001a). At the same time, there was evidence that staff in FE colleges were feeling undervalued, tied down by bureaucracy and being underpaid (Crequer, 2001b; Crequer, 2001c; Tysome, 2001a;Tysome, 2001b; Hughes, 2001).

As a result of concerns expressed within the Education and Employment Select Committee, the LSC commissioned a report into bureaucracy (Crequer, 2001b; LSC, 2002). The report concluded that the relationship of the LSC with its providers was not working, and indeed, probably could not work. The national LSC office relationships with the satellite Local Learning and Skills Council offices, of which there were originally forty-seven across England, were also described as not

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[6] Sheerman is a Labour Member of Parliament from Yorkshire.

working, and the report concluded that the model needed re-engineering to make it work (LSC, 2002). Within this thesis, the difficulty that many SSCs had when trying to formulate an SSA against the contradiction and confusion between the central LSC and the local LSCs will be described, showing that the problem identified in 2002 still existed in 2006-2008.

The development of the LSC model therefore was intended by the 'New Labour' Government to not only control the 'excesses' of some of the principals within FE colleges, but also to manage and formulate curriculum and the curriculum offer around the needs of employers and learners. There was also an expectation that the LSC would obtain efficiency savings through planning of the type that the FEFC was supposed to achieve through marketisation (Hammond, 2003). It is perhaps the failure of the LSC to achieve this ambition in England that led to the development of SSCs and the concept of the SSA, coupled with the development of regionalism that is considered in the next section of this chapter.

The contribution of the 'Manpower Services Commission' and the 'Training and Enterprise Councils' to skills policy formation

This section examines skills policy emanating from the National Training Boards (NTB) in 1964, to the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) in the 1970s, and the Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) in the 1990s. Many of the issues these bodies were set up to address are similar to those faced by SSCs, which were supposedly to be addressed by the SSAs. This section illustrates how the NTBs models of coercion gave way to the public voluntarism of the MSC, which was subsequently replaced by the perceived

employer-driven yet publicly funded voluntarism of the TECs. These earlier interventions impacted on the philosophical nature of the SSAs and the SSCs.

The creation of the SSC network, and the SSA policy that emanated from it, cannot be viewed in isolation from the historical journey of skills policy prior to this time. This historical journey is considered briefly within this section, and contextualised with some of the experiences in relation to the SSA described in this study. Prior to 1964, the attitude to skills in the UK was one of 'laissez-faire' with trade unions and employers being left to resolve matters themselves, against a background of reluctance by employers to invest in training of their human capital (Evans,1992; Barnett,1986; Wiener,1981; Anderson and Fairley 1982). Increased awareness of the higher skill levels of foreign competition, and a resentment by employers who were training having their staff 'poached' by employers who weren't training their staff led to the creation by government of training boards in the 'Industrial Training Act (ITA) 1963 (Wright,1989). The training boards were responsible for raising a 'compulsory levy' on employers to pay for training. Evans (1992, p8) states that the ITA incorporated a 'carrot and stick' approach to employers. The 'stick' was the compulsory levy to pay for training, with the carrot being the reduction in trade union influence in the apprenticeship system, through the creation of Central Training Council (CTC) consisting of an equal number (six) of employers and trade union bodies.

The economic conditions prevailing in the 1970's began to create mass unemployment, particularly among young people, leading the Labour

Government (1974-1979) to create the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), which was tasked with creating comprehensive manpower policies in order to improve the efficiency of the workforce, increase economic growth, and move back towards full employment. It was perceived that this initiative would involve both government and industry spending a considerable amount of money on training (Ainley and Corney, 1990, p 4-5). In Chapter 5 of this study, the composition of the project boards of the SSA policy are discussed, and it is interesting to note that the composition of the MSC executive commission was constituted with an equal number of employers and trade unionists, and an educator, whereas the SSA boards in the devolved nations, and ultimately in the English regions, were composed entirely of civil servants, with a nominal trade union representative, but no employers (Evans, 1992, p15). Evans (1992) and Ainley and Corney (1990) talk in their analysis of the trend within the MSC towards the reduction in involvement with the trade unions as being a move away from the corporatist strategies adopted by government at the end of the Second World War.

Employers appeared to be sceptical of the value of the MSC at its inception, arguing that mass training of young unemployed people merely led to overtraining that industry did not need, and therefore responsibility for funding this training should be that of government alone. Secondly, employers argued that more effort was required by schools to equip young people with better employability skills (Ainley and Corney, 1990, p 37). This is in keeping with the move towards neo-liberal thinking that according to Evans (1992) began when James Callaghan took over as Prime Minister in 1976, and was

articulated for the first time in relation to education in his Ruskin College speech. The conclusion from Ainley and Corney (1990) is that many employers at that time were opposed to any concept that encouraged or compelled them to spend money on training, a situation still pertinent over thirty years later when the SSA was conceived. As Wright (1989, p 204) points out, however, the situation was uneven, with some employers being committed to training, while others were not, and this issue was identified again in the SSA process. Another issue that was central to the neo-liberal foundation of the SSA was the need to develop a flexible, highly skilled workforce able to adapt to change, and to attract global capital investment to the UK (see Chapter 3). The MSC was beginning to echo this argument too, claiming that a core part of the training they offered should enable people to adapt to change (MSC, 1978).

The election in 1979 of a Conservative Government led by Margaret Thatcher changed the character of the MSC, coupled as it was with an ideological determination finally realised in 1982 when Norman Tebbit abolished the majority (16 out of 23) Industrial Training Boards, and returned responsibility for skills back to a voluntary system (Ainley and Corney, 1990, p 55). The appointment of David Young to responsibility for the MSC was a further sign of the ideological conviction by the Thatcher Government to remove consensual corporatist arrangements for skills and move control towards employers. Young's association with the Thatcherite wing of the Conservative Party was further emphasized by his comment that he didn't believe in throwing money at problems, and his conviction that employers knew best

about training, and therefore should be left in a free market to resolve their training issues themselves (Evans, 1992, p 59). Mass structural unemployment now meant that the MSC was able to move from providing 'training for stock' in anticipation of an increased demand for employment upon an economic recovery, towards a national and comprehensive training programme for all young people. This initiative was carried out by the MSC with a view to creating a multi-skilled and flexible workforce to replace the traditional apprenticeships supported by the ITBs, which were perceived as outdated and dominated by trade unions (Kenny and Reid, 1985; Ainley and Corney, 1990, p 56). These training programmes for the first time embodied the concept of creating portable skills transferable within and between 'occupational families' (Hayes, 1982 and 1983; Ainley and Corney, 1990, p 59). This theme of portable skills to respond the vagaries of international capital was prevalent in much of the 'New Labour' discourse considered within this study, see Chapter 3.

The MSC was, however, criticised by some for having a romantic and almost 'mystical' respect towards employers (Collins, 1986). They were perceived as being forward-looking, knowledgeable about training programmes, and ideal leaders of vocational curriculum (Collins, 1986, p248). Collins concluded that while there may have been some good employers at the time, many employers in the early 1980's were in 'survival mode', coming as they were out of a recession, rather than forward-looking, with no training plans, or much interest in training (Collins, 1986, p 248). The same sort of attitudes identified by Collins (1986) in relation to employers can also be identified in DfES

(2003), along with much of the rhetoric surrounding the creation of the SSA identified in this study.

In Chapter 3 of this study, an analysis of Marxist concepts of class is used to suggest that the SSA could be perceived to be a document of class control. This being because the SSA effectively targeted the working class occupations of the traditional proletariat, by seeking to make them more amenable to the needs of international capital. A similar observation was also made by Lamb (1984), who claimed that the MSC was seeking to create attitudes in the proletariat that were appropriate to the needs of capital. Finn (1986) makes a similar claim, accusing the MSC of seeking to engineer a 'radical restructuring of the working class (p 54), while Benn and Fairley (1986) perceived the MSC as a 'sinister corporate creature' that was using education and training to change the nature of British society. Morris and Griggs (1988) concluded that the MSC was creating a class divide by protecting the middle class traditional education offer while reducing the working class offer to something called 'training'. This study argues that the SSA suffered from a middle-class 'opt-out' of the kind described by Morris and Griggs, because 'A' levels, the main bastion of middle-class education, were excluded, which made the SSA more focused on the traditional blue-collar workers. There are thus similarities in the theory on this between the writers discussing the creation of the MSC and the conclusions of this study on the creation of the SSA.

Burness (1989) also points to the MSC in relation to the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) starting the discourse on employer-led training courses, which covered not only unemployed young people, but all trainees, including those in full time employment. Although this concept was not perceived in the same way as employer-led within the auspices of the SSA, it nevertheless began to create the linguistic framework upon which the SSA was to build later.

During its lifetime, the MSC had been a quango with close links to the civil service, which included staff enjoying civil service pay and conditions (Evans, 1992). While it is not suggested that this was the only reason for its demise, the desire by government to move employers into the centre of training encouraged the creation of the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs). Evans (1992, p 131) argues that the government wanted to use the TECs to give employers real executive and budgetary power to get them really engaged in the training agenda. As stated later in this chapter, the failure of the SSCs to get similar power probably damaged the ability of the SSA to get focused on employer needs. In Hammond (2003), the former CEO of the FEFC claimed in an interview that the 'fraud and incompetence' in the TECs meant that the incoming 'New Labour' Government was reluctant to give 'public money' to quintessentially private companies, which is what SSCs are.

Another reason suggested for the demise of the MSC and the rise of the TECs was the fact that the MSC was a UK national body whereas the TECs that replaced them (called Local Enterprise Councils (LECs) in Scotland) mirrored the more localized structures in Germany and the United States of

America (Department of Employment, 1990; Evans, 1992, p 137). The Department of Employment (1990) believed that poor employer engagement in training was due to the national policy emphasis of the MSC, which would be improved by a more localized structure offering local solutions to employers (another iteration of the oscillation within government between favouring national or local policy-making discussed in Chapter 3 of this study). Within a Scottish context, Brown (1989) infers that the centralist and perceived English nature of the MSC made its acceptance difficult in Scotland. Policy contradictions surrounding national sectoral solutions arraigned against national and regional geographical solutions, also bedevilled the progress of the SSA, and this is discussed in Chapter 5. In its white paper, though, the government was also critical of employers cutting back on training in a recession and then complaining about skills shortages in a subsequent economic recovery (Evans, 1992, p 137).

 Another policy that was central to the development of the SSA was the long-standing conviction in government that the costs of training should be transferred to employers. Evans (1992, p 142) states that the government hoped that by transferring executive responsibility to employers, they would come to appreciate the need to invest themselves in their workforces. This same hope can also be found within the concepts of the SSA discussed elsewhere within this chapter. The Department of Employment (1990, p 33) protested that the role of developing individuals training through life was not a government responsibility, and that employers must lead on it. Evans (1992, p 150, 154-155) points to some of the difficulties with government interference

that TECs experienced through activities such as directing TECs to focus provision on the unemployed for example, rather than giving help to small businesses to train their employed staff. Evans (1992) concludes that employers not only wanted to be freed from trade union intervention, but also from government intervention too. The issue of government interference at a number of different levels is dealt with at considerable length in Chapter 4 of this study, as it is one of the fundamental reasons cited for the failure of the SSA policy. Evans (1992) concludes (p 205) that at the time of writing his book, despite the development of the TECs, employers were still not investing in training, and he argued that the litmus test of the success of the TECs would be whether the amount of training employers undertook increased as a result of them (p 202). Given that the impetus behind the SSA process was to encourage employers to take responsibility for training and to pay for it, it is suggested that the TECs failed to achieve this in any way, and the SSA represented yet another approach of government to try to get employers to start investing in training. Many of the ideas within the MSC and the TECs, and indeed in the LSC model can be seen to have been recreated in the SSA process, and having failed before, it is perhaps not surprising that they failed to make any impact through the SSA.

This section of the study has identified the historical development of skills policy within the UK from the creation of the ITBs through to the creation of the MSC and subsequently the TECs. The reasoning behind the creation of these bodies with responsibilities for skills development is the failure by employers to adequately provide training for their workers, or apprenticeships

for new entrants to the professions. The ITBs, with the collection of a mandatory industrial levy, represent a coercive philosophy of training the workforce, and did not fit into the Thatcherite concepts of free markets. The MSC (although originally created by the Labour Government (1974-1979) to tackle rising unemployment, particularly among young workers) represents the development of the voluntary scheme to encourage employers to train that was managed firmly within the public sector. The demise of the MSC and the creation of the TECs represent the transformation from the voluntary scheme to a more market-driven private sector approach, using private companies to manage public money. The TECs also address the criticisms that the MSC was a national organization, and skills policy needed to be grounded more locally to address specific business needs created by local geographical conditions. The issue of national/regional relevance became a major issue for the SSA policy, and is described in some detail in Chapter 5.

A comparative analysis between the SSC network, the SSAs and the ITBs, MSC, and TECs would suggest that the SSC network was effectively a national voluntary network akin to the MSC, but having the perceived employer ownership by essentially being positioned within the private sector like the TECs. Unlike the TECs, however, the SSCs were not given any control of public funding, which remained firmly within public sector bodies such as the LSC. Given essentially that the SSCs had less power than the TECs with which to 'broker' agreements, it is perhaps not surprising that the SSA failed to create the radical employer demand-led system of curriculum development envisaged by the government.

Regionalisation Developments in England Post Learning and Skills Act 2001

As intimated within the previous section, the LSC began to receive criticism almost from its inception, and within this section, the slow changes in the power structures around skills are discussed within the 'regionalisation' agenda of the Labour Government. In 2004 the Government produced a White paper on regional development, which saw enhanced role for the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and in the skills agenda alongside the (subsequently moribund) concept of regional assemblies. The White Paper states:

> *"Employment and skills are at the heart of regional economic development. The Government believes that it is important for national, regional, and local partners to work together to improve employment opportunities and skill levels and thereby increase prosperity and competitiveness. Accordingly, Regional Development Agencies were asked to lead on Frameworks for Employment and Skills Action (FRESAs)[7] and to produce a first framework for each region by October 2002. The Frameworks are intended to provide a forum for planning and delivery, which will involve all the main stakeholders at regional and local level. Their aim is to enhance the range of services that already exist by bringing together the work of different government agencies, business, the TUC, CBI and other key partners in each region, in a collective approach, which helps to maintain the health of the local labour markets. This will mean less overlapping of services and fewer resources being wasted."* (DTLGR, 2004, para 2.11, p26)

The partnering and pluralistic nature of the proposal above underlines a shift from the original remit of the LSC as described by Blackstone in the House of Lords (Blackstone, 2000a). Originally the LSC were responsible for the planning of provision and skill needs, but under DTLGR (2004) responsibility for this had passed

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[7] From these FRESAs the Regional Skills Priorities evolved and the Regional Skills Partnerships groups to develop and manage them. As will be shown within this thesis, this in turn led to SSCs having to start to negotiate with individual regions in the same way as they had to do with the devolved nations. By the time that the last tranches of SSCs were going through the SSA process, the concept of an England project board had collapsed and SSCs were dealing with nine separate English regions, as separate entities.

to the RDAs. The plan was originally intended to look at regional level skills, and was not unlike the concept of an SSA, which was regionally specific, rather than economic sector-specific as SSAs were. The SSA and the SSCs footprints were based on their SSC economic footprint[8]rather than geographical constraints.

> "The first step is to develop a single plan based on coherent, valid and accessible information and knowledge about labour markets and skills. This plan will focus on what needs to happen[9] in the region in order to develop a healthy labour market which benefits employers and individuals alike. Government guidance emphasises that the Framework is a much a process as a product. The joint approach to analysis, consultation, communication and planning are at the heart of the process of developing the Frameworks and will be the areas in which they are likely to add the most value" (DTLGR, 2004, Para 212, p27)

 This regional concept was moving forward at the same time as the Sector Skills agreement policy was developing, meaning that Parliament was being presented with a regional and central policy for skills at almost the same time. This may have something to do with inter-departmental 'conflicts' of the type described by Richard Crossman in his diaries of the 1964-1970 Wilson[10] Labour Governments (Crossman, 1991). The then Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (a super department created by New Labour and under the control of the then Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott) was promoting what could be defined as the Regional Skills policy. At roughly the same time, the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES)[11] was promoting a UK national Skills policy, using economic sectors through the SSDA and SSC, which had a different philosophical base[12] to that proposed in

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[8] The SSAs were based on national economic footprints of the respective SSCs, which were determined by SIC codes

[9] This statement appears to presuppose the development of mechanisms such as the RSA for determining "what needs to be done"

[10] Rt. Hon Harold Wilson was Labour Prime Minister 1964-1970 and 1974-1976.

[11] The Rt. Hon Charles Clarke MP was the Secretary of State at DfES at the time, and he was perceived as a cabinet 'big hitter' having been a senior Labour politician for many years.

[12] By referring to different philosophical bases, the author of this study has in mind the fact that the SSA was supposed to give power to sector of employers, who through the central

DTLGR (2004). This seemingly contradictory approach was in England at least partly responsible for many of the problems that SSCs had in getting their SSAs approved. The thesis will argue that the regional bodies through the Regional Skills Partnerships (RSP) effectively manipulated the SSA process to make it complement existing regional skills policy, rather than iterating the skill needs of the relevant sectoral employers.

The LSC responded quickly and firmly to the 'political danger' that they espied in the White Paper (DTLGR, 2004), with the LSC announcing that in addition to the national and local structure created under the 2001 Act, they intended to create a regional tier of operation. The recently employed Chief Executive of the LSC Mark Haysom stated:

> *"We are committed to continuing to develop the localness of our operations. The appointment of the Regional Directors strengthens the role of our local LSCs, allowing for a more streamlined, manageable and responsive reporting structure that avoids unnecessary bureaucracy. It will free up the front line, giving additional strength and confidence to local decision making, resulting in truly local leadership delivering local solutions to local needs."* (LSC, 2004a)

The re-positioning of the LSC seemed to meet with Ministerial approval, as the then Secretary of State was also quoted in the same document as saying:

> *"The delivery of the Skills Strategy will in part depend on the ability of all key delivery agencies to work in partnership at a regional level. The new arrangements at the LSC to put in place a regional management structure will help the key partners to work even more closely together."* (LSC, 2004a)

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mechanism of national civil service departments would drive forward. The DTLGR white paper was promoting a regional basis, whereby skills problems were identified regionally, and acted on from a regional basis through regional government. One base therefore was a sectoral one (SSA; DFES, 2003) and the other Regional (DTLGR 2004), and it appears that these are contradictory.

The regional LSC was supposed to mirror and respond to the arrangements that were developing within the English regions, and thus reduce the size of the national LSC, because it became very difficult to know what the role of the national LSC was within a regional skills policy framework in England. In LSC (2004b) the role of the national LSC within the new policy construct remained undefined, except that it appeared that its role was diminished, with power transferring to the regions (LSC, 2004b):

> "The reorganisation of our Coventry-based teams is wide-ranging. We aim to create a smaller, simplified National Office where there is clear ownership and accountability within all areas of our activity. The Learning group will focus on young people and adults, including the development of learning and funding strategies. [The role of the leader of the Learning group] will also encompass building effective relationships with our key customers, including the further education sector, training providers and schools. The LSC will be seeking to appoint a Director of Skills shortly. His or her remit will be to work closely with the Sector Skills Councils and all key employer-led organisations to secure their engagement in learning and skills training."
> (LSC, 2004b)

The development of the regional LSC and the demise in size of the national LSC was one policy agenda, but as already stated at the same time a more centralist skills agenda was being developed, and this will be considered in the next section of this chapter.

The National Skills Agenda in England

In the previous section of this Chapter, it was suggested that the Government may have become unhappy at the progress that the LSC had made in addressing the skills gaps problems. In echoes of Coldstream (1991), Shiner (2003) was still lamenting the stubbornness of the skills gaps within the UK.

> *"In education and training over the last six years we have made major progress such as the setting up of the Learning and Skills Council, bringing in coherence to planning and funding, and the Regional Development Agencies focussing on knowledge and skills as key drivers of economic regeneration. However despite these improvements our skills gaps remain stubbornly persistent."* (Shiner, 2003, p8).

Although the LSC seemed to be losing power to other organisations such as the RDAs, the official position seemed to be that the providers in the LSS were to blame for the skills gaps. Pollitt (1993) argues that such a paradigm means that Education becomes the slave of industry and thus only educationalists are wrong; industrialists who do not co-operate with educationalists do so because they have lost confidence in the system due to those same educationalists. The then Secretary of State at DfES stated:

> *"Too many educational institutions think that employment is somehow nothing to do with them and I am talking about schools, colleges and universities. There are many schools, colleges and universities, which are very positive about their local employers, but actually there is often a view that it is not really something to do with education, and education is inward looking rather than outward looking in too many places. By the same token there are some employers who are so fed up about the way in which the education system works that they really cannot see the value in any particular kind of collaboration. So I say that at each level, whether it is in the school, in skills, at universities, in further education or lifelong learning, we have to bring education and employers closer together."* (Clarke, 2003, p24).

The White Paper produced by DfES, which announced the creation of the Sector Skills Agreement policy *"21st Century Skills: Realising our Potential"* (DfES, 2003) also re-emphasised the concept of the demand-led system from an employer's perspective, which echoes ideas and concepts that have been present in the LSS policy mix since the Thatcher/Major Governments.

Shiner (2003) states that the primary desire at that time by Government, was to make the supply side of the LSS more susceptible to employers needs, as it was still perceived to be lacking by Government against this measure:

> *"We published the Skills Strategy in July and we set out how we intended to reform the education and training system to make it more responsive to business by engaging employers, by investing in the individual, and by building the capacity of the supply side. That is no small challenge. I and colleagues at the Department are very proud of this document because it tackles some of the big issues that have been around for some time. It is not the first time that we have tried to tackle them, but this is the first time that we have seriously put business at the centre of education policy"* (Shiner, 2003, p7)

The model for LSS development, described in DfES (2003) on analysis, appears to be based on three distinct policy level national (all England), regional and local. The SSDA was responsible for developing long-term sector skills and productivity agendas nationally and establishing Sector Skills Agreements with the emerging SSCs (DfES, 2003, p32). In addition, the SSDA was responsible for feeding into and receiving information from the national skills alliance led by the national office of the LSC, and the regional partnerships championed by the RDAs.

To take account of local needs the White paper provided that a range of organisations feed into and receive data from the RDAs. The model is complex, requiring a 'partnering' arrangement with a large number of bodies from business and education/training, at national, regional and local level, through which policy is developed at these three levels that complement each other. This then relates back to the national priorities. Given the political desire to develop regional solutions, the sectoral approach prescribed by the SSA seems to be at odds with this devolved policy. The sectoral model of the SSA was designed to develop UK sectoral solutions rather than devolved nation, English region or sub-regional/local policies, and thus it could be argued the tension described in this thesis was inevitable.

The Secretary of State at DfES was at the time enthusiastic about the pivotal role that SSCs and the SSA would play in developing the model described above. He stated:

> *"What is the permanent long term framework? First, there will be 23, 24, 25 Sector Skills Councils across the whole of the country involving business... There will be the engagement of employers to say for our sector "What are the qualifications we need? What are the funding channels?" We need that, and that will be much more effective than the much larger number of National Training Organisations that there were. Then to support that framework the Learning and Skills Council is working together with the Regional Development Agencies to ensure that in ever locality of the country it is working with local employers and to ensure that there really are the resources there so that both employers and the students can get the skills they need."* (Clarke, 2003, p25)

The SSDA rather than the LSC (as was the case previously) were to take on the role of working with the SSCs (DfES, 2003). From the statement of Clarke (2003) it would appear that the LSC had been relegated to an enabling role for the SSCs along with the RDAs through the LLSCs at local level (DTLGR, 2004). The role of the SSDA was to assist in the creation of SSCs (as SSCs were still being created in 2005) and fund, support and monitor the performance of SSCs across the SSC network, which became known as the Skill for Business Network (SfBN). The SSDA therefore was tasked to make sure that there were consistent standards of quality across SSCs as well as providing a 'minimum cover for essential functions', which is not defined within the White Paper. The SSDA was also required to ensure that skills provision was designed to meet sector needs, as well as ensuring that generic skills were effectively covered in the work of SSCs. Finally the SSDA was responsible for promoting best practice sharing and benchmarking between sectors and providing a website for public bodies and individuals to enable them to access high quality sectoral labour market intelligence data across the UK (SSDA, 2004).

The reasoning behind why a demand-led system was the way forward was enunciated by Studd (2003) (an employer) as providers were accused of manipulating qualifications structures to suit themselves.

> *"I am stepping back a little bit to a question you asked earlier about the reason for empowering employers and empowering SSCs. It is that word 'empower'. If you look back over the last few years employers have spent a lot of time developing national standards, developing Scottish and National Vocational Qualifications, developing apprenticeship programmes, but once those programmes are developed, by the time they are delivered back to employers through training providers, colleges or awarding bodies, they do not look at all like they did when we first devised them. Unless SSCs have authority and influence over the whole of that delivery structure you will not have a properly demand-led system."* (Studd, 2003, p38)

Salmond (2003) the then chairman of SSDA reiterated the re-development of the demand-led approach, with its emphasis on employer demand driving the curriculum offer.

> *"Fundamentally we are shifting the balance of power between those that supply education and training and those that demand it, and we have made some really encouraging progress. We have nine licensed SSCs; both trailblazers and those with full five-year licences. They already cover a third of the workforce in the UK, and we now have another 13 SSCs well through the development phase; so by the middle of next year we expect the Skills for Business network to cover around 85% of the UK's workforce."* (Salmond, 2003, p20).

Another Minister the then Parliamentary Undersecretary of State for Skills and Vocational Education at DfES also endorsed the development of a demand led model which shifted power from providers to employers. He stated:

> *"We must have a situation where education and training responds to the demand side. There is an alignment between what demand is and what the supply side offers. In some areas we already have some good practice. This is always presented as a faulty model and yet I know for example in my own local college what an important part of their role is working direct with business, particularly SMEs, and how effective they are at it. The assumption is that all colleges are not responsive to business but that is nonsense. It is like saying all businesses don't give*

a damn about skills, it is just a generalisation that is meaningless. That does not mean that we have a demand-led system. We have a supply-driven system largely, and that needs to change." (Lewis, 2003, p45)

Within the skills agenda, and for that matter in general policy making itself, the power of individual secretaries of state within their particular parties and in their departments can impact/ influence policy direction. By implication also, how policy direction can change on the replacement of a Secretary of State. At the time of SSA inception, the SSCs and the SSDA were enjoying the particular 'patronage' of the then Secretary of State at DfES:

> *"The debate about the role of Sector Skills Councils being at the heart of what we are trying to do has been moved on by the strategy, and quite frankly by the Secretary of State's passion about Sector Skills Councils. Every time Charles Clarke talks about this agenda sometimes he forgets all the other organisations that are involved and only refers to Sector Skills Councils."* (Lewis, 2003, p46).

It is perhaps not surprising, that many SSCs felt that in addition to assuming much of the LSC planning operations, they should also like the LSC become a funder of skills training as well. Stanners (2003) makes this point:

> *"Hopefully the Ministers can't hear this! We are being revolutionary in our concept; the LSC have about £9 billion to spend and we think probably the SSCs are getting something in the order of £30 MN or £50 MN ultimately and incidentally I personally as Chair for Skillfast would like to know how much is being spent on these initiatives. However, our view was that if productivity is such a key issue to the UK's economy, why can't you spend some real money? Because if you have a 0.1% increase in productivity, forget the 22% we think may be possible if you compare us with the States, what does that give us in additional GDP? Does it not justify spending £100 million or £200 million on these initiatives? LSCs in many of our minds are not working; they are not as answerable as they should be, as accountable as they should be, so let's have a big slug of their cash and see if we can't make a better job than they are doing"* (Stanners, 2003, p33).

A Chief Executive of an SSC also called for more funding to be transferred from the LSC to SSCs. He stated:

> *"The politicians have already half-bought the notion of transferring the money from the LSC to the Sector Skills Councils. I think this is what Sector Skills Agreements are all about, and there is a partially open door there that we need to lean on harder."* (Marshall, 2003, p33-34).

An employee senior manager (who it is noted came from the same sector as Marshall (2003)) immediately supported this statement:

> *"If we are looking at the point of being employer led then what is really important is that the funding supports that. The employer that I work for is certainly keen to have funded learning for over-24 year-olds, so if we had that pot of money and it was employer led in terms of how it was spent then we could I guess make more informed decisions about whether the focus is on younger people, or whether there is a better balance across all age groups"* (Digby, 2003, p34).

Falder (2003) makes a very apposite point about the problems that he perceived the proposed national, regional and local structures would have in relation to the key driver of curriculum responsiveness, namely the 'funding pots'. He contended that they would 'silo' money and skew business development, and to counter this, he suggests that monies should be transferred from the LSC to the SSCs.

> *"One point I would like to make is that we are taxpayers. The Government doesn't have any money, we give it to them and then they give it back to us, so I don't think we should be shy about taking resources and using them effectively. I believe that the Sector Skills Councils are the way to provide the resources to individual areas. National or regional boundaries such as are reflected by the LSC can be quite damaging; they can move businesses that don't need to be moved and create imbalance. I really hope this is a partially open door,* because certainly in our little team we intend to push very hard at it, even if it is shut, and it will open I am sure." (Falder, 2003, p34).

The fact that a major contention within this thesis will be that the SSA was ultimately squeezed into the narrow regional and devolved nation 'silos' that Falder (2003) expressed concern about shows that the potential problem was identified earlier. It failed to be tackled however, which in part resulted in the failure of the SSA policy described within this thesis.

The concept of money going to SSCs rather than the LSC would no doubt have concentrated the minds of the supply side to respond to the SSA findings, and the failure not to do this may have contributed to the failure of the SSA. The Minister however, was cool to any concept of monies being transferred from the LSC to SSCs.

> *"This is a debate and we have looked at it, but do we want numerous funding streams? Do we want a lack of clarity about where the resources are going to be put? It is not essential that the money is routed through different routes to create a more demand-led system. I simply do not accept that if people were doubtful whether Sector Skills Councils in themselves would be sufficiently powerful and influential to create more of a demand-led system, then the creation of the Sector Skills Agreement model answers that question pretty fundamentally."* (Lewis, 2003, p46)

It is worthwhile to note that some employers, and not just SSCs, were concerned about the potential conflict between RDAs and regional policy, with national policies, and the need for some employers (particularly the larger ones that had bases across England) to have a standardised policy outlook. In an exchange with the Minister an employer asked a pertinent question on this subject.

> *"As an employer in the paint and coatings industry we consider that to be competitive we need focus. We see SSCs potentially providing that and cutting out the scattergun approach of umpteen different organisations many of which you have been quoting. One thing that does concern us though, is would you not agree that there is a potential conflict between national and regional activities? Will the Regional Development Agencies for instance be required to make provision in their budgets for SSC activities, because what we are looking for as an industry and as an employer is a common standard across the country that we can rely on."* (Rieck, 2003, p56)

The minister replied:

> *"Yes there is, and our job is to try and make sure that we get that right and certainly much better than it is now, and be absolutely clear about the respective roles of different organisations that function nationally and regionally. Let me tell you two tangible things that we have done about it. The reason we were all meeting in that boardroom earlier*

today was not just because we thought it was a good idea. It was the first meeting ever of all the national delivery organisations responsible for delivering skills around the same table. I find that phenomenal, but it has taken I don't know how many years to create a structure which brings all of those organisations around the same table to tackle some of these fundamental and important issues. The thing they identified today as being their Number One Priority was this issue about the national vis-à-vis the regional and getting that dynamic right." (Lewis, 2003, p56)

He continued:

"The second practical thing we have done as part of the Skills Strategy is clearly region by region to the RDA. 'You now have lead responsibility for bringing together RDA, LSCs , Job-Centre Plus, Business Link within those regions and ensuring from a customer perspective in terms of skills we have a simple system to access, rather than the bureaucratic muddle and nightmare that it is now for the employer and the individual learner. What I am saying to you is that we have not solved this yet, but I really believe that the structure is in place now for the first time to make a difference in these areas." (Lewis, 2003, p57)

The Chief Executive of the SSDA was not as confident that the procedures described were likely to achieve what was desired, as many of the regional skills priorities pre-dated either the creation of SSDA and the White Papers DfES (2003) or DTLGR (2004). He stated:

"Yes there is a need for better clarity over roles and responsibilities, particularly since we are now on the scene and in some force and substance. It is probably time to re-evaluate and re-think. To give you the example around the regional development agenda; the priorities that were established were before Sector Skills Councils came along and there is a need to evaluate those strategies, because I don't think you would have invented those ones, because they do not reflect employer priorities necessarily. They reflect regional economic development priorities so a difference in emphasis there and it is time to revisit those issues." (Duff, 2003, p57)

This section therefore has identified that at the very beginning of the Sector Skills Council movement, potential tensions had already been identified, and these tensions between the regional and the national skills strategy were to be a recurrent

problem in the devolved nations as well as the English regions throughout the whole of the SSA process. It is interesting that Duff (2003) identified the problem for resolution, because ultimately as this thesis explores the issue was never resolved and SSCs and their SSAs became 'hostages' to the regionalist agenda, aided and abetted in that policy shift, this thesis suggests, by the SSDA itself.

The final issue that this section looks at in more detail than hitherto within this chapter is the original intention behind the SSAs. In DfES (2003), the SSAs were intended to be a mechanism led by the SSDA to address 'priority skill needs'. The SSA was intended to provide a mechanism where the employers and employees in each sector of the British economy could identify the skills and productivity needs of their sector. Through the SSA, SSCs can collaborate with providers of education and training so that the employers' skills demand can directly shape the nature of the supply of education and training provided to meet that need (SSDA, 2004).

As the name implies, the SSA was perceived as an agreement 'framework' of skill priorities for employers to sign up to, with the main funding and delivery agencies. The framework then allowed the partners to agree what actions they would take to meet these skill priorities and provide strategic employer leadership. It also sought to put in place a mechanism for identifying the shared objectives and contributions between employers and agencies, and establish a clear set of accountable actions (SSDA, 2004).

From the outset, a large partner and stakeholder grouping was identified, emphasising the potential pluralistic nature of what SSAs would become.

> *"The SSA project is being led by the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) in partnership with the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and Trade and Industry*

(DTI), key delivery partners including the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), higher education institutions as well as other key partners including the Trades Union Congress, the CBI and the Small Business Council " (SSDA, 2004)

As will be seen later within this thesis, the above list of organisations in SSDA (2004) represents what became the 'England Project Board'. This was eventually discontinued before the end of the SSA process.

What was a Sector Skills Agreement?

It is important to conceptualise the Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) policy and define what it was, and how it was perceived to work at its inception by Government. At first sight, the definition of what a SSA was would appear to be straight forward:

"In simple terms, a Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) is a deal between employers, training providers and government. Employers lay out what their workforce and skills requirements are now and in the future. In return, the government and providers agree to fund and deliver training tailored to this need, within government policy, providing employers are also willing to make a commitment" (Summitskills, 2006,p2)

 The SSA was actually a five stage process, which the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) described in the following terms: Stage 1 the Sector Needs Analysis (SNA) was a research report, designed to determine short-term, medium-term and long-term skills needs for each sector under the responsibility of an SSC. Stage 2, was entitled the Assessment of Current Provision (ACP) stage, and looked at the current training provision across all qualification levels related to the sector, from foundation and level 1 to level 5[13] where this was appropriate. SSCs were required to

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[13] Here the English qualification levels as they were when the SSA was developed are retained; they are different in the devolved nations and have been/are in the process of being amended in England.

produce a report on the quality of provision, within this Stage 2 report (Summitskills, 2006, p2; Bacon & McManus, 2008, p3).

Stage 3 was entitled the 'gap analyses'. In this exercise, theoretically, the main gaps and weaknesses in workforce development were analysed and priorities agreed by the SSC, employers and public sector partners and stakeholders. SSCs were also required to produce a report on the 'gaps' between demand and supply within their sectors. Stage 4 was a rather illusive stage, as it did not have a report with it, but was entitled variously as "How we can work together to address these issues?" (SummitSkills, 2006, p3). The official version of this stage was that a review was conducted into the scope for collaboration and engaging with employers to invest in skills development to support improved business performance. This included an assessment being made into what employers were likely to sign up to. Finally, stage 5 was the final outcome, and this was the agreement about how the Sector Skills Council (SSC) and employers would work with key funding partners to secure the necessary supply of training (Summitskills, 2006, p2; Bacon & McManus, 2008, p3).

The Sector Skills Development Agency agreed with the stakeholders in the devolved nations and the central Whitehall departments that rather than all SSCs carrying out the SSA activity at once, the process would be spread out over four tranches, with the 'pathfinder' SSCs effectively completing their SSAs before the final tranche 4 had begun. As well as supporting the SSA process by not 'overwhelming' partners and stakeholders, the tranche system provided an opportunity for the SSDA to improve and evaluate the policy process as it progressed (SSDA, 2006a, p1). Table 1 below shows the Sector Skills Development Timeline, for the development and completion of each SSA, which was managed by the SSDA:

Table 1: SSA Development Tranches

Development phase	Sector Skills Council
Pathfinder (launched SSA mid-2005)	Construction Skills; e-skills UK, SEMTA, Skillset (4)
Tracnche 2 (launched SSA in late 2006/early 2007)	Cogent; Lantra;Skillfast-UK; Skills Active; Skills for Health; Skills for Logistics (6)
Tranche 3 (launched SSA in mid-to late 2007)	Automotive Skills; Asset Skills; Improve; Go-Skills; People 1st, Skills for Justice (6)
Tranche 4 (anticipated completion by March 2008)	Creative & Cultural Skills, Energy and Utility Skills; Financial Services Skills Council; Government Skills; Lifelong Learning UK; Proskills; Skills for Care and Development; Skillsmart Retail; Summitskills (9)

Source: SSA Development Timeline (October 2007)

The purpose of the Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) was to introduce a radical employer-led model for curriculum development, which was to meet the needs of employers. This is confirmed in SSDA (2006a) where the role of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and the SSDA (Sector Skills Development Agency) were defined in the following terms:

> *"SSCs were to be powerful 21st century, employer-led collectives that would move beyond the voluntarism of the late 20th century but which would (usually) stop short of the statutory regulation of employer training through levies, which had been tried previously and generally found wanting. The SSA was originally seen as a mechanism that embodied the role of SSCs. It would encourage employers to work together so that their individual investment in training, which was substantial, could be better realised. The original intention, as set out in the 2003 Skills White Paper, was that an SSA would be an agreement for collective action by employers and would be pursued…where the SSC and employers judge that such an agreement would be valuable."* (SSDA, 2006a, p5)

As stated above, the management of the SSCs and control of the SSA process, was given to the SSDA, and a major part of this thesis will look at how the SSDA discharged this function against the actual 'brief' given to them by Government. The role originally given to the SSDA on its creation in 2002 is defined by Giles (2004, piii) below.

> "In October 2002 the Department for Education and Skills formally launched Skills for Business, a new UK-wide network of employer-led Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), supported and directed by the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA). The purpose of SfB is to bring employers more centre stage in articulating their skill needs and

> delivering skill-based productivity improvements that can enhance UK competitiveness and the effectiveness of public services. The remit of the SSDA includes establishing and progressing the network of SSCs, supporting the SSCs in the development of their own capacity and providing a range of core services. Additionally the SSDA has responsibility for representing sectors not covered by an SSC and co-ordinating action on cross cutting and generic skills issues." (Giles, 2004, piii)

The role of the SSDA therefore would appear to have been to manage the SSCs and support them through core development services, enabling them to represent effectively the needs of employers. The management of SSCs within the SSA process by the SSDA is criticised within this thesis, as the management of the SSA process by the SSDA appears to have supported the re-focusing of the SSA away from the initial intention of the policy makers in Whitehall.

Research Question

Why did the Sector Skills Agreement Policy fail to deliver the 'employer' demand driven curriculum offer from the skills supply side envisaged by the Westminster Government?

Research Question Proposition

The research question proposes/suggests that the Sector Skills Agreement failed. For the purpose of this thesis, failure is contextualised in terms of the SSA failing to influence or change the skills supply in favour of employers and produce an 'employer-driven' curriculum offer. This is within what Avis (2007) calls the contested area of skills policy and the different bodies already alluded to within this chapter with responsibility for skills.

Is there a justification for the proposition posed by the research question? Within this study, it is argued that the SSA was eventually reduced from being a radical 'employer demand-led system' of curriculum supply to being merely a 'direction of travel document' with no lasting change to the LSS sector. SSDA (2006a, p7) refers to the evolutionary nature of the SSA, and how the development of the policy fundamentally changed over a very short period of time from when the pilot (tranche 1) SSCs commenced their SSAs from a UK-wide document to one that had to take cognisance of the three devolved nations and the nine English regions in a separate context.

> *"One of the most striking aspects of the SSA in practice is that the scale of the task has expanded, seemingly exponentially, since its initial conception. It has evolved from an initially anticipated one year SSA development timeframe [Annex3- Specification for the Scope and Delivery of Sector Skills Agreements (England),SSDA] to a typical 18-month gestation in practice (and sometimes longer). It has also grown from being a single agreement to multiple agreements for each of the UK nations, and at some points, for each English region."* (SSDA, 2006a, p7)

This expansion then created the situation of multi-stakeholder appeasement and conformance to devolved nation and English region policy, which is described in the subsequent chapters within this thesis. SSDA (2006a, p8) defines this evolutionary process as making the SSA a "hostage to fortune". This thesis describes how SSAs were remoulded and shaped by partners and stakeholders, who were able to dictate how the reports should look to fit in with existing skills policies within each nation or region. This ultimately led to SSAs beginning to mirror the policy and supply side requirements of partners and stakeholders, and not those of employers. SSDA (2006a, p8) describes this process very well:

> *"The Stage 1 Skill Needs Assessment[14], in particular, can become a hostage to fortune, especially when the SSA has expanded to encompass separate sets of stakeholders within each of the nations and regions. The finely grained research and the depth of consultation required may be impossible to achieve and the SSCs tend to be at the whim of individual stakeholders and group of stakeholders within the nations and regions to determine what continues acceptable analysis in practice. SSDA and stakeholders use a quality standards framework alongside their own expectations, to judge outputs. One stakeholder described it as: 'death by a thousand cuts'"* (SSDA, 2006a, p8)

While agreeing with the analysis of SSDA (2006a, p8), this is not the end of the story as far as this thesis is concerned. In the subsequent chapters of this thesis, a description is given of the methods that SSDA utilised to 'cajole' SSCs to create SSAs that fitted in with devolved nation and regional policy. The methods SSDA adopted to ensure that the content within each SSA also met an SSDA template, regardless of whether that template accurately identified the needs of the sector for which the SSA was actually being developed, is also explained.

One of the methods discussed in some detail within the thesis is the use by SSDA of what could be described as a 'pseudo' academic assessment. This was utilised by SSDA as a measure of quality of SSAs. As described later within this thesis, this assessment was developed by SSDA for SSA analysis, complete with grades equating to 'good', 'satisfactory' and 'fail' respectively. Although mentioned in SSDA (2006a) it is discussed there in only a cursory manner, and is not seen as important by SSDA, whereas this thesis argues that this assessment process had a very detrimental effect on the development of employer-driven SSAs. This thesis maintains that this process was a command and control technique that the SSDA used to control the SSA process.

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[14] This was subsequently re-named the Sector Needs Analysis, a convention retained throughout this thesis.

The assessment process was relaxed as the process neared completion, but the reason for this, was that SSDA wanted to complete all twenty-five SSAs before they were 'wound up' by Government and their responsibilities transferred to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) in April 2008, as is made clear by Bacon and MacManus (2008).

> *"The Skills for Business network (SfBn) is on track to have fulfilled its commitment to Ministers that all SSCs will have a Sector Skills Agreement in place by the end of March 2008. At time of writing March [2008], a small number of SSCs are in the final stages of developing their first Sector Skills Agreement. Approximately six SSCs are expected to be still finishing their SSAs in Northern Ireland and two in Scotland, in spring 2008. All others have completed the main part of the development phase and are either negotiating actions with partner organisations, or concentrating on their implementation."* (Bacon & McManus, 2008, p3)

Although not perceived by this study as important per se, had SSDA put the same amount of effort into stages 3-5 as had been made by them in relation to stages 1-2 for tranche 3 and 4 SSCs, then it is unlikely that the SSAs would have been completed before the demise of SSDA. This would then have meant that SSDA would have failed to deliver their 'ministerial promises'. SSDA were ultimately prepared to sacrifice quality for 'speed' of completion, suggesting too, an acceptance that the impact of the SSA process had diminished. SSDA (2008, p25) also regrets the amount of emphasis that was placed on the research elements at the beginning of the process, arguing that the most important facet of the agreement might have been lost, namely the concept of the agreement, with most of the engagement with partners and stakeholders taking place around the LMI (p25).

The quote below from SSDA (2008) shows the extent that partners would reject SSA data that did not meet the needs of their regional plans.

> *"Much is made of the extent to which SSA LMI is most able to influence where it is aligned with partner priorities. The identification of a skills*

> *gap or shortage is not in itself sufficient for action. One RDA interviewee made the point that 'addressing shortages in leadership and management skills is an issue identified by almost all SSAs, but doesn't meet anyone's PSA (target) to deliver that.'"*(SSDA, 2008, p43-44)

This thesis will identify in the chapters that follow, that the devolved nations and the English regions were very interested in using SSA research and LMI data to triangulate existing policies. SSDA supported this concept by encouraging SSCs to map their SSAs into existing devolved nation and English region policies. Where SSCs were unable to disaggregate LMI collected nationally into the format required by stakeholders in the devolved nations and English regions, then the SSA work was either rejected or 'side-lined' (SSDA, 2008, p25).

> *The challenge has been that that it is very hard to do anything other than develop a template analysis and tailored data and region-specific text. Much then depends on the skill of the SSC in being able to overlay that regional intelligence, in practice through their regional employer engagement teams. If this is not done effectively, then regional SSA reports and action plans tend not to provide the depth of insight that stakeholders are looking for. A significant number of the critiques of the SSA research reports stem from this. (SSDA, 2008, p25)*

SSDA (2008, p31) also suggests that stakeholders themselves appeared to be confused as to how the process was supposed to work. This may reflect some of the contentions made in this thesis about the evolutionary processes that underpinned many of the process related to the SSA. Criticisms by stakeholders accepted in SSDA (2008) about the process being controlled by a template (which this thesis will show to be true) suggest an acceptance by SSDA that the SSA policy had failed to deliver. The inference from SSDA (2008), however, appears to be that the failure in part of the SSA policy was because it did not meet the needs of the stakeholders, which it is contended was not part of the remit for the policy when initially conceived by central Government.

> *"On top of this, there is still a lack of stakeholder consensus about how the process should work. Stakeholders within the same geographic area make critiques of SSA outputs that are mutually exclusive, which shows that the agreements are still not being judged on a consistent basis. One stakeholder criticises the Stage 1 and 2 reports generally for being too generic ('they read like annual reports of the labour market with very little to differentiate them…they are chasing a template'). Another stakeholder reported that 'each SSA has a different format, so it is hard to see where the SSC is coming from'. As much as anything, this shows the difficulty of introducing a process that is going to satisfy all stakeholders within a given geographic area. Arguably, the risks associated with perceptions of SSAs being generic (and, as a consequence, not adding value) are far greater than those associated with having a multitude of different approaches".* (SSDA, 2008, p31)

There was also an expectation by the SSDA that the stages of the SSA would flow nicely together, as was suggested in DfES (2003), and thereby create a demand-led system. The 'road blocks' that were put in the way of SSCs by a variety of stakeholders, contained within them, all manner of excuses for why the SSA could not be carried out as described in the SSA. These varied from contradictions of existing regional policies to budgetary constraints, and were not perceived at initiation of the SSA process by SSDA. This lead SSDA (2006, a p9) to conclude:

> *"It is also unrealistic to expect a continuous logical flow from stage 3 gap analysis to the Stage 5 agreement. Evidence-based policy making can only ever inform the decision making process **it cannot determine it** (my emphasis). Actual decisions will always be constrained by current budgets and systems for delivery across a range of partner organisations. **The SSA is only one input into the policy mix** (my emphasis) and it is only over time that the scope (or lack of scope) for potential influence has emerged. The SSA 'output' is therefore more of a staging post and part of a longer-term process of negotiation about delivery, which the SSA 'product' captures in **broad 'direction of travel'** (my emphasis)"* (SSDA, 2006a, p9)

To create a demand-led system, then, DfES (2003) identified the need to put the employer voice at the centre of policy making, and the development of curriculum and training. This thesis believes that the language of DfES (2003) meant that Sector Skills Agreements were intended to usher in a new demand-led system, where the needs of the employers would be paramount and the curriculum would be adjusted

accordingly. SSDA (2006a, p9) stating that the SSA was only one voice in the policy mix, and therefore cannot determine policy but only indicate a direction of travel, is a significant reduction in influence of the SSA from the original intention. This is implicitly conceded by those who were tasked by DfES (2003) to manage it.

SSDA (2006a, p9) further conceded that little had been achieved by the SSA process in relation to deal making between employers, partners and stakeholders (particularly within the skills supply side) to effect change. It also concluded that what deals could be identified would probably have happened anyway.

> *"Few hard 'deals' have emerged from the SSA process directly. Deals are much more likely to occur as a result of 'serendipity'- preparation meeting opportunity (e.g. the national skills academies). A number of more significant SSA 'deals' have been in preparation for some time prior to publication of the SSA (e.g. Skillset's screen academies and e-Skills UK's Computer Clubs 4 Girls programme). If it has proved extremely difficult for SSAs to gain leverage over public sector funders and providers through the power of the argument (i.e. the research and analysis), it is even less likely that an evidence based approach would throw up a real deal with employers."* (SSDA, 2006a, p9)

In subsequent chapters, this thesis will concentrate on the way that particularly in the devolved nations some of what Gleeson (2011) (among others, see Avis, 2007, etc) would describe as the neo-liberal context by the 'New Labour' central Government was not replicated within the devolved nation Governments within the UK. So Scotland for example never accepted the concept of the demand-led system, with SSCs being relegated from the outset of the SSA process to being only one voice in that process. This of course created numerous problems for SSCs, as emphasised by SSDA (2006a, p9).

> *"If an SSA is truly employer-led, then the skill needs identified will often be the same in different parts of the UK. Most SSAs are set in a global context or framed around a small number of strategic industry drivers. Yet if nations and regions are the main mechanism for delivering SSAs then*

> *the notion of a unified SSA process is hard to sustain. This is notable in Scotland, for example, where the underpinning notion of the demand-led system has completely different connotations. There was never consensus about what role the SSA should play and stakeholders in Scotland (and indeed elsewhere) have tended to impose their own vision, describing it 'variously as: an input into the policy pot; a workforce planning tool; an additional piece of LMI; and providing ideas for pilots."*
> (SSDA, 2006a, p11)

This thesis seeks to expose the way that SSDA 'capitulated' to the regional construct, rather than accepting the sectoral argument that underpinned the concept of SSAs and SSCs as Government funded employment bodies. While the statement in SSDA (2006a) above does support the presupposition within the research question forming the subject of this thesis, the disingenuous argument in SSDA (2006a, p11) appears to be an acceptance that the regional/devolved nation paradigm negated the sectoral view postulated by the SSA. SSDA (2006a) also does not contain an acknowledgement by SSDA, that they were created and funded by Government to promote the sectoral approach.

Another dichotomy in the SSDA analysis of the SSA process is the acceptance in SSDA (2008, p26) of the usefulness of project boards.

> *"In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland the project board has tightened up the whole of the SSA development process. It has been a sensible way to progress where the number of stakeholders is of a manageable scale to 'get round a table'. Policy evolution in Wales has further emphasised this, with an increasing concentration of skills and employment functions within the WAG. It has meant that completing the 'process' is, in some ways, easier in the nations"* (SSDA, 2008, p26)

This study disagrees with the statement above, as the amount of control exercised by the supply side-dominated project boards in the devolved nations led to the SSA being overwhelmed and absorbed into the devolved nation process[15]. This absorption left the SSA as being only a very general non-committal agreement to a

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[15] This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

'vague' direction of travel that did not impinge or make demands on the supply side within the devolved nations. An argument of this thesis is that the project boards in the devolved nations contributed significantly to the failure of the SSA policy.

Having subsumed the SSA process into the devolved national will, SSDA (2008) points out that these same partners and stakeholders were then not able to deliver on the agreements they had made. They go on to suggest that these partners and stakeholders will even fail to produce the 'watered-down' solutions that the project board members had accepted. SSDA (2008, p27) concludes:

> *"It is still unclear how a lot of stakeholders who have invested so much time and resource through the project boards are supporting SSA implementation in practice. This was a source of frustration for some partners who sit on project board, but it is partly a failure of ownership over the process for those partners. The development process itself has become the focus to the detriment of the substance i.e. what it is trying to achieve. One SSC questioned the extent to which the project board model facilitated access to decision-makers: 'the process forces you to work with people (in partner organisations) that are only empowered to say no'"* (SSDA, 2008, p27)

This thesis concurs with the SSDA assessment of SSAs in SSDA (2006a) and SSDA (2008) that the lack of engagement with SSAs by partners led to the creation of very bland agreements, akin to a 'direction of travel'. SSDA (2008) concludes that the whole process could have been even "blander" if the sign-up had actually required partners to commit to something! The lack of enthusiasm from Scotland in particular to the whole notion of the SSA can clearly be seen through SSDA (2008, p32), although this study suggests that similar statements would equally be true of the other devolved nations and the English regions.

> *"The weaknesses in the SSA rationale are becoming more apparent as increasing numbers of SSCs reach the end of Stage 5. One stakeholder in Scotland felt that "the idea that SSAs will deliver things is entirely wrong" The process in Scotland had been routinised so that the project*

board becomes a 'bland letter…drawn up along the lines that we agree to talk about things.' The point was made that where there is something to be done we will do it and don't need a signed agreement.' This notion of a signed agreement being anathema to Scotland's modus operandi has been constantly made by a range of stakeholders, but there is a more general point that the Scottish experience most clearly highlights in terms of partners' tactical response to stage 5: 'partners can't be held accountable to the agreement and if they could, it would be even blander' "(SSDA, 2008, p32)

What it is most important to remember [after reading above] is that it was the intention of Government that partners and stakeholders would agree to carry out recommendations arising out of the SSA, and change their policies accordingly. Too effectively sign up to nothing, which is what the partners and stakeholders have effectively done with this process, is to invalidate the whole of the policy, and further confirm the central tenant of this thesis that the SSA policy was a failure.

Perhaps as a result of the disappointment of the SSA not meeting expectations,[16] there is evidence that DfES (as it then was) now BIS (having also been DIUS along the way) moved on from supporting SSAs long before the SSA process was completed. SSDA (2006a, p18) states:

"At the start of the SSA development process, there was a dedicated team within the DfES working closely with the SfB network. The team worked to help articulate the vision for the SSA, liaise with and bring stakeholders into the process (e.g. HEIs) raise the profile of the SSA with Ministers and within government, while also managing the demands and expectations being made of the SSA. That locus of policy intelligence and operations within the centre was a fundamental contributor to the effective development of the first SSAs. Where is that locus now within DfES? What is less clear now is the degree to which the SfB network has effective 'sponsors' both within central government departments and in the nations reflecting the interests of the network within policy discussions. Further, recent reviews raise the question of the extent to which SSDA and the SSCs are adequately resourced within their policy development teams in the UK and nations to hold effective influence over the policy process." (SSDA, 2006a, p18)

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[16] Ball's (2003) contention of continuous policy initiatives taking attention from the SSA may also explain this perceived phenomenon.

SSDA (2006a, p18) seeks to suggest that responsibility for the failure of the SSA resides to some degree within the DfES. While not specifically disagreeing with this analysis, this thesis is suggesting a more eclectic set of reasons for the failure of the SSAs to live up to their promise, many of which could be laid at the door of the SSDA itself. Indeed this thesis is effectively a critique on the management of the SSA by the SSDA, as well as illuminating some of the issues raised by SSDA (2006) and SSDA (2008).

When it comes to apportioning blame for the failure of the SSA policy then SSDA (2006a) shares this between the SSCs and employers without a suggestion that SSDA considered that they themselves were responsible for any part of the failure:

> *"In taking forward the SSA, the corollary to the lack of funding and qualification reform has been the continued reluctance of employers to seize the opportunity to engage in collective action and the slow speed in changing the prevailing employer culture. This has partially been exacerbated by the way in which the SfB network has presented SSAs to employers as 'your opportunity to influence the supply side.' There has also been reluctance among some SSC staff involved in negotiating agreements to challenge employers' views and to challenge them to engage more actively in the solutions."* (SSDA, 2006a, p17)

There was also a suggestion in SSDA (2008) that the SSA process actually reduced support for the process from employers across the employer base. Employers interviewed in SSDA (2008) felt that it was just one more task to get their head around, due to the complex language and format of the SSA, which SSDA (2008) concluded led to employers who were already engaged in the skills discussions becoming further involved, but those disengaged from the process becoming further disengaged (SSDA,2008, p42).

Notwithstanding broad acceptance of the failure of the SSA in SSDA (2006) and SSDA (2008), Bacon and McManus (2008, p7) in the SSDA handover document to

the UKCES [17] sought to remain upbeat about the achievements of the SSA, arguing that change would be seen in due course, even though none had been seen currently.

> *"If one thinks that the overall purpose of SSAs was to deliver quick and substantial changes to the skills infrastructure then it was probably not the right way to go about it. However, if one thinks of the SSAs as fundamentally about relationships and changing the way in which the demand and supply-side interacts on investing in skills and commissioning training then one could argue that SSAs have set in train the potential for fundamental and sustainable change. But those changes are not manifest yet"*. (Bacon & McManus, 2008, p7)

Bacon and McManus (2008) accept that the policy had failed to deliver what was required of it, and appear to accept that the way that SSDA had gone about it was also wrong. But they also appear to suggest that an ethereal engagement between demand and supply that had yet to produce susceptible benefits was in some way a success! It is suggested that this appears to show a measure of desperation.

There was an intention in SSDA (2008) that the SSA process should continue, although it was suggested that a 'lighter touch' was needed, albeit with stronger commitment to outcomes[18]. There is also within SSDA (2008) the 'tipping of the forelock' to what Keep (2006a) defines as the justification for intervention by Government in the education and skills process due to market failure. Keep (2006a) argues that this was fundamental to 'New Labour' thinking. Although neither SSDA (2006a), SSDA (2008), nor Bacon and Macmanus (2008) appear to have been able to identify a tangible benefit of the SSA process, SSDA (2008) nevertheless concludes that the SSA process produced some important intangible benefits. They

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[17] Most of the people who worked in SSDA were TUPE'd [This refers to the Transfer of Undertakings Regulations, which provides that people are transferred from one organisation to another with their terms and conditions of employment intact. It is common within the UK for people to be transferred from one public body to another] to the UKCES, the handover document therefore was effectively a hand over to the same people.

[18] In actuality this never happened, and the SSA was not repeated on the demise of the SSDA.

are not however able to define what these are, nor does SSDA (2008) expand on them:

> *"Going forward from here we would suggest that the SSA continues, with a lighter touch process but with stronger commitments to outcomes. There needs to be an on-going agreement about what different partners will deliver for employers. Thus far in reality, the SSA is an agreement between the SSC and the public sector on behalf of, and endorsed by employers. In the future, the SSAs, in order to ensure delivery, need to present a much stronger case for market failure and justification for public service investment and be clear what employers, especially large ones, are prepared to fund themselves. The SSA is clearly work in progress and should be seen as such. Despite this, it has to be managed to deliver some important benefits in many cases."* (SSDA, 2008, p48)

The statement by SSDA (2008) that the SSA, such as it was was merely an agreement between SSCs and the public sector on behalf of and (where possible) endorsed by employers, that contained no commitment by the public sector to actually do anything substantial, is what SSAs became. It is not however, what they were intended to be.

Organisation of the rest of this Thesis

Chapter 2: This chapter looks at the methodology forming the basis of this research. The paradigm underpinning the research is defined, and the data collection tools are explained. The ethical considerations surrounding the primary data collection (email correspondence as part of the SSA process) are explained and justified. The data gathering and dissemination methods are discussed, and the originality, significance, rigour, limitations and delimitations of the research are defined. The chapter also looks at validity and trustworthiness of the methodology, and how the study seeks to use triangulation to obtain robustness.

Chapter 3: This chapter is quintessentially an extension of the methodology chapter, in that there are number of theoretical concepts that the author of this study seeks to utilise. This is then used to explain and develop a critique on the process of implementation of the SSA. This chapter considers neo-liberalism including the concept of globalisation and the perception of skills as a mode of intellectual capital for attracting inward investment. The 'exemption' of middle class curricula from effective consideration within the SSA process and the relegation of the SSA to working-class based vocational courses and policy are related to the neo-liberal concepts described above. The chapter also considers the theoretical concepts of command and control management and pluralistic notions of policy development, as these impact on the understanding of the transformation of the SSA policy during the implementation of the policy.

Chapter 4: This chapter introduces the main constituents of the Sector Skills Agreement (SSA). A theoretical analysis of Newman (2001) and the command-control model serves as an introduction to an analysis within this chapter of how the SSDA expected an SSC to manage the SSA process. The guidance material and problems with the constant re-issue of this guidance throughout the SSA process and the related evolutionary development of the SSA by SSDA as the project continued is described. This culminated in the development of a 'short-lived' stage 6 concept, the evolution and demise of which is documented. Also, the demise of the England project board as part of this same evolutionary process is considered. The SSDA instructions on power and influence are also discussed to illuminate the nature of power relations within the negotiating process of the SSA.

Chapter 5: This chapter commences by examining the regionalisation of the English regions and its impact on the SSA. The chapter continues with an analysis of the membership of a Regional Skills partnership, and the mix between the demand and

the supply side, including the positioning of government agencies such as the LSC. The chapter then considers the impact of the devolved nations on the implementation of SSAs. It looks at the role of the project boards, and the control and power exerted on them by the devolved nation governments. The chapter also points to the development of policy in skills during the development of SSAs, and the 'political' refusal to implement non-devolved nation solutions implicit in the partial/total rejection of the Leitch (2006) report, for example.

Chapter 6: Conclusions from the data focussed around the research questions and areas for potential further research are analysed.

Conclusions

This chapter has identified what a Sector Skills Agreement was, and what it was intended to achieve. It has also argued that the Sector Skills Agreement policies failed to deliver the employer demand-led system that was intended of them, as explicitly contained within the research question. External evaluation by SSDA (SSDA, 2006a; SSDA, 2008; Bacon and MacManus, 2008) to 'justify' this explicit presumption within the research question is also described.

The chapter has also discussed the contribution that the thesis seeks to make to the body of knowledge about skills policy making. This is to be achieved by providing a 'close-up' internal analysis of policy implementation, and providing basic empirical data and hypothesis to underpin the more 'arms- length' theorising discussed within the academic literature.

This chapter has described the history and development of the English Learning and Skills sector from its origins under local authority control pre-1992 to the development of the FEFC in 1992. It has defined the development of 'business-focussed' FE colleges through the Further and Higher Education Act in 1992. It has then plotted the reasons for the changes in the FE system brought about in 2001 through the Learning and Skills Act (2001). This highlighted problems of 'sleaze' and mismanagement, protracted industrial disputes, and a inability of Government to monitor and steer the sector as being factors leading the New Labour Government to move towards a more planned model of FE. This came into being with the Learning and Skills Act (2001), which saw the merger of the TECs and the FEFC into a new body called the LSC.

SSCs when seeking to implement their SSAs within the nations of the UK discovered a skills system that was at variance with each other, with Northern Ireland being quintessentially based on a local authority pre 1992 model (although this changed slightly during the process with the incorporation and rationalisation of the Northern Ireland College system). Scotland remained legislatively in a post-1992 system of FE management, with incorporated colleges maintaining control over their own curriculum offers, which were defined by 'learner' demand. Wales has effectively the same system as in England, albeit with national differences. As this thesis will explore, this meant that these diverse systems presented some challenges to the development of SSAs.

This section has then gone on to suggest that in England, although responsibility had initially been placed under the act in the hands of the LSC in 2001, by 2003/2004 two white papers DfES (2003) and DTLGR (2004) were proposing a certain diffusion of this responsibility into a number of 'other 'organisations both at regional and at national level. In DFES (2003) the SSDA and SSCs were being given a lead in

developing skills priorities for their economic sectors, whereas in DTLGR (2004) RDAs with local LSCs were being given responsibility for developing regional strategies. The potential for confusion and conflict between the national and regional agenda was seen by some people, including employers, right at the beginning of the process. This was subsequently to cause difficulty for the SSCs in England when they embarked on their SSAs.

The chapter has also identified the issues surrounding the leverage through funding debates that took place in 2003 between the fledgling SSCs, the LSC and the Government. This study notes the decision by Government not to transfer responsibility for funding of providers and curriculum to SSCs and away from the LSC, as potentially being a significant issue in relation to the potential in England for leverage by SSCs over the supply side.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter identifies the main issues justifying the approach and methodology that the author of the study has taken to carry out this research. The chapter defines the research paradigm, investigating the influence of 'reflexivity' and ethnography in particular, and the role of the author personally within his research. Essentially the question of "where am I in my research" is considered within this analysis.

 The data collection tools used in this study are identified and described, and the methods (through meaning units) that the author of the study used to develop meaning from the data sources are discussed. The ethical issues raised by the methodology are highlighted, and these are placed within a pre-existing theoretical framework for utilisation of data of this type.

The chapter concludes with an analysis of the rigour, originality, significance and limitations that have been identified within this research, and the justification that the study has put forward for the validity and trustworthiness of this thesis as a piece of rigorous academic work.

Research Paradigm

The paradigm that is suited to this research is the interpretative/qualitative paradigm. The need to clarify and define a paradigm for research is considered to be important by a number of writers on research methodologies (Silverman, 1985; Patton, 1990; Cohen and Manion, 1994).The two overarching paradigms within which research can

be carried out are the positivistic paradigm and the interpretative paradigm (Cohen and Manion, 1994, p25).

 Positivism postulates that the truth is out there, and can only be identified by a process of empirical science and rational methods of analysis and data collection, with objectivity being the goal (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; McNeil, 1990).Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p10) argue that the qualitative/interpretative paradigm places an emphasis on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured in terms of quantity, intensity or frequency. The qualitative researcher therefore stresses the socially constructed nature of their reality and the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the "situational constraints" that shape the inquiry (p10). There is an acceptance not found in quantitative work to the same extent that research and the researcher are value-laden, and that the task of the researcher is to answer questions that investigate how social experience is created and given meaning (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p10).

The Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) was an objective piece of work in relation to the intended outcome (employer demand-led system of curriculum development) that it sought to generate. The analysis of the SSA in this thesis, however, is not given to a positivistic analysis, but more to an interpretative analysis of policy and procedure. This is because the core question at the 'heart' of this thesis is to understand why the SSA policy failed, which by the nature of the investigation is subjective, as a number of 'truths' need to be woven together to create a meaning to this question. Due to the subjective nature of much social sciences work, Cohen and Manion (1994, p56) point out that some writers deem positivism to be unsuitable for social science research, and while not wishing to express a view per se on that argument, the author of this study believed that positivism was unsuitable for this thesis, because of the subjective nature of policy analysis contained herein.

The research being undertaken in this thesis looks specifically at Government policy, and more specifically at the implementation of that policy. The methodology and utilisation of data collection tools within 'policy' research shows a considerable amount of methodological eclecticism by academics working in policy research which is replicated to some degree by this study (Finch, 1985; Troyna, 1994). MacPherson and Rabb (1988), for example, used a methodology consisting entirely of interviews, whereas Salter and Tapper (1981) used only primary source documentation. Walford and Miller (1991) and Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) used a 'partial ethnographic' approach to their policy research (and it is proposed to discuss the ethnographical concepts utilised within this research later within this chapter).

In this piece of work, significant reliance has been made on primary data, which consists primarily of primary source documents, reports, papers, minutes of meetings, memoranda etc, with little reliance being able to be made on secondary data. This was because the Sector Skills Councils and their work have not had significant academic research carried out on them that could be found through the usual 'search engines' and academic publications. As stated in Chapter 1, this gives this thesis the opportunity to add significantly to academic knowledge, as well as to critique related work on policy from the perspective of the experiences of the author of this study in researching the SSA policy.

The primary data and analysis is also augmented by the use of email correspondence sent to the author in his role in the process of developing an SSA, as the author was responsible for developing an SSA for an SSC. These emails are used to augment the analysis for the primary data, and the theorising (see research philosophy section within this chapter) of the research within the larger political context within which the policy had to work. The emails were not part of an interview

process, but were part of the development of the SSA. There were some ethical issues that the study had to consider when deciding how to use this data, and these are explored within a separate section within this chapter.

The development of the chapters was facilitated through the process of developing 'meaningful units', which Tesch (1990, p95) describes as a:

> *"Segment of text that is comprehensible by itself and contains one idea, episode or piece of information."* (Tesch, 1990, p116)

The meaningful units were derived from the research question, and from this, the chapters of the thesis were developed. Tesch (1990, p116) advises that meaningful units are kept flexible throughout the process, and this was done through the author constantly immersing himself in the data and relating it to the meaning units. Emails were allotted with both primary and secondary literature to an appropriate meaning unit, or in some cases where the email ranged across two or more meaning units it received multiple allotments.

Box A: Example of a Meaningful Unit

One major meaningful unit was the command and control techniques (Newman, 2001) that the Sector Skills Development Agency adopted to direct and control the development of the SSAs, for example instructing SSCs to make their SSAs fit existing policy in relation to the Learning and Skills Sector in the devolved nations and English regions. Further examples within this meaningful unit were additional directives by SSDA in relation to the content of the SSA documents, and the 'assessment criteria' that SSDA used on the SSA process to control outcomes and 'quality-assure' the process.

An important issue that the author had to consider in developing this research was the use of 'himself' as the main data collection tool. Naturalistic enquiry in which the human being is seen as the instrument of research is well known in qualitative research terms (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Tesch, 1990). In this instance, however, the author of this study was intimately involved in the process, and not engaged as a casual bystander in perhaps the more 'common' way that qualitative work is undertaken. The research issues that the author of this study encountered, by putting himself at the centre of the research are discussed in further sections within this chapter.

Reflexive Research Methodologies and the 'Me' and 'My' in this Thesis

In academic research, it is usual to write in the 'third person' and this convention has been strictly adhered to within this piece of work. There is now a movement in academic research in the social sciences for writing in the 'first person', which is predicated on the acceptance of 'self' actively engaged within the research process. Crotty (1998) defines the 'traditional' view of research and the tensions that it creates for researchers.

> *"Academic research has traditionally been seen as an impersonal activity: researchers have been expected to approach their studies objectively, and were taught that rigour demanded they adopt a stance of distance and non-involvement and that subjectivity was a contaminant. This 'God's eye view' of the world can seem unchallengeable, expert, hard to connect with, and sometimes, for me, uninteresting to read. Without sight of the person at the heart of the work I feel no relationship with the writer, even if I am interested in the topic. But this is a very personal view. Personal views and beliefs do, however, guide our choices between paradigms and methods, as well as our topic of research and what we intend as our purpose (Crotty 1998, p23)"*

Due to the nature and subject matter of the research for this PhD, it has not been possible to distance the author of the study from the subject matter of the research, as he was intimately involved in the development of an SSA from a professional point of view, as part of his everyday employment. While seeking, therefore, to maintain some of the more traditional checks and balances demanded in academic research, the author of this study has sought also to make use of some of the concepts of 'reflexive' research. The third to first person tension is however relevant for this piece of work, as much of the work was effectively carried out within the first person context for the author in his professional work context (Etherington (2004).The desire by the researcher to distance 'himself' for analytical purposes from

the primary data collected in 'his' professional life was facilitated by writing this thesis in the third person, according to academic convention.

Heuristic Inquiry as Participatory Knowing

The author of this study was very influenced in his analysis of the methodology for this PhD, and the identification of 'self' within this thesis by the theories of heuristic inquiry developed by Clark Moustakas (1975;1990;1994) and Moustakas and Douglass (1985) ,based on the ideas enunciated by Michael Polanyi (1958; 1966; 1969). These are defined by Douglass and Moustakas (1985, p40) in the following way.

> *"Heuristic research is a search for the discovery of meaning and essence in significant human experience. It requires a subjective process of reflecting exploring, shifting and elucidating, the nature of the phenomenon under investigation"* (Moustakas & Douglass, 1985, p 40)

They continue:

> *"Heuristics is concerned with meanings, not measurements; with essence, not appearance; with quality not quantity; with experience, not behaviour."*(Moustakas & Douglass, 1985, p 42)

Hiles (2002,p 3) points to heuristic inquiry as being an adaptation of phenomenological inquiry, but explicitly acknowledging the involvement of the researcher to the extent that the lived experience of the researcher becomes the main focus of the research . Moustakas (2001, p263) concludes:

> *"From the beginning and throughout an investigation, heuristic research involves self-search, self dialogue, and self discovery. The research question and methodology flow out of inner awareness, meaning and inspiration {…] My primary task is to recognize it, accept it, support it and dwell inside it".* (Moustakas, 2001, p 263)

Although influenced by the concept of 'self' and heuristic inquiry, the author of this study was not comfortable with the potential 'narcissism' that such an approach might achieve, and the need to balance this not with data, but where possible with the 'shared' experiences of others, particularly other writers in the policy field in relation to the Learning and Skills Sector. As stated in Chapter 1, the lack of comparative engagement within the academic literature with the problem that the study is grappling with within this thesis has made objective comparative analysis difficult.

Mykhalovskiy (1997), however, does describe some of the 'emotional conflicts' that this study had to consider in defining self and adopting reflexivity concepts within this thesis.

> *"Later I struggled between two conflicting ideas; on the one hand, during the MSc I was being encouraged to use myself as a powerful tool in my research, but on the other hand, I was still concerned that others would not consider my personal experience to be a legitimate source of knowledge. By the time I came to write up my PhD, I believed that even though it might be acceptable to use my self in the field of counselling, in the wider world of academia my subjectivity and reflexivity would almost certainly be seen as self-indulgent or narcissistic, and a contamination of 'objectivity' which was still the legitimate benchmark for 'good' research (Mykhalovskiy, 1997)"*

Etherington (2004, p31) in her book "Becoming and Reflexive Researcher" points out that for some researchers, reflexive awareness may involve little more than a means of checking against possible sources of subjective bias creeping into an experiment or survey (Stiles, 1993). For other researchers though, reflexivity may become the primary methodological vehicle for their enquiry as in research using autoethnography, autobiography, heuristic methodologies, narrative inquiry or social

politics (Ellis, 1995; Ellis and Bochener, 1996; Ellis and Flaherty, 1992; Katz and Shotter, 1996; Moustakas, 1990; Riessman, 2002).

Reflexivity has also become a tool for feminist research, as it is perceived to dissolve the distance between the researcher and those who are being researched through the recognition that both are "*labile, non-unitary subjects"* (Britzman, 1998, p.ix). This steps beyond traditional criticisms about researcher bias (Denzin, 1992, pp.49-52; Huber, 1973) although feminist researchers have argued for "strongly reflexive" accounts about the researcher's part (Fine, 1992; Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994; Phoenix, 1994, Warren, 1988) and reflections from the participants (Appleby, 1997). Giorelick (1991,p 461), however, identifies that the use of 'self' for feminists (and the study would argue that this is equally true of anyone using reflexivity) presents potential problems in that the feminist may fail to take account of a *"hidden structure of oppression"* and make 'andocentric perspectives' in their work (Diaz (2002: Olesen, 2005, p250-251).

The feminist perspective is helpful in articulating the underlying concern for the study about a 'reflexive' approach, although the feminist critique is merely a 'gloss' on the original critique of lack of objectivity identified by Lynch (2000) discussed below, and the need for academic work to be seen to be objective and dispassionate (Crotty, 1999).

The variety of definitions of reflexibility led Lynch (2000) to talk about 'reflexivities' as a multiple construct. Gergen and Gergen (1991, p 79) argue that a constructivist approach to reflexivity alone provides 'no exit from personal subjectivity', which might lead to an infinite regress of cognitive dispositions.' They also go on to argue that a social constructionist view invites the investigator onward towards a fuller realm of shared language. They conclude that a balance between both positions can help us

avoid accusations of solipsism, self-indulgence, navel gazing or narcissism. The conclusion of this is that the inclusion of 'self' in the research needs to be intentional and a means to an end in itself; it does not mean anything personal goes (Etherington, 2000, p31). Behar (1996, p14) makes the same point well.

> "The exposure of self, who is also a spectator, has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake."
> (Behar, 1996, p14)

Reflexivity continues to receive challenges about its academic validity, so Lynch (2000) for example argues that at times it can seem confused as to what is actually being claimed by reflexivity.

> "Reflexivity is a central and yet confusing topic. In some social theories it is an essential human capacity, in others it is a system property, and in still others it is a critical or self-critical act. Reflexivity, or being reflexive, is often claimed as a methodological virtue and source of superior insight, perspicacity or awareness, but it can be difficult to establish just what is being claimed." (Lynch, 2000, p26)

McLeod (2001) points to a view that reflexivity is one of a number of approaches within social science research that is useful to utilise in some disciplines and research projects.

> "On the one hand, qualitative research is indeed personal, and the promotion and communications of the reflexive awareness of expectations and experiences of the researcher contribute to the meaningfulness of a research report. On the other hand, the subjectivity of the researcher does not command a privileged position. Personal statements made by researchers are themselves positioned within discourses." (McLeod, 2001, p199).

What therefore does it mean within the context of this study to refer to reflexivity as a methodological process and justification for the approach adopted? Etherington (2004)

sums this process up rather well in relation to the thought processes undertaken by the author in relation to this process.

> *"I understand researcher reflexivity as the capacity of researchers to acknowledge how their own experiences and contexts (which might be fluid and changing) inform the process and outcomes of inquiry. If we can be aware of how our own thoughts, feelings, culture, environment and social and personal history inform us as we dialogue with participants, transcribe their conversations with and write our representations of the work, then perhaps we can come close to the rigour that is required of good qualitative research…One of the methodological issues for me is that our interpretations can be better understood and validated by readers who are informed about the position we adopt in relation to the study and by our explicit questioning of our own involvement. This means 'interpreting one's own interpretations, looking at one's own perspectives, and turning a self-critical eye onto one's own authority as interpreter and author' (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000, pvii). In my view this enhances the trustworthiness of the findings and outcomes of research."*(Etherington, 2004, p32)

From Etherington (2004) there is the presumption that the researcher needs to be transparent so that the reader can identify the part that he has played personally in developing the narrative within this thesis. Walsh (1996) makes the same point.

> *If human knowledge is co-constructed, then any research project must involve some degree of mutual exploration and discovery. The unmet challenge for qualitative researchers is to document this process in an open and honest way."* (Walsh, 1996, p383)

Taking into account Etherington (2004), Walsh (1996) and Behar (1996), the author of this study has sought to position 'himself' within this research as a data collection tool through which 'vignettes' that he experienced can be used to explain the failure of the SSA policy. Due to the personal nature of this 'rich vignette' data (which could not be collected by an academic outside the SSA process), it could only really be extracted through the use of the author of this study's own experiences within the SSA process. It is believed that without this exposure, this study would lose this insight into what

actually occurred during a policy implementation. The need, however, to 'triangulate self' against external sources though, remains central to the developed methodology of this thesis. Giorelick (1991,p 461) argues that the use of other sources apart from self is important, as the author of any reflexive research may develop certain "structures" of thought that failure to introduce external experience to, might leave unchallenged.

The SSA policy as enunciated by the 'New Labour' Government in Westminster is perceived by this study as one of the neo-liberal policies identified by Denzin (2011), Avis (2007), Keep (2006a) et al. Neo-liberalism has been developed and inflicted on the education and skills sector since the Thatcher/Major Government between 1979 and 1997 and was continued unabashed by New Labour between 1997 and 2010. The author's identification within this study of the reasons for the failure of this policy challenged his own perceived 'left-of centre' leanings. The author of this study's perceived normal critical position would be the same as the majority of academics working within the field of education and skills (Avis, 2007; Allen & Ainley, 2007; Keep 2006a et al) critiquing neo-liberal incursions into education and skills. In this sense, the SSA was one of these neo-liberal mechanisms that Government identified to achieve this aim[19], and in his professional life the author of this study was responsible for trying to develop and implement the policy. Within this thesis, it is through the prism of the author's professional life that the SSA policy implementation is being analysed, and not through his personal beliefs, values or political affiliations.

While the failure of a neo-liberal policy to 'take off' may be a cause of 'rejoicing' for educational academics on the 'left' (although this feeling may not be inclusively felt by those who would consider themselves on the left), it created a need for the author to effectively set up a 'dualistic' construct within his head in order to try and understand

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[19] This in the case of the SSA was to make employers the determiners of curriculum content rather than the providers, to enable employers to compete successfully for international capital investment.

why this policy failed. This process required the study to incorporate neo-liberal benchmarks to identify failure, without engagement in contrary 'left'[20] arguments such as the merits of for example social justice to justify the way that the SSA policy was changed by partners and stakeholders from its original neo-liberal context.

To have engaged in these debates would have 'pulled' the thesis away from its central objective of understanding how implementation of policy can radically change the philosophical thrust and focus of the policy into a debate about the validity or otherwise of the neo-liberal assumptions that are accepted as present within the policy. While this may have been interesting, it would not ultimately have added much to knowledge, because academia is flooded with critique on the philosophical basis of neo-liberal education policies, but not so much on the way that policy is perverted and changed during implementation. Objective triangulation is therefore used in this thesis as an objective check on the internal conflict between the author of this study's professional life and relationship with the SSA and his philosophical values and beliefs.

None of the writers cited in this chapter who have written on reflexivity, have discussed potential conflict between a researcher's professional life and personal/political values, and therefore it seemed right to the author of this study to 'hedge' the reflexive nature of this thesis with as much objective data and theorisation as possible to negate this conflict and create qualitative validity.

 Finally, Etherington (2004) points out that reflexivity may represent a means of constructing a bridge between research and practice (Etherington, 2000; Heron, 1996; Reason, 1994). This concept was interesting to this study as one of the objectives of this thesis was making this research accessible to the policy makers

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[20] Concepts of this critique being ipso facto 'left' may itself also be open to critique

and politicians, to help policy makers and politicians as well as academics gain a better understanding of the process of implementation of policy.

Ethnographic Analysis

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) state that ethnography is one of the many approaches that can be found within social science research and like many types of qualitative social science research it is not easily definable. It overlaps with a number of other labels such as 'qualitative inquiry', 'fieldwork' ,'interpretative method' and 'case study'.(p1). Hammersley and Atkinson (2007,p 1) conclude that no sharp distinction can be made even between ethnography and the study of individual life histories, even auto/ethnography, and the researcher study of his or her own life and context might rightly be described as ethnography (Reed-Danahy, 1997, 2001; Holman Jones, 2005). Given this definition, it seemed to complement the 'reflexive' methodologies that are described in the section above, and influenced the author of this study in the development of the methodology for this thesis.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p2) argue that in various ways over time ethnography has been reinterpreted and recontextualised in various ways, in order to deal with particular circumstances as they arise. Ethnography has also been associated with and put up in opposition to a range of other methodological approaches. At the same time, ethnography has been influenced by a range of theoretical ideas, anthropological and sociological functionism, philosophical pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, Marxism, phenomenology, hermeneneutics, structuralism, feminism, constructionism, post-structuralism and post-modernism (p2).

The methodology adopted in this thesis would certainly 'fit' with the concept of ethnography, as described by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) as this usually involves the researcher participating overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time. The researcher watches what happens, and listens to what is said, and gathers whatever data is available to throw light on the issues that are emerging as the focus of inquiry in this case. The author of this study was involved in the process with a range of other people and organisations and was able to observe how the various political nuances worked over time to change the SSA policy from that which was originally intended.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p 3) list five features found in ethnographic work: first, people actions are studied within an everyday context, rather than in the context of experimental "setups" or highly structured interviews. This is certainly a factor in this research: although the investigation is one primarily of process, the individuals and groups of individuals working within organisations, such as the Welsh Assembly Government or the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland does play a part in the determining the direction of process. These individuals contributed ultimately to its change in direction and failure to deliver the 'employer demand-led system' desired by the Government. Although at times, these individuals are hiding behind the organisations that they represent, they still represent the ethnographic descriptions defined by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007). This is because they promote the collective agenda of their organisation, which is made up of their collective agendas, as well as those of the more 'transitory' ministers who head up the departments for a period of time.

Secondly, data is gathered from a range of sources, including documentary evidence, which in the case of this thesis consists of a range of primary and secondary documentation relating to the SSA process, including memos, papers,

SSDA directives and minutes of meetings. Email conversations that the author of this study was either copied into, involved in, or had forwarded to him form the largest amount of non-documentary data within this thesis. Conversations occurred as part of the author's role in the process, although they were not instigated to illicit information for this thesis, as the wealth of data from the other data collection sources negated the need for use of casual conversations.

Thirdly, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p3) state that data collection in ethnography is relatively 'unstructured' as it does not involve following through a fixed and detailed research design and the categories for interpreting data are not built into the data collection process through the use of observation schedules or questionnaires. Instead they are generated out of the process of data analysis, which the researcher did through assigning data to meaning units after collection, rather than developing meaning units. As already stated, the data collection within this thesis has been generated from emails and documents about the SSA created by a diverse group of individuals and organisations, but particularly the SSDA. There was no research design of the type that might be found in some qualitative methodologies, as there was, for example, no interview or survey design or set of questions that predicated the collection of research data.

Fourthly, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p3) define ethnography as focussing on a few fairly small-scale cases to facilitate an in-depth study of the object for research. In this context, therefore, this thesis can not be described as ethnography within the Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) definition, as the study has been of a UK wide policy and process, rather than a small scale project. There is however, the ability by the study to break down the process into smaller pieces of analysis, which may well allow it to fall within this definition.

Fifthly, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p3) argue that in ethnography, the analysis of data involves the interpretation of meaning, functions and consequences of human actions, and institutional practices, and how these are implicated in local and perhaps also wider contexts. They conclude that what are produced, for the most part, are verbal descriptions, explanations and theories, with qualification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role. Within this context there are some facets of this description within this thesis. There is it is suggested an interpretation of meanings and functions and consequences of human actions on UK education and skills policy making, but whether the email descriptions could be argued to be verbal descriptions is less certain, although they are descriptions, and theories are generated from these.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p4) conclude:

> *"Ethnography is not far removed from the means that we all use in everyday life to make sense of our surroundings, of other people's actions, and perhaps even of what we do ourselves. What is distinctive is that it involves a more deliberate and systematic approach than is common for most us most of the time, one in which data are specifically sought to illuminate research questions, and are carefully recorded; and where the process of analysis draws on previous interpretations. What is involved here, then, is a significant development of the ordinary modes of making sense of the social world that we all use in our mundane lives, in a manner that is attuned to the specific purpose of producing research knowledge." (Hammersley* and Atkinson (2007, p4)

Within the context of this thesis, and this methodology chapter, the study has spoken about the messiness, adhockery and evolutionary development of much of policy making within the UK. Both post-structuralism and post-modernism have affected the development of ethnography, as Derrida's 'deconstruction' has led to a questioning of the idea that ethnographers can capture the meanings on the basis of which people act, because meanings are not stable, nor are they fully the property of individuals. Instead, they reflect the shifting constitutive role of language. It is this changing nature,

inconsistency of language within the SSA that in part this thesis seeks to capture, as meanings of policies change over the time of the policy implementation (Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p12).

For example throughout the thesis, the whole language of 'employer demand-led' has been contested between the devolved nation Governments and the central Government , with the emphasis changing from a neo-liberal employer voice being the voice, to a devolved national concept of the employers voice being **a** as opposed to **the** voice within the development of LSS policy. As is shown throughout this thesis, the relegation of the employer voice to being just one voice among many ultimately meant that the employer voice had to be subservient to existing developed policies, and an 'appeaser' or justifier of existing policy, rather than a challenge to it. It is this change of language that this thesis contends contributed to the failure of the policy to have the impact conceived for it by national Ministers within Westminister.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p14-15) discuss reflexivity in relation to ethnographic work, which links ethnography with the reflexive discourse earlier within this thesis, and the need that the study had to ground himself and his contribution to the thesis within the context of an academically accepted methodology. The discourse in Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) mirrors many of the reflexive discourses discussed in the previous section, and thus justifies within the ethnographic methodology, the placing of self, at the centre and the rejection of the concept that research can be carried out within an 'autonomous' realm. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) support the contention that this thesis is centred within a reflexive ethnographic methodology, with the primary data source being the author of the study himself, triangulated by the ethnographic usage of multiple data sources.

Research Philosophy

The research philosophy section of this chapter is broken into two parts, the first part looks at the philosophical issues related to policy analysis and the theories contained within this process. The second part of this thesis analyses theoretical concepts, as a way of developing a rationale for the contention within this thesis that the SSA failed to deliver what was intended for it by the UK Government.

Ethical Considerations in relation to Email Data

This section of the methodology considers the ethical considerations in relation to the use of email data that was collected to 'enhance' and 'amplify' the primary literature relating to the Sector Skills Agreement (SSA). The email data used throughout this thesis was generated by a number of partners and stakeholders within the development of the Sector Skills Agreement process at a number of levels of seniority from CEOs to administration assistants. This included both national and devolved national Government departments. There was also engagement with regional Government (in England) and some private sector involvement with for example, 'trade associations' related to one of the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). The use of email communication created to perform the function of furthering the development of the SSAs within the developing discourse of a PhD thesis did create some ethical questions.

The core ethical text that guided which emails were acceptable ethically to place within this study was arrived at through an adherence to the 'Ethical decision-making and Internet Research' code of ethics produced by the Association of Internet Researchers (Ess and AoIR, 2002). The use of email as a means of communication is relatively new, but the need for participants to have the same protection from risk is

the same as that for any other form of primary data collection. Researchers still have to balance the potential benefits of research on one hand with human subjects' rights to and expectations of autonomy, privacy, informed consent etc (Ess and AoIR, 2002, p2).

Ess and AoIR (2002) provide a set of guidelines, rather than a recipe for 'ethical purity' (Ess and AoIR, 2002, p3). Within research involving the use of 'online' data, then there is a requirement for a degree of 'ethical pluralism' as researchers have to consider more than one ethical decision-making framework from which to formulate an ethical position on the data collected (Ess and AoIR, 2002, p3). Ess and AoIR (2002, p 4) conclude that the different ethical considerations and philosophies that permeate the internet and email correspondence, will create a certain degree of "*Ambiguity, uncertainty, and disagreement*" (p4), while at the same time rejecting the potential ethical relativism of 'anything goes'.

Ess and AoIR (2002, p 4) therefore advise that in relation to internet research, a middle-ground be found between ethical relativism and ethical dogmatism, which is defined by Ess and AoIR (2002) as:

> *"A single set of ostensibly absolute and unquestionable values, applied through a single procedure, issuing in 'the' only right answer- with all differing responses condemned as immoral."*(Ess and AoIR, 2002, p4).

Ess and AoIR (2002) conclude:

> *"To make this a last way: since Aristotle (in the West), ethicists have recognised that doing the right thing, for the right reason, in the right way, at the right time remains a matter of judgement or phronesis. Again, such judgement cannot be reduced to a simple deduction from general rules to particular claims. Rather, it is part of the function of judgement to determine just what general rules indeed apply to a particular context. Developing and fostering such judgement, as Aristotle stressed, requires both guidance from those more experienced*

than ourselves and our own cumulative experience in seeking to reflect carefully on ethical matters and to discern what the right thing at the right time for the right reasons and in the right way may be." (Ess and AoIR, 2002, p 4).

The study has accepted the need for developing an ethical 'framework' in determining the data he has acquired. The data that the author of the study has he received legitimately, in that he was a subject within this work, as he was the creator of many documents that underpin an SSA for one SSC, and therefore these communications were part of his on-going work, but were not (of course) sent to him for the purpose of going within this thesis.

This point is important, because in development of an 'ethical framework' to underpin this research, Ess and AoIR (2004, p4 et al) give a range of questions/consideration points to guide the development of the framework.

First, there is the consideration of the venue/environment in which the research took place. This is important, because as already stated, the data was 'obtained' by the researcher as part of his own 'working life'. The data is restricted to email data, and this is not to be confused with more structured 'email interviewing', which has been the subject of some academic discussion (see: James and Busher 2007; James 2007; Kralik, Price, Warren and Koch 2006). In this thesis, the email data is used in a similar way to the use of primary literature, as there is no ongoing dialogue between the author as researcher within this study and the sender of the email outside the professional work context.

Having defined this as the context in which the data was collected then, the next ethical question posed by Ess and AoIR (2002, p 4) is fundamental to a discussion of

the use of this data; and this is: *"What ethical expectations are established by the venue?"* Ess and AoIR (2002, p 4).

Based on this concept of the ethical expectations of the venue, Ess and AoIR (2002, p5) go on to make a crucial statement that was considered seriously by this study.

> *"One broad consideration: the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent, etc."* (Ess and AoIR, 2002, p5).

Table 2 breaks the email correspondence into five loose sub-groups. The rationale behind this is that although the primary data is email data, the level of privacy may vary given the nature of the correspondence, and the perceived recipients.

It is important; it is suggested, to break the data down into these categories, as these can be considered in relation to 'informed consent', and the necessity for obtaining it. Ess and AoIR (2002, p6) conclude:

> *"Determining not only if, but when to ask for informed consent is thus somewhat context-dependent and requires particular attention to the "fine grained" details of the research project not only in its inception but also as it may change over its course"* (Ess and AoIR, 2002, p6)

Informed consent may be linked to the initial ethical expectations and assumptions of the authors/subjects being studied. Ess and AoIR (2002, p7).

The question that Ess and AoIR (2002, p7) suggest the researcher should pose are:

"Do participants in this environment assume/believe that their communication is private?

Due to the nature of internet communication, the mere fact that the participants believe that the communication is private may not make it so, as a document that is accessible by others and can be forwarded through email technology to others might be presumed not to be private, regardless of the feelings of the originating author and/or sender of the email, thus allowing the researcher seeking to use the data to feel justified in using it (Ess and AoIR, 2002, p7).

Examples cited by Ess and AoIR (2002, p 7) of where this might be relevant are publicly accessible archives, interactions where intended by their authors/agents as public, performative (e.g. intended as a public actor performance that invites recognition for accomplishment). Venues assigned the equivalent of a "public notice" that participants and their communications may be monitored for research purposes (Ess and AoIR (2002, p7).

Table 2: An analysis/ categorisation of email data in thesis

Email content	Recipient
General dictates from SSDA mangers on guidance for SSCs in producing SSA documents	SSC leads or sub-groups of the same, plus 'others' on occasions such as SSC Chief Executives/Directors etc. Expectation of dissemination within SSCs to relevant/interested parties
Guidance from SSDA on engaging with national government/ devolved nation government/ English regions or major stakeholder such as the LSC etc. Information on project boards Also policy announcements/interpretations of policy etc	SSC leads or sub-groups of the same, plus 'others' on occasions such as SSC Chief Executives/ Directors etc. Expectation of dissemination within SSCs to relevant/ interested parties
Policy and SSA discussions emanating from 'others' including Government departments at national and devolved level, stakeholders etc.	A wide range of recipients received directly by author of this study and others, or sometimes emails forwarded by SSC CEO et al to the author for information.
Emails forwarded on from CEO level for dissemination around team members of the SSCs.	Prescribed team members within an SSC
Personal emails to the author of this study, in the form of dictates from SSDA or personal 'hearsay' information from colleagues working within the field on devolved nation/regional attitudes to the	The author of this study, plus some copying to other people both in the author's organisation and the sender's organisation, where relevant.

SSA	

Taking the examples and ethos suggested by Ess and AoIR (2002, p7) then the study sought to consider the categorised email correspondence in table 2 in relation to the necessity or otherwise to gain informed consent.

The first category of 'General Dictates' from the SSDA on producing SSA documents were a set of emails sent to either the whole of the SSC network, consisting of at least twenty-five SSC recipients, with the potential for those recipients to forward the information internally to any number of potential recipients electronically. Within the emails there is no indication that the sender considered the content to be private or confidential, therefore as it had a significant public currency, within the second example of Ess and AoIR (2002, p7), it is suggested that it is not necessary to seek informed consent for this category of correspondence. The only other test that the study then applied against this initial conclusion to not seek informed consent was to determine whether there was an ethically significant risk of harm to the author/agent of this email as a result of using this data (Ess and AoIR, 2002, p7).

The usage of these emails in this thesis is what Ess and AoIR (2002, p8) would describe as a 'form of communication analysis', particularly in relation to the command-control methodology (see Newman, 2001) that underpinned the management of the SSA process by the SSDA. The general nature of the emails did not appear to provide a risk to the authors/agents, and did not contain sensitive information.

The second category in Table 2 is SSDA guidance on engagement with stakeholders, management of project boards etc. The conclusion that informed consent was not

needed was arrived at by a similar logical progression. There were other factors to consider, though, in addition to those cited above. These emails did show the attitude of the SSDA to partners, and this was important for an analysis of the eventual effectiveness of the SSA process, as it showed a desire by SSDA to accommodate and 'mould' the SSA to the needs of these partners and stakeholders. This was not 'a sole driver of employer-demand', which this thesis argues the SSA was originally intended to be. This does not impact on the individual authors of the emails themselves within SSDA, as this it is suggested defines an organisational culture, rather than an individual one, and it is outside the scope or capability of this thesis to determine if the authors of these emails as actors in the performance of this policy had an influence on this process. The authors of all the emails used are anonymous.

One issue that had to be considered is the reaction that some of the fluidity and evolution that the SSA went through as SSCs developed SSAs may cause to the reader. For example, the confusion and demise of the England project board etc may seem to show a confusion and 'disorganisation' within SSDA over the management of this policy. But the author of the study was happy that this did not suggest individual, but organisational issues, with little possibility of harm to the originating author of the email even if the author could be identified. As with category one emails, these emails were widely circulated, and therefore were public rather than personal to the originating author. The author of this study believes that these emails have considerable interest in their identification of policy implementation and interpretation within a national, regional and devolved nation context, and thus where it was considered that there was no danger of risk of harm to the originating author/agent these emails were used.

The third category of emails contains emails originating with partners and stakeholders to the SSA process. As with categories one and two, these were directed to multiple

recipients, often members of a project team and SSC leads. The author of this study therefore received them along with others directly, or on other occasions they were forwarded to him by the CEO of an SSC for information. The author of this study again considered that these emails were in the public domain, and therefore could be used subject to the need to consider harm to the participants. None of the emails used were marked 'confidential' or 'not for dissemination' on them. It was again felt that there was no need for informed consent on these emails.

The fourth category contained email communication between CEOs of SSCs and the SSDA on the SSA process, and how this was perceived by SSC CEOs within the process. An example of this, is the development of an 'implementation stage' a stage 6, which it was proposed be added to the five-stage process, and the differences of opinion this proposed development had in the SSC network. The fluidity and evolution[21] of the SSA policy described above and throughout this thesis is triangulated and enhanced by this kind of data, so unless the email had an instruction from the CEO regarding 'confidentiality' it was considered public initially among the CEOs then among the 'forwarded' recipients, and thus no need form informed consent was required.

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[21] The term 'evolution' is used throughout the thesis to describe the development of the implementation of the SSA policy. Within this thesis, this is looked at in relation to a number of ways that the implementation policy was changed between the pathfinder SSCs and their SSAs, through guidance notes issued by SSDA and changes to the specifications during the process, to more unscripted evolutions such as the 'demise' of the England project board and re-packaging of the SSA as an English regional initiative, rather than an all England initiative. Finally there is the way that the Stage 6 implementation phase of the SSA was changed such that SSCs became liable for assessment of performance under it, rather than supply side partners and stakeholders being brought to account in the implementation of the agreement, if employer-identified actions were stalled. The term evolution within this thesis is not per se intended to describe one of the fundamental assertions of this thesis, namely that through neo-pluralism partners and stakeholders were able to manipulate and change the SSA from an employer demand-led system of curriculum development into a rather 'tame' 'direction of travel document. The word evolution is used by the author only to describe the changes to the SSA process, not the outcomes.

The fifth category was effectively split into two types, the first of which is personal discussions/dictates between the author of this study and individuals within the SSDA and other bodies. With these emails, where it was felt that some confidentiality is involved, informed consent was sought; where it was not considered confidential, because of copies being sent to others, making the correspondence public, or due to the nature of the content, then no informed consent was sought. The nature of the LSS[22] meant that some of the personal correspondents have left the SSDA on its evolution into the UKCES, while others left during the process to take up roles in the private sector. Where this was the case, the study considered the nature of the correspondence and whether the data could do the subject any harm now, considering that they were no longer working in the LSS in any capacity, where it was not possible to contact the subject to obtain consent. If the author of this study was satisfied that there was little possibility of harm ensuing from the use of this data, then it was utilised accordingly.

The second category is hearsay[23] statements made to colleagues in an SSC by Government officials etc, which were passed to the author of this study to advise him in his job of writing SSA documents for an SSC. Hearsay evidence is not admissible in a court of law within the UK due to its inability to be cross-examined and tested in open

[22] Due in a large part to the recommendation in the Leitch (2006) report, that the SSDA be merged with the National Employment Panel to become the United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) many of the main actors in the SSDA SSA team left for other employment, as the UKCES remit was more tightly defined than that of the SSDA. Interestingly many of these individuals now work for the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils, an umbrella body created by the SSCs to facilitate a single employer voice on general skills issues.

[23] A legal definition of a hearsay statement is X tells Y something Z said. Y has no way of validating the veracity of this statement without asking Z and getting a direct response from him or her. In the case of this thesis, much of the hearsay data that the author received was from colleagues advising him of conversations they had had with civil servants etc while negotiating on the implementation of their SSAs. They are extremely interesting as they show an inside Government view (particularly in Scotland, for example) of the way that the SSA was being perceived, and the way that devolved nation and English region LSS policy challenged national thinking on learning and skills. While the author has no doubts as to the veracity and accuracy of the hearsay data, as in some cases it triangulates or complements data in (SSDA) literature, it is felt important to tell the reader that it is hearsay, to allow the reader him or herself to evaluate the value that they are going to put on it.

court. It is used within this thesis to emphasise or triangulate data from other sources, and as an indication about how a Government organisation may be viewing SSAs. It is not possible to get informed consent from the person who made the original comment as this is not known; neither would it appear relevant to get informed consent from the individual to whom the statement was made in the first place. As the chances of the individual within Government being identified and thus a potential harm occurring, assuming that the statement was deemed to be harmful (which the author of this study does not think that it is), are negligible. The data was useful to show potential intent among senior civil servants, so the study deems that ethically it is acceptable to include them.

Validity and Trustworthiness

This final section of the methodology chapter concentrates on the methods the study has sought to use to obtain validity and trustworthiness within the research process. This section should be contextualised with the section on reflexive research, as the concept of validity and trustworthiness in relation to the author of this study's relationship to his work is discussed within that section. This section seeks to define more general qualitative concepts of validity and trustworthiness that the study has explored and seeks to justify the conclusions that have been arrived at during this research process.

Lincoln and Guba (1995) suggest that when undertaking naturalistic research of the type contained within this thesis, there are a number of concepts that researchers can employ to achieve a level of trustworthiness from the research data.

> *"The four terms credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are then, the naturalists' equivalent for the conventional*

terms, internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. These terms are introduced not simply to add to the naturalism's mystique or to provide it with its fair share of arcane concepts, but to make clear the inappropriateness of the conventional terms when applied to naturalism, and to provide alternatives that stand it in a more logical and derivative relation to naturalistic actions." (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, pp300-301)

Within this chapter the concept of triangulation has already been raised, and there are a number of ways in which triangulation can be achieved (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p296). Patton (1990) defines four types of triangulation, being methods, sources, analyst and theory/perspective. Of more resonance with the author of this study, however, are the concepts of triangulation as a process defined by Smith and Kleine (1986). These are described as being first, a comparison of what people say in public, with what they say in private. Secondly, *comparability* of what people say over time by the researcher to show triangulation. Thirdly, a researcher can compare the perspectives of people from different points of view within a construct. Fourthly, triangulation can also involve validating interview data against primary and secondary data.

The fourth definition of triangulation postulated by Smith and Kleine (1986) is also accepted by Denzin (1978), who also defines four triangulation categories, which are data, investigator, theory and methodological triangulation. Denzin's data triangulation involves the triangulation of various data sources with each other. Investigator triangulation seeks to triangulate research using several different researchers or evaluators. Theory triangulation is achieved through the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data. Methodological triangulation uses multiple methods to study a single problem or programme (Denzin, 1978).

The data that makes up this thesis consists first, of theoretical data, theorising the UK education system, and/or critiquing the system. Alongside this are general critical

texts on the main modernistic paradigms of neo-liberalism, globalisation, Marxism and post-modernism and its possible impact on policy making within Government and also the Learning and Skills Sector. The study would define this as being secondary data.

Secondly, primary data in the form of reports, directions and guidance for the production of a Sector Skills Agreement published by or on behalf of the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) is also a major component of the data within this thesis. It is used to emphasise issues such as command and control methodologies (Newman, 2001) as well as the messiness, evolution and adhockery of post-modern influences on policy development (Ball, 1993). There is also some consideration of policy emanating concurrently both nationally and from the devolved nations to the Sector Skills Agreement. The study would define this data as primary 'literature' data.

The third data source is emails that the author of this study received as part of his involvement in the SSA process. The ethical justification for using this data is contained within a separate section within this chapter above. The difference between this data and what might be deemed to be the 'usual' data for academic research is that it was not produced for the benefit of the thesis but to dictate, clarify and determine the Sector Skills Agreement. This being the case, it is argued that this is very powerful in underpinning both the primary and secondary literature, as it contains examples of the (notions of) power of some of the stakeholders, and their ability to dictate the direction of the agreement.

The notion of triangulation is therefore very important, as the study seeks to create meaning and narrative through pulling together the primary literature, and triangulating this through theorising with established academic research theories. Through this process, and also by comparing these sources, and the 'stories' they

produce with 'stories' that other researchers have experienced in their policy analysis research, the study intends to achieve triangulation.

The email data is used primarily to amplify the primary data within the thesis, although there is some triangulation between this data, and the experiences described above of other researchers within the secondary data. The email data is also used to triangulate the reflexive statements of the study, with the intention of taking some of the potential danger of narcissism and 'blind' subjectivity that Etherington (2004) notes out of the thesis.

The author of this study remains concerned about achieving the requisite amount of objectivity while seeking to benefit from the serendipity associated with the qualitative process and the use of the author himself as an integral part of the research process. The study sees the triangulation of reflexive statements through primary and secondary literature as well as primary email data as being essential to the achievement of the level of objectivity relevant to an academic piece of work of this kind.

Another method through which the validity of research may be judged is its ability to be replicated and transferred into other contexts. Within the SSC network, this type of methodology would it is suggested be easy to replicate, because as already stated in the email ethics section of this chapter, the emails were generally sent out to either the whole network of SSCs or to a number of SSCs in specific tranches. The methodology could be incorporated into a 'close-up' policy implementation analysis by a person actually working within Government or an NGO, even though the context could be different.

Transferability is defined as the ability of research findings contained within this thesis, to be used by other researchers within their research situations and contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p316). As with the concept of replication, it is suggested that the findings of this research could be transferred to a policy analysis regardless of the field to determine, for example, common themes of interaction between central government and devolved government.

Rigour

In a later work, Guba and Lincoln (2005, p205-206) speak about the achievement of rigour in research as a concept within validity. They conclude that there are two types of rigour. The first, which is perceived to derive from positivism, argues for a kind of rigour in the application of method, which involves the assembly of a set of methodological criteria (p205) through which rigour and validity would be argued. Within this chapter, the author of this study has sought to present methodological criteria through which to justify the methodological basis of the thesis in the manner described by Guba and Lincoln (2005, p205).

The second type of rigour, however, described by Guba and Lincoln (2005) argues for a *"community consent"* (p205) and a form of rigour that is defensible, reasoned and plausible alongside some other reality that is known to author of a study and the reader of the study in *"ascribing salience to one interpretation over another"* (p205). This second type of rigour is defined by Guba and Lincoln (2005, p 205) as a question:*"Are we interpretively rigorous?"* In other words, can our constructions be trusted to represent important human phenomenon? (p205).

The author of this study believes that some evidence of this second type of rigour is exhibited. The interpretations that the study has sought to define seek to enhance the writings of other writers on policy within the Learning and Skills Sector. The phenomena described within this thesis are not unknown to other writers and academics, although some of the policy machinations described in this thesis may not be. The author of this study feels that the interpretative rigour of this thesis within this context is found in the analysis of how a policy was developed during its implementation, such that it changed (in the case of the SSA) from its original intention.

Originality and Significance

The originality within this thesis is provided through the analysis of a Government policy from its inception to its implementation. Academic writers often comment and critique Government policy at its conception and completion, but due to the 'outside' nature of the majority of academic research are reliant on traditional 'external' research tools (such as interviews for example) through which they can get insight into implementation. This research explores the actual 'mechanics' of the development and change of policies between the original conception and implementation. The author of this study is able to actually watch, relate and interact with participants in the policy implementation process and observe the change and manipulation of the policy at 'close quarters'. This study will give academics a new insight into how LSS policy was carried out during the last term of the 1997 to 2010 Labour Government.

Limitations of the Methodology

One of the benefits of using this methodology, as already inferred, is the rich descriptions, and interpretations of social phenomena, 'serendipitous' findings and new research integration that this methodology afforded (Miles and Huberman, 1984, p14).

There is, however, the problem of researcher bias in a piece of qualitative research, and as already stated the use of reflexive methodology within this research made this problem more dangerous than if other qualitative data collection tools and philosophies had been adopted (Miles and Huberman, 1994, pp17-18).

A further limitation of the email data is that the author of this study had no control over it, as it was created for the purpose of the SSA, not the purpose of this thesis. As, however, it was unsolicited for the purpose of this thesis, and formed direct guidance et al on the SSA , the data received did provide, it is suggested, a powerful tool for emphasising the points related to the work of theorising the process, and for reduced potential bias.

Conclusions

This chapter identifies and justifies the overreaching interpretative paradigm for the research. It also explores the different types of research philosophies that exist within the overarching interpretative paradigm. This study also defines how facets of these philosophies have informed the development and justification for the research methodology of this thesis. Particular emphasis is placed on how reflexivity and the

role of the researcher him or herself in the policy process and in the data gathering for the research has been used by this study to seek to enhance the understanding of the policy development process by academics.

Due to the nature of the data collection tool utilised within this study, the author of this study has had to consider ethics of using email and internet data to underpin the arguments of this thesis, and how the originating authors/agents of the data are protected, and this is also discussed and justified within this chapter.

Finally, the rigour, validity and trustworthiness, rigour, originality, significance and limitations of the methodology chosen are considered within this chapter. The purpose of this is to seek to legitimise the ethos of the thesis, and to show that due care and consideration has been given to the problems of bias.

Chapter 3: Theorising

Introduction

This chapter contains a number of theoretical concepts that are related to the Learning and Skills sector (LSS) and the SSA, which are examined and critiqued. Where the author of this study believes that this study is adding to the knowledge base of academic theorising, this is acknowledged, particularly in relation to the concepts of 'pluralism' and the developments of new pluralistic contexts. This chapter also seeks to ground the thesis in neo-liberal globalisation theory, and critique this through adoption of Marxist theories of class, and the reduction of the SSA into a class-based document. This thesis argues that the SSA was confined to 'working class' traditional occupations, and the 'hypothetical' development of the 'polytechnic' worker[24], rather than being the 'cosmopolitan' and 'classless' document intended.

The influences and difficulties of 'Third Way' and New Labour theorising on the LSS is also discussed as a grounding of where the SSA stood within the 'conflicting'[25] theories at the heart of New Labour thinking. The theoretical contexts of regionalisation and the cyclical nature of the national/local context are also discussed and juxtaposed with the neo-liberal philosophies also dominant in New Labour.

This chapter therefore seeks to provide a theoretical underpinning as to why the SSA failed to deliver what was intended for it.

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[24] This concept is developed and contextualised later within this chapter.

[25] In using the term conflicting, this should be interpreted by the reader as a value judgement of the author of this study [supported by other academics-see Avis (2007), Edwards (2006)] as within the 'New Labour' Lexicon the assumption was that neo-liberal competitiveness strategies would produce inclusion and social justice for citizens, which is a contested point within this thesis and by some of the academics that are cited within this thesis.

A Critique on Academically Defined Drivers in the Learning and Skills Sector

This section looks at the current analysis of the Learning and Skills Sector (LSS)

from the published work of academics researching the LSS. This section specifically

excludes the command and control concepts enunciated by Newman (2001) and the

concepts of pluralism, which are discussed elsewhere within this chapter.

An overriding criticism of the academic work reviewed in this section by the author of

this study is the lack of a fundamental research base to justify the statements that are

made. These statements often appear to be informed and often very insightful

'guesswork'. This statement is not meant to 'rubbish' this theorising, as much of it the

author of this study would agree with. What it lacks however, is the underpinning

theoretical analysis that justifies the statement. In relation to this criticism, this thesis

seeks to provide such a theoretical base from which other academics can reference,

through the development of the SSA policy at a very close-up 'insider' level, to show

how a policy is changed from inception to completion.

The second overriding criticism that this study would make about current theorising in

academia around education and skills policy development is that (and this is

understandable if one accepts the outsider – insider concepts described above) the

policy analysis within the research found by the study is 'secondary' to the

fundamental thesis within those papers/books etc. What is meant by this statement is

that the policy analysis flows from a need to analyse the effect of the policy on FE

colleges, Train to Gain, or Basic Skills, to give three examples. The justification and

need of those writers below to consider policy development therefore flows from the

need to theorise its development, so that it can be seen what impact the policy is

having on the desired research object, such as FE colleges. It is this secondary

nature within the academic work found by this study that explains the rather under-

developed and ungrounded theorising that the author of this study perceives in current academic writing.

This situation has presented the study with a considerable amount of problems in critiquing academic writing for this thesis, as the 'bald' statements made by academics with no apparent evidence base aside apart from their own observations on policy. The secondary nature of the theorising means there is little that the author of this study can disagree with, as the treatment the actual implementation of policy receives from these writers is understandably de minimus. The contribution this study makes therefore to the development of theory in this area is important, but this phenomenon makes it difficult to provide a critique of other literature in the area.

The couching of policy within the LSS section is deemed by the majority of writers to be within the neo-liberal paradigm which has dominated Government thinking since the Thatcher/Major Conservative Governments (1979-1997) and championed by Blair (Evans, 2007; Gleeson, 2011). In relation to the LSS sector, Grubb (2004) and Grubb and Lazerson (2004) talk of a 'gospel of vocationalism', framed within a neo-liberal system of beliefs that suggested that most other forms of state intervention in the economy and labour market are either impossible or undesirable. Education and training and the supply of skills, however, offers one of the few legitimate ways in which government can boost the fortunes of individuals workers and of firms and the economy generally. DIUS (2008)[26] and DBIS (2009)[27] therefore defined a range of policy goals that education and training policy was to tackle. What both the acts did, was to seek to establish ideological beliefs, limits and boundaries within which education and training policy, programmes and institutions could be debated in the public arena.

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[26] Post-SSA policy
[27] ibid

As suggested within this thesis, there is a consensus among the academics writing on LSS policy, that 'New Labour' held as a central tenant the neo-liberal view that globalisation is an unstoppable force that has created a worldwide product, capital and labour markets. It is in this globalised world that the UK and its individual citizens/workers must compete (Blair, 2007; Brown, 2007a and b). There was also within the New Labour lexicon a belief in the neo-liberal concept of deregulated, flexible labour markets delivering the best economic results (Brown, 2007a; Brown, 2007b). From this, the Leitch Review (2006, p2) can be seen to promote the investment in skills as 'human capital' as a way of creating wealth and a way to reduce social deprivation. Government interventions being justified through/on the basis of the supposition that market failure must be acting to produce sub-optimal levels of outcome (Keep, 2006a and b).

The author of the study would suggest that this study triangulates the claims in Keep (2006 a, 2006b) in that the Sector Skills Agreement was conceived at this time, as a Government intervention (albeit on behalf allegedly of employers, notwithstanding the suggestions within this thesis that Government does not truly understand employers). Keep (2008) also highlights how this discourse of globalisation has dominated 'New Labour' thought, and from this the Government developed a keen interest in 'International Benchmarking', something that can be triangulated from the experiences of SSCs carrying out their SSAs. SSDA demanded the inclusion and analysis of 'international benchmarking' data and information on the potential impacts of globalisation on the SSCs sector within the SSA process, regardless of whether the SSC felt it was really relevant to the needs of the sector[28].

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[28] For example, in the author's SSC, 85% of companies in the SSC's footprint were micro companies (i.e. less than six employees) with the majority of these being sole traders. Only seventeen companies in the whole sector are deemed large enough to carry out international work. Globalised competition therefore has a minimal effect on them; however SSDA demanded that the data was included.

Keep (2008) also points to the use by Government of these international benchmarking as a modus operandi for creating a sense of national crisis (Leitch Review (2006); DIUS (2007)), ensuring the justification for investment by Government in education and training interventions. Keep (2008) challenges[29] the underpinning assumption of the SSA process, when he argues that the persistence of low-paid, dead-end work has either been ignored, or it is assumed that it can be tackled by up-skilling those workers who fill these positions (DCSF (2007); DIUS (2007); LSC (2007)).This also challenges the concept of the 'polytechnic' worker defined by Leitch (2006). Keep (2008) concludes, though, that as these jobs are going to remain, no thought has been made as to whether this up-skilling is needed, and who will do these jobs, if the existing workers leave these jobs. The author of this study would agree with Keep (2008) on this issue, namely that the underpinning assumption of the SSA was up-skilling workers, without consideration of the role of unskilled work within the economy. There was an assumption in the SSA process that increasingly jobs would need higher skill levels than had been the case previously, and that higher skills would be required to attract International capital to the UK, to generate wealth (Blair 2007). Further analysis of this argument falls outside the scope of this thesis, which is only concerned with the reasons for the failure of the SSA policy.

Keep (2008) also points to a central argument of New Labour thinking, which is that skills supply not demand is the central problem with skills updating in the UK. Grubb and Ryan (1999) identify this philosophy as dating from the very beginning of the

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[29] The purpose of the SSA in part was to improve skill levels and up-skill low or un-skilled workers to meet the perceived demands for skilled labour by international capital. Given the lack of interest in the SSA process by academics, it is possible that Keep (2008) was not aware of the SSA process, or what it was intended to achieve. The fact that it is accepted by this thesis, that the SSA failed, both to deliver what it was intended to deliver, or have an impact on the wider skills agenda, or on academic writers, would justify this view.

New Labour Government's tenure, as a variation of 'Say's law'. The underpinning argument being that if more skills are supplied, they will be used. Grubb and Ryan (1999) call this a 'build and they will come myth'. The SSA argument as enunciated within this thesis is a variant of this, which this study would define as 'provide the curriculum/skills that employers want, and they will use it'. This is the same ethos, albeit with a different twist.

Coleman and Keep (2001, unnumbered) state:

> *"Skills are by no means the only, or even the most attractive route to competitive success, perhaps particularly so in the Anglo-Saxon world. Rather than seeing skill as THE Key to competitive success, it might be more realistic to view upskilling as simply one model vying for senior managers' attention in a marketplace for ideas. There are many other competing models available"* (Coleman and Keep, 2001, unnumbered)

Keep and Mayhew (2010) conclude that 'New Labour's' analysis of the skills issues is located within a narrow economic construct of human capital theory, market failure and rate of return analyses. Keep (2006) and Keep (2009) in a critique of this 'narrow' economic analysis points to the failure of the government to absorb messages from other schools of thought internationally on skills, in areas such as 'workforce development' and the links between skills and business strategies". Keep (2010) in a concentrated critique of the New Labour skills narrative points to the multi-layer skills forecasting and planning mechanisms based around a simple matching model, with a supply of publicly funded education and training being required to meet the demands of a range of specified geographic units. This is a very salient point, and one that the author of this study would agree with, although he would express it as one of notions of power. The failure of the Government to give SSCs and the SSAs real power (perhaps by transferring funding to SSCs in the way discussed in Chapter 1) meant that multi-layered forecasting and planning models 'cancelled' each other out. The neo-pluralistic partners and stakeholders (see

Chapter 5) contradicted and subverted employer demands articulated in the SSAs, by requiring that SSAs were sublimated into the existing strategic policies of the nations or regions of the UK.

Keep then cites RDAs, SSCs, Multi-Area Agreements, the Young Persons Learning Agency (YPLA)[30] and the Skills Funding Agency (SFA)[31] as being required to ensure that supply meets demand (Keep, 2002; Keep, 2006b; Keep, 2010; Denham, 2008). Keep (2009) in his critique points out that the narrative laid out by Government has not sought to rule out or control the overt or covert inter-agency rivalry or conflict that this thesis inadvertently discusses. Nor, Keep maintains, has it primarily focussed on trying to define and dictate the detailed implementation of policy or the practice of delivery agents. Keep (2009) concludes that Government has encoded a set of basic beliefs that have justified and supported the community with an overall direction of strategy and a high level of resourcing. This has been coupled with powers of patronage, the honours system, and the constant threat of disbandment of subordinate bodies and control of funding, target-setting and inspection regimes, in an attempt to lever Government desires.

While agreeing with Keep's (2009) initial analysis, the author of this study is left wondering to what extent Keep (2009) believes that these covert inter-agency rivalries have damaged effective policy making in the UK? A key contention this thesis makes is that the 'lack of power' given to the SSA process by the SSDA and Government agencies, and the inter-agency rivalry at every level that SSCs and the SSA policy encountered, contributed significantly to the failure of the SSA policy. Denham (2002) points to the way that in Further Education, the marketisation of FE colleges and the introduction of a corporate culture had created a *"social context for*

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[30] The Young Persons Learning Agency and the Skills Funding Agency are the new creation out of the Learning and Skills Councils.
[31] See footnote 6

crime, including corporate crime", which may explain the reluctance of Government to consolidate power in one body such as the SSCs, rather than dissipating it among a collection of organisations.

There is not the sense in Keep's work that he perceives that it is as big an issue as this thesis maintains it is in terms of the control exercised by the SSDA, and the manipulation of the process by the devolved nations described in chapters four and five. This would be particularly the case in understanding the development of policy through implementation.

Hodgson and Spours (2006) also identify multiple organisations at national, regional and local level within the Learning and Skills Sector, which include a number of key groups and individuals. These include centres of political power such as the Policy Unit at 10 Downing Street, Parliaments or Assemblies, government departments , regulatory and quality assurance agencies, quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations (quangos) including funding bodies, regional and local government and public and private education providers. Interestingly, Hodgson and Spours (2006) were writing at a time when Sector Skills Councils were at the height of their political influence (see chapter 1) at DfES, yet the writers do not appear to consider them worthy of special mention or identification beyond a general description of non-governmental organisations. The author of this study finds this interesting, as it supports one of the major criticisms that he has about academic 'arms-length' research, because it suggests that Hodgson and Spours (2006) were perceiving an incomplete and 'jaundiced' position of what was going on within skills policy at that time, and supports the contention that 'close-in 'research can support academics in their observations and theorisation of policy development within an academic context.

Avis (2007, p2-3) describes this as the "zeitgeist", with the role of the state being to facilitate global success. The development of the labour process is seen as the route not only to global economic success but societal well-being (p3). Avis (2007) points out that New Labour believed that economic success led to societal well-being. This concept of economic success **and** societal wellbeing is challenged in this thesis through examination of the neo-pluralistic behaviour of the partners and stakeholders in the SSA process. This behaviour led to a re-arrangement of SSA outcomes to economic success as defined by employers **or** societal wellbeing as desired by partner and stakeholder policies at devolved nation and English regional level. This thesis suggests that economic competitiveness ultimately was sacrificed to fit SSAs with existing regional and devolved national priorities. Avis (2007, p9) also speaks of a 'competitiveness settlement' whereby education both pre-school and post compulsory education (what this thesis has spoken of as the Learning and Skills Sector) is responsible for developing the skills needs of their learners to meet the needs of industry. Quintessentially, this is an enunciation of the ethos of the SSA. Avis (2007) correctly annunciates the policy of the New Labour Government, although this thesis suggests that in relation to the SSA, the 'competitiveness settlement' effectively means nothing because it is subjugated to the needs of partners and stakeholders, and the supply side providers for skills education and training.

This settlement has been enunciated on both sides of the Atlantic, and academic critique on it dates from the 'Thatcher/Regan' era (Avis, 2009; Apple, 2001; Apple, 2004; Aronowitz and Giroux, 1986; Leitch, 2006). Avis (2007, p28) concludes:

> *"New Labour has accepted an economic model of the economic and social relations foundered upon the competitiveness settlement.*

> *Labour's particular contribution has been to introduce an interest in social inclusion and cohesion to those of value-added waged labour and human capital. However the former interests remain predicated upon an economic logic whereby a socially inclusive and cohesive society would provide the stability required for economic success." (Avis (2007, p28)*

Hodgson et al (2007) in their analysis of the LSS sector identified the notion of 'Social Justice' within the 'employer demand-led' system. They agree with the description by Avis (2007) that in New Labour speak neo-liberalism leads ultimately to social inclusion and justice. But as Hodgson et al (2007) conclude, this view is contestable by those people who are ultimately responsible for developing the skills that will create this social justice, the providers themselves:

> *"In English policy documents, it is clear that a direct link is being made between skills, employment and social inclusion. There is an assumption that the first leads to the second, and on to the third, even though there are many who would question this assertion (see for example, Wolf 2002). Indeed from close reading of these 15 policy texts it appears that the second aim of social justice is not only dependant upon, but also subordinate to the first aim of developing skills for economic competitiveness. Moreover, some of our interviewees saw the two in tension with one another, as this comment illustrates: "I do think there's a tension between social inclusion and upskilling UK plc and productivity. And I do see the social inclusion agenda as not necessarily being the employers' agenda and rightly so. And I do see the social inclusion agenda as being one that the state should support." The focus on these twin drivers and the connection between them has, in fact remained remarkably constant as a rationale for policy within the LSS in England throughout its whole lifespan 2001-2007." (Hodgson et al, 2007, p10).*

This study would concur with Avis (2007) and Hodkinson et al (2007) as far as they go in their analysis of the tensions between economic competitiveness and social justice. Where this study seeks to go further is to explore the ways that arguments about social justice, and social cohesion were used by the conflicting bodies (Keep, 2009) within the Learning and Skills Settlement to negate the 'employer'-driven concepts emanating from the SSA process. As indicated above, the author of this

study accepts the 'and' analysis within Avis (2007) and Hodkison (2007) as being the aspiration of Government policy. At the same time however, this thesis is arguing that through negotiation and contention within the neo pluralistic interventions of the devolved nation and English regional stakeholders the 'and' was reconstituted to a 'or'. To obtain an agreement, SSCs were forced to 'trim' their employer messages to meet the existing policies of partners and stakeholders at devolved nation and regional level. These policies tended to favour the social justice, rather than the competitive element of skills supply.

Avis (2010) states that the FE sector is still being tasked with developing human capital and the reservoir of skills available to the social formation, and through this supporting social inclusion and societal cohesion (p20). This suggests that to the 'bitter' end, New Labour clung to a notion of 'and', without ever truly understanding the nature of contention that exists between a system that is focussed on employer need, rather than learner need. It is not proposed to develop this argument further within this thesis, as the SSA was not tasked with the 'and' bit of New Labour LSS philosophy, only to articulate employer needs, but it is important to identify it.
This thesis offers no challenge to this current theory of the development of the LSS along neo-liberal lines per se. In subsequent sections of this thesis, some discussion of the position of the SSA within the neo-liberal concepts of globalisation and 'human capital', and the concept of class is discussed. If this thesis does challenge the neo-liberal hegemony that academia has applied to the LSS, then it is only to show how some of the concepts of social justice that this thesis is seeking to enunciate have been utilised by regional partners and stakeholders within the concept of 'neo-pluralism' to seek to subvert the neo-liberal policies of the central government. This study believes that this has less to do with philosophical differences generally between the governments of devolved nations and the national government (although arguably this might not be the case in Scotland) as with nationalistic beliefs

that power and policy making control should be vested within the control of devolved nations and English regions.

Grubb and Lazerson's (2004) contentions that this establishment of pre-eminent ideological beliefs closes off consideration of alternative analyses or ideological belief, and that DIUS (2008) and DBIS (2009) encode a set of basic assumptions about how the education and training system can best be structured and managed by central government is challenged by this thesis however. Where the author of this study would critique Grubb and Lazerson (2004) (and this argument is also true of other policy makers) is that DIUS (2008) and DBIS (2009) may what is claimed of them, but they cannot be the final word on skills policy within the UK, because as this thesis clearly demonstrates, the power that regional and central bodies had on the policy implementation (and while the demise of the RDAs under the 'coalition' Government may change this in England, the devolved nations currently remain unaffected) remains considerable.

Hodkinson (2004) argues that within the period of policy creation that the SSA considers, the Government created a culture within research and policy that seeks to champion a more empirical system of research and policy design (p10). Hodkinson (2004, p17) concludes that this empiricism has created in both the public and private sectors a reliance on target setting and outcome measurement, with a focus on effectiveness and efficiency, rather than determining a form of purpose or value (p17). He concludes:

> "Like empiricism, audit focuses on that which can be objectively measured. Like post- positivism, the culture thrives upon the assertion that subjectivity can be tamed so that research quality, teaching quality, the effectiveness of learning and 'value for money' can be objectivity determined and unproblematically demonstrated. It is from within this audit culture that UK and US politicians called for better educational research to show 'what works' . Thus as Stronach et al (2002a, p174) argue, we have seen a 'resurgence of positivism as handmaiden to the

management control of errant professions', the latter category clearly including educational researchers." (Hodkinson, 2004, p17)

Again, this thesis would not challenge this contention by Hodkinson (2004) or the contention by Hammersley (2004, p140) that Hodkinson (2004) is defining a new orthodoxy related to educational research for Government and policy makers. The SSA was a mechanism through which some of the 'value for money' questions in relation to employers were supposed to be answered. This is further empirical evidence (if any were needed) of the neo-liberal ethos of the SSA. Further obtuse justification for Hodkinson's (2004) view can be identified through the way that SSDA managed the SSCs and the SSA process, developed elsewhere within this thesis (see Chapter 4).

Hamilton (2007) in her paper on agency and change in the policy process talks about the notions of power exercised by Governments in seeking to influence change based on work by Burns and Stalker (1961), and these are: direct coercion, financial incentives and penalties, normative pressure and access to knowledge respectively. Hamilton (2007, p251) concludes:

> *"These kinds of power are enforced variously through legislation; funding and audit and performance indicators; discourses that persuade and align public opinion ; social networks; and structures of consultation and decision-making that influence and channel communication in particular ways. All of these can be identified in the current policy era. They were also unevenly and sporadically used by both national and local government during the 1980s and 1990s pursuing educational reform."* (Hamilton, 2007, p251)

The management of the SSA has many of the facets described above and these are described throughout this thesis. The discourses and pluralistic and neo-pluralistic social networking that allowed partners and stakeholders to control and direct the development of the SSA, and in doing so reduce a potential potency that might emanate from employers adds to Hamilton's identification of central and local

government, as the purveyors of these 'outcome and control' strategies to include

devolved national and English regional government. Hamilton (2007, p255)

concludes:

> *"Policy analysts such as Fischer (2003) and Hajer and Wagenaar (2003) show that much of the policy translation process goes on through argumentation and paperwork negotiated between actors at all levels. Policy levers often manifest themselves textually, as forms to be filled in or a category to be reported. Much policy is thrashed out in the oral and written exchanges between different groups and key players. In a mixture of expensive and democratic debate, arguments are built, warrants are put forward, and persuasive cases are made. The shape of policy is affected by how convincing and inclusive these cases are, and whether they are accepted or rejected by the key players. The terms of these debates and discourses can act as powerful mechanisms for the exclusion of certain groups and perspectives. The opportunities for deliberation are determined in part by the formal consultative spaces, partly by informal networks that exist." (Hamilton (2007, p255)*

Again there is not much within this statement that this thesis would disagree with,

although Hamilton is actually describing policy formation rather than policy

implementation. In a sense, this statement from Hamilton is incomplete, as although

it probably defines relatively accurately the development process, it does not develop

what this thesis suggests is the more important part of policy development, the

implementation phase. The contention of this thesis is that it is during implementation

of policy that most changes are made by partners and stakeholders. This study

suggests that only by understanding the issues that surround implementation can

academics begin to theorise the totality of policy impact in the LSS or any other part

of the educational sector.

Hodkinson (2007), when reviewing policy on the Learning and Skills Sector, argues

that policy making in relation to LSS (which includes skills) suggests that there are a

number of problems with policy. First, current governments have an "impoverished

view" of what learning actually is, which has been reduced to a simple process of

acquisition of knowledge and of skills. Secondly, the purpose of skills acquisition has been reduced to education for employment or to improve career prospects, whereas Hamilton (2007, p267) argues that learners study for other reasons than the restricted view of education for employment. The third assumption identified by Hamilton (2007, p267) is that according to the government, the learning should be front ended in peoples' lives, with education being targeted at young people, within the LSS. The first contention of Hodkinson's this study would suggest is a 'value – laden' judgement that cannot be considered within this thesis, although the SSA does fit within the second category of being a policy to improve employability. The SSA does implicitly also fit within Hodkinson's third category of being aimed at younger people; in the case of the SSA, apprenticeships.

What the author of this study finds difficult about the contentions of Hodkinson is the simplistic and value-laden analysis of government policy. He offers no support for his contention that learners want to learn for more altruistic reasons than becoming more employable or developing career progression. This thesis is not the place for a developed argument defending the contention that 'employability' should not be at the core of education and skills policy, which is the inference that can be gleaned from Hodkinson. One of the purposes of the SSA, and the role of SSCs, is to define the potential future labour demand needs of the various sectors constituting the UK economy. Hodkinson seems not to have considered the social effects of continuing to train and raise the aspiration of learners with offers of a career in what is a declining or saturated economic market. From the author's SSC there was a very good example of this phenomenon where in plumbing, current numbers of young people training to be plumbers full time in FE colleges exceeds Labour Market projections by a factor of almost ten. With potentially ten people chasing every job, it is highly unlikely that the majority of people trained to be plumbers will actually become

plumbers (Hammond; 2007). There must be a question of the economic as well as the moral value of undertaking such a skills mismatch.

Spours et al (2007a) continues to challenge employer demand concepts, by pointing to the difficulties that some providers have in responding to conflicting needs among their clientele. This means that providers often have to divert their most expert staff to areas of high learner demand, particularly where the learning outcome is stimulated by employer demand, rather than using these staff for non-employed groups.

> *"You either disadvantage the groups of students by mucking up their*
> *timetable to respond to the employer over there, or you can't provide*
> *what the employer wants, so immediately becoming non-responsive."*
> (ZA05 in Spours, K et al (2007a, p200)).

Spours, K. et al (2007a) also seek to point to employers as being unhelpful in relation to engagement in education and training, with small employers being reluctant to pay for training, which has made providers reluctant to develop courses for employers. These providers also questioned the government's intention of making employers contribute more for training, as they argued that in their experience, employers were reluctant to invest in training (ZA06 in Spours et al (2007a, p201)).

In a further article, Spours (2007b) et al talk about the changing forms of governance and the rise of policy steering, which refers to the process whereby national governments have withdrawn from direct control over the administration of public services and used instead a range of different levers to steer policy. Although Spours (2007b) is vague, it is assumed that he was thinking of Sector Skills Councils as being part of this process, although he makes no mention of the SSA process. The author of this study would certainly agree with Spours' (2007b) analysis of the governance of 'New Labour'.

Ainley (2004) theorises that this phenomenon of policy steering has become more widespread as the administrative Keynesian state declined, to be replaced by neo-liberal forms of governance. Beck (1994) argues that the rise of policy steering is in part a response to the displacement of the old certainties of the twentieth-century industrial society by a more 'reflexive modernisation'. This has culminated in a growing awareness of the limitations of the states capacity to solve complex social problems on its own (Spours et al (2007b, p176)). Both of these theories explain the development of the SSA policy, and the concept of partnership that the SSA promoted, and the concept of agreement between Government, education and training suppliers and employers. If the study would make a critique of these writers, it is that they define some of the theoretical issues but do not appear to take much cognisance of the type of perceived[32] 'real' problems that the SSAs and the SSCs were created to address and seek solutions for.

Spours et al (2007b) also defines the arms-length development approach of government, which presumably includes SSCs in a way that typifies the SSA process:

> *"As the operational functions of government have increasingly been 'contracted out' to various non-departmental public bodies and public private partnerships (Ainley 2004; Steinberg and Johnson, 2004), so its role has shifted to that of a 'regulator of services, setter of standards and guarantor of quality' (Newman, 2001, p83). Policy levers such as performance targets, standards, audit, inspection, quality assurance processes and powers to intervene where public services are 'failing' , have consequently become central instruments in a system of arms-length regulation."* (Spours et al (2007b, p177).

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[32] The word 'perceived' has been used here, as it not is clear from their writings whether the writers considered within this section have simply felt that the issues of employability, skills demand and supply discrepancies within the market are not important enough or relevant enough for them to consider, or whether they simply reject them as an issue in favour of a different philosophy. Some academic critique of neo-liberalism considered for this thesis appeared to sweep up many concepts which might not necessarily be identified as being neo-liberal per se into a homogenous whole, which is then critiqued, but from which no alternative policies emerge.

The description above encapsulates perfectly, the nature of the SSA process and the relationship that SSCs had with the SSDA over the development of SSA documents. The setting of quality standards for SSA documents, and the measurement of these standards through assessment etc in relation to the SSA by SSDA, is documented within this thesis in relation to the SSA.

There is some analysis of other policy makers in relation to policy failures, although these are restricted to English policies that were not delivered by the LSC. Steer et al (2007, p181) point to the Strategic Area Review (StAR) policy of the LSC which had 'rationalisation' of curriculum provision as a central tenant, but failed to deliver this. They conclude:

> *"The reality of the StAR process proved somewhat different as LLSCs soon discovered. Where the sensitive issue of 16-19 provision was concerned, for example, they had neither the power nor the political support to reorganise provision in the radical and innovative ways the original policy suggested. At the same time, questions were being asked about whether LLSC staff, many of whom had formally been contract managers within the TECs, had the capacity and experience necessary to undertake such a comprehensive planning task. Moreover, providers and even some LSC officials complained that its planning processes and internal management structure were excessively bureaucratic. These problems were exacerbated by the tendency of the government Department for Education and Skills to micromanage the LSC rather than stand back and allow it to operate as a genuinely arms-length agency (Hodgson et al, 2005)"* (Steer et al (2007, p181)

The work by Steer et al (2007) identifies some of the issues that this thesis will also identify in its analysis of the failure of the SSA. First, like the LSC, with the enunciation of the SSA policy there was no power given by government to facilitate a form of rationalisation or change in curriculum at the behest of employers within the SSA process. There is also present in Steer et al (2007) an indication of the incessant interference in the case of StAR from DfES (as it then was) rather than the SSDA, as in the case of the SSA. So in this way, there is some triangulation between

the work of Steer and this thesis. Where this thesis adds to Steer is that there is no discussion within his work of a control or power exercised by the English regions on the development of StaR policies. This is interesting as RDAs with regional skills policies were certainly in place when the StAR process began. Given the control and influence that RDAs and RSPs had on the SSA process, it would be surprising if the Regional dimension did not play some part in the 'watering-down' of the proposals.

In conclusion, given that the central tenant of this thesis is that the SSA failed, Keep (2006b and 2009) makes some interesting comments on the context of policy failure. Keep states that ipso facto, the official belief is that policy does not fail and if it has not achieved what was required of it, then this is due to failures of implementation and project management, not because of fundamental design flaws. Mead (2006, p3) makes the same point by quoting an ex-policy maker, who stated that a lot of government programs start off with a good idea, but are then put through the bureaucracy and out into the system. It is at this point that compromises are made, resulting in the policy being so watered down that it does not work. The frontline then tells policy makers that the idea was bad, when there was nothing wrong with the idea just the implementation of it, according to this senior policy maker.

Mead's (2006) work is fascinating, because in many ways the crux of this thesis is that there was nothing wrong with the idea, only the implementation. Where this thesis would challenge the senior policy manager, is that there seems to have been no consideration of whether the current implementation structures could actually facilitate the successful implementation of the idea as it was originally perceived. The contention of this thesis is that the multi-layered planning and forecasting model through which the SSA had to work guaranteed the dissolution of the radical elements of the SSA, which in turn contributed to the failure of the policy, but there seems to have been no consideration of this point by the policy maker in Mead

(2006). Keep (2009) concludes that this attitude and approach has helped to ensure that few if any lessons have been learned from past policy failures.

Pluralism

In this section it is proposed to develop the theories underpinning traditional pluralism such that these can be critiqued and refined to address the epistemological and theoretical data coming out of the SSA. The term pluralism is used across a number of academic disciplines, and therefore the meaning allotted to it by these various disciplines may be differ (Laborde, 2000; Hirst, 2000, Smith, 2006).

Nichols (1975) states:

> *"The principle causes of confusion has been the fact that the term has been used by separate groups of thinkers who have rarely attempted to relate their particular use of the term to its other usages."* (Nichols, 1975, p1).

Dunleavey and O'Leary (1987) in their introduction to theories of the state define pluralism in the following way:

> *"Pluralism is the belief that there are, or ought to be, many things. It offers a defence of multiplicity in beliefs, institutions and societies and opposes 'monism'- the belief that there is, or ought to be only one thing. Pluralism began as a philosophy which argued that reality cannot be explained by one substance or principle. Similarly, political pluralism recognises the existence of diversity in social, institutional and ideological practices, and values that diversity. (Dunleavey* and O'Leary, 1987, p13).

The rejection of absolute, unified and uncontrolled state power is a hallmark of pluralism as pluralists assume that societies are characterised by "ubiquitous change and conflict". This would lead to a disintegration of society without political institutions that manage the numerous conflicts of interests and struggles for power that mark a

modern complex society (Dunleavey and O'Leary, 1987, p21). Galbraith (1953) spoke of 'countervailing power' as a response to conditions of power struggles between organised labour in the form of the TUC and employers in the form of the CBI. Galbraith's (1953) sanguine acceptance that power may reside disproportionably between different groups is a useful notion when considering both the power of Regional Skills Partnership in England, and the power of small organisations like SSCs to force through changes in the way that Government envisaged. Smith (2006) states that in most of its manifestations pluralism retains a benign view of both the existing state in democratic society and the future potential for the state as a mechanism for political organisation, which is probably its main critical limitation (Smith, 2006, p21).

Merriam (1964) in his work talks of the government performing a 'balancing function' between the competing demands of groups, because these by their nature cannot be reconciled with each other. It is therefore a primary function of government to balance these demands into a policy context. In this balancing act, government seeks to appease each group sufficiently that there are wins and losses on all sides as it works toward a common good, but with government achieving the balance (Knuttilia and Kubik, 2000,p74). Merriam (1964) concludes that the better organised and influential a group is, the more likely it is that government might favour this group or groups over others, creating a less pluralistic approach as common interests give way to group interests. An example of this can be seen in the policies pursued by the Thatcher Government post 1979 where trade unions per se were locked out of the decision making process at national level, although Thatcher's neo-liberal agenda rejected pluralist notions of state (Merriam,1964, p144). The important principle enunciated by Merriam (1964) is that within a political process some groups have more power than others. This thesis has already stated that right at the beginning of the SSA process, SSCs were not empowered to influence the skills agenda through

obtaining responsibility for funding of curriculum, which the author of this study would

suggest disempowered SSCs and the SSA fundamentally.

Merriam (1964) states:

> *"The more highly organised these groups are, however, the smaller their number; and the larger their membership, the more serious the problem becomes, whether these groups are racial, religious, regional, professional, or representative of agriculture, labour, industry, or other social aggregations. In a wide range of groups their very pluralism tends to offset one against another. If, however, these corporate groups are relatively few and prefer their corporate existence and programs to those of the state as a whole, their special goods to the common good, then difficulties arise which are not readily met by any mechanism or formula. The problem under such circumstances is that of creating a genuine community, with priority of common interests over the special. There cannot be any very effective common counsel unless there is an explicit will to provide a common program in the pursuance of common interests"* (Merriam, 1964, p144).

Knuttilia and Kubik (2000, p74) state that in a pluralistic model the government acts

as an arbitrator, holding the balance of power and umpiring the various interest

groups lobbying on the policy. It is this statement in relation to the traditional notion of

pluralism that is being challenged by this thesis, as within the new pluralistic model

postulated by this study, the groups described in the SSA process as 'partners and

stakeholders' were able to exhibit a significant amount of control over the

implementation of the policy, such that the outcomes achieved for the SSA were

diametrically opposed to the objectives that it was given by government .This thesis

argues that the SSA process 'failed' to deliver the policy aims of government due to

the behaviour of these groups.

Bentley (1935) one of the first and leading American pluralists concluded that

government could only be analysed through the medium of groups (Knuttila and

Kubik, 2000, p69). Bentley (1935) concluded that these groups would then compete

with each other to obtain their agenda:

> *"We shall always find that the political interests and activities of any given group- and there is no political phenomenon except group phenomenon – are directed against other activities of men, who appear in other groups, political or other. This phenomenon of political life which we study will always divide the society in which they occur, along lines which are very real, though of varying degrees of definiteness. The society itself is nothing other than the complex of the groups that compose it."* (Bentley, 1935, p222).

Government within this context of groups therefore is composed of separate organs that respond in making decisions to the multitude of interest groups that arise within the civil society. Bentley (1935) contextualises this concept within the patterns of US Government policy at that time:

> *"In governments like that of the United States we see these manifold interests gaining representation through many thousands of officials in varying degrees of success, beating some officials down now into delegate activity, intrusting representative activity (in the narrow sense) to other officials at times in high degree, subsiding now and again over great areas while "special interests" make special use of officials, rising in other spots to dominate, using one agency of the government against another, now with stealth, now with open force and in general moving along the route of time with the organized turmoil which is life where the adjustments are much disturbed. Withal, it is a process which must surprise one more for the trifling proportion of physical violence considering the ardent nature of the struggles, than for any other characteristic."* (Bentley, 1935, p453).

The in-out swings in favour in the policy swirl are interesting, and are worthy of further consideration in relation to the plethora of 'groups' (perhaps for post-16 skills and training the word should be agencies) within the skills arena. The process that this thesis describes particularly within chapter 5 is the subjugation of a government policy in the implementation stage by a number of groups made up of public sector partners and stakeholders. A generation or so later, Dahl (1965) was to make the same point about the diverse groups in the US policy creation process:

> *"Important government policies would be arrived at through negotiation, bargaining, persuasion and pressure at a considerable number of different sites in the political system- the Whitehouse, the bureaucracies, the labyrinth of committees in Congress, the federal and state courts, the state legislatures and the executives, the local*

governments. No single organized political interest, party, class, region or ethnic groups would control all of these sites" (Dahl, 1965, p325)

Vincent (1987) explained Bentley (1935) in the following terms:

"One of the early American pluralists, A. F. Bentley, was concerned to direct our attention away from legal and institutional studies towards the behaviour of groups. The political arena was composed of a diverse range of groups all articulating interests, and putting pressure on government. The distinction between types of government was based largely on the way interests were articulated, accommodated and adjusted. All groups were seen as interested in striking some kind of bargain. The government was not there to seek some abstract national interest. The national interest, in a minimal sense, is the final bargain struck between interests in the policy sphere. Policy is the outcome of group pressures" (Vincent, 1987, p189).

The concepts enunciated by Bentley (1935) also identify the tension between group desires and the government's needs to obtain consensus. Although in the case of the SSA, it would appear that government far from providing consensus between competing groups in the broadest policy sense is having consensus inflicted on it through the pluralistic groups, many of whom the Government itself was responsible for creating. The traditional model of pluralism therefore does not reflect the governance of the UK as it was (and to an extent still is) during the implementation of the SSA.

Many academics claim that pluralism has failed to adequately represent 'official' government policy process phenomena post Thatcher and despite ten years of Labour Government. Smith (2006) points to the neo-liberalism of Thatcher, with an inherent distrust of groups as being a reason for the retreat of pluralism within the UK policy-making concept. He concludes:

"The British state is based on the notion of indirect, individual representation, a decision making elite isolated from civil society and unresponsive group interests, combined with an indivisible notion of

> *internal and external sovereignty. The epitome of anti-pluralism was the Thatcherite conception of state with its suspicion of groups and intermediate institutions and emphasising the direct relationship between a sovereign government and the individual. As a consequence of these developments, pluralism had little purchase in Britain"* (Smith, 2006, p24).

Where this study would challenge the assertion by Smith (2006) is that although policy development may have removed the pluralistic power of groups in the development of policy, these groups have merely shifted the emphasis from influencing development to influencing, or indeed sabotaging implementation.[33] The creation of significant numbers of non-governmental organisations may have aided this shift (if indeed there has been a shift) from policy development to implementation, as governance through non-government organisations is significantly higher than it was at the time traditional concepts of pluralism were being developed.

Another explanation for the phenomena of national and regional partners and stakeholders steering policy implementation to suit their needs, may perhaps be a localised enunciation of a theory of international pluralism. This occurs when a nation state devolves power to Europe, and the EU then re-devolves this power back to regional rather than national power structures. Smith (2006) describes this process of multi-level governance in the following way:

> *"Developing out of analysis of the European Union, the multi-level governance literature suggests that there is an increasingly complex*

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[33] It is interesting to note, that in the literature, and in developing the perceptions of pluralism used in this study, emphasis seemed to be on policy development, with no discussion about how the disparate groups then operated through the implementation phase. Whether this was because the writers failed to consider that policy could be manipulated in the way that this thesis describes in implementation, and therefore ceased their studies once the policy had been formulated and legislated on can only be speculated upon. The development of non-governmental organisations may also have transferred the pluralistic contention away from the developing of policy to the implementation of it, which would not have occurred to the same extent when government was centralised, as it predominantly was when notions of pluralistic theory were developed.

> *process of governance with decision making operating between different levels. The levels interact to produce new forms of policy making. The key premise of multi-level governance like the rest of the governance school, is that authority has dispersed away from centralized nation states, and that there are multiple sites of decision making each involving different actors and interests. MLG again adopts pluralist assumptions about the way power is dispersed and the limits on the state. It effectively by-passes the issue of how actors with different levels may exercise power on each other."* (Smith, 2006, p32).

Although this hypothesis could explain the phenomenon that this thesis describes, the author of this study is unconvinced that EU involvement in skills is sufficiently influential as to influence the governance model chosen by the UK Government. Smith (2006) concludes, however, by suggesting that multi-level governance retains what he perceives to be the error of pluralism in that the state is still seen as benign but challenged by multiple power centres (Smith, 2006, p33).

It is perhaps apposite here to differentiate the use of pluralism within this thesis from the ideas of 'corporatism' which the author of this study did not consider to be applicable to the theoretical analysis within this thesis. Watkins (2011) points out that the concept of 'corporatism' was devised at the end of the nineteenth century as a response by the *"Catholic Intelligentsia"* to the perceived threat of socialism, and the abolition of private property (p1). Watkins (2011, p2) concludes that corporatism was formulated as a system that emphasises the positive role of the state in guaranteeing social justice and suppressing the moral and social chaos of the population pursuing their own individual self-interests.

Watkins (2011) links corporatism to the 'Third Way' analysis of Giddens (1998) et al. Where the 'corporatism' defined by Watkins did not sit with the concept of the SSA within this study, was that the state did not play the arbitrating role assigned for it in 'corporatism' thinking by acting as the mediator of the diverse factional interests. Within the SSA there is nothing of the 'Lyndon Johnson' dictate of *""let us reason*

together" (Watkins, 2011, p3), where the state is the arbitrator. Rather as this thesis seeks to demonstrate, the state stood back from the process and allowed the manipulation of this process by the various interest groups during implementation. It is this attitude by the government that lead the author of this study to differentiate the SSA from the concept of 'corporatism' towards a more neo-liberal inspired concept of neo-liberalism. This being despite the use 'New Labour' made of 'Third Way' thinking, when theorising 'New Labour', during the 1990's.

Perspective Approaches to Education Policy Analysis

Malen and Knapp (1997, p419) emphasise succinctly the major issues and problems that this study has had in researching the phenomenon of the Sector Skills Agreement policy, as it was defined and the practice as it became. There is also an inference within Malen and Knapp (1997) that suggests that the 'up close' reflexive ethnographic methodology adopted by the author of this study is the correct one, as it allows a more detailed analysis of policy implementation than could be obtained from more 'arms- length' approaches.

> *Policy analysts and actors often struggle to 'make sense' of perplexing policy developments such as the seemingly tenuous connections between policy and practice. The stark and stubborn disparities between a policy's stated aim and actual effects seem to defy explanation in part because the social conditions to be attended are tangled webs of problems with symptoms, sources, and 'solutions' that are neither readily apparent nor reliably addressed by policy provision. These disparities also resist explanation because policy is an elusive, multi-faceted phenomenon. Since policy takes many forms, performs many functions, and begets many effects, it is difficult to get a fix on the boundaries, let alone the 'workings' of a policy or set of policies. Simply put, efforts to analyse policy developments are seriously complicated by the mysteries of social problems and the intricacies of public policies."*
> (Malen and Knapp, 2002, p419)

Ball (1993) makes a similar point when writing about policy, talking in the title about ''Trajectories and Toolboxes', which suggests a multiplicity of approaches and concepts to address policy analysis. Ball (1993, p10) not surprisingly within the body of the text goes on to argue that *"Two theories are better than one"* (p10) in relation to the analysis of policy; concluding that:

> *"The complexity and scope of policy analysis from an interest in the workings of the state to a concern with the contexts of practice and the distributional outcomes of policy preclude the possibility of successful single theory explanations."* (Ball, 1993, p10)

Ball (1993) goes on to expand this concept, picking up many of the issues and experiences that have informed the development of this thesis examining the SSA.

> *"Thus in addition, it is crucial to recognise that the policies themselves, the texts, are (a) not necessarily clear or closed or complete. The texts are the product of compromises at various stages (at points of initial influence, in the micro-politics of interest group articulation). There is ad hocery, negotiation and serendipity within the state, within the policy formation process. Now if this sounds like a restatement of the epistemology of pluralism it is not meant to be. There is a difference between agenda control and ideological politics and the processes of policy influence and text production within the state. The point is that quibbling and dissensus result in a blurring of meanings, in public confusion and a dissemination of doubt."* (Ball, 1993, p11).

The study would concur with Ball's analysis that policies are not complete; as the study would see them as statements of intent, with a defined outcome, at least in relation to the SSA. The author of this study also would certainly agree about the amount of adhockery and serendipity within the state, although he is not as keen to dismiss pluralism as a vehicle to analyse the development of the adhockery phenomenon. Ball's lack of interest in developing an explanation of the constituents of the 'blurring of meanings', 'confusion' and doubt in the minds of the public does, the author of this study feels, leave that statement with which he agrees 'suspended'

without adequate support. As will be developed later in this study, the theorising of 'policy manipulation', adhockery or whatever, relies on an analysis of pluralism, albeit one that critiques and seeks to add to traditional concepts of pluralism in the instance of the SSA.

A second phenomenon highly pertinent to this thesis also identified by Ball (1993) is the way that policies change over time as a result of varying factors, including the actors engaged in the policy.

> *"These studies also point to a second issue. (b) Policies shift and change their meaning in the arenas of politics; representations of change, key interpreters (Secretaries of State, ministers, Chairs of Councils) change; (sometimes the change in key actors is a deliberate tactic for changing the meaning of policy). Policies have their own momentum inside the state; purposes and intentions are re-worked and re-orientated over time. The problems faced by the state change over time. Policies are represented differently by different actors and interests."* (Ball, 1993, p11).

In relation to the SSA, then the transfer of the Right Hon Charles Clarke MP from DfES (as it then was) to the Home Office did seem to move SSAs off the agenda, and may have led to a downgrading of the policy. Charles Clarke allegedly told SSDA, and this story was related to the author of this study, that he was happy to accept twenty-five 'Sector Skills Disagreements', as presumably he saw the process as 'dragging the vested interests' out into the public domain. Be that as it may, there is no suggestion that this personal view carried over into his successor, who may have driven the SSA process down the department's agenda. The thrust of this thesis certainly concurs with the final statement of Ball's that policies are re-orientated over time, but while identifying the problem, Ball (1993) offers no clue as to 'why' policies change, and only suggestions (accurate but not in-depth) of 'how' they change, and no discussion about 'who' changes, them, which is the function of this thesis.

Another point made by Ball (1993) is that the policy, whatever that may be, has to be re-worked into a practice, to give voice to that policy, and thus in comparisons of policy documents to policy practice then:

> *"Solutions to the problems posed by policy texts will be localised and should be expected to display ad hocery and messiness. Responses indeed must be 'creative'; but I use the term carefully here and in a specific sense. Given constraints, circumstances and practicalities, the translation of the crude, abstract simplicities of policy texts into interactive and sustainable practices of some sort involve productive thought, invention and adaptation. Policies do not normally tell you what to do; they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed. A response must still be put together, constructed in context, off-set against other expectations. All of this involves creative social action not robotic reactivity. Thus, the enactment of texts relies on things like commitment, understanding, capability, resources, practical limitations, cooperation and (importantly) intertextual comparability."* (Ball, 1993, p11-12)

Where the study would question the generality of Ball's comment is in that the policy of the SSA was clear: to create an employer demand-led system of curriculum development within the LSS. From the perspective of this study, the context and wording was clear: the re-working for practice in the case of the SSA by consensus (see chapter 1) changed the SSA from this 'radical' policy directive to one that descended into a 'direction of travel'. Also the suggestion by Ball that the simplicity of policy texts requires further analysis and definition sounds like an apology for the 'Civil Service', and in the view of the author of this study, this work seeks to challenge and elaborate on the generalities and justifications for policy change that Ball enunciates without an apparent evidence or justification.

The re-working of policy into practice, which is the essence of this thesis, also relies to some extent on the power relations within the various departments and agencies that are involved within the SSA. Ball (1993) again, also identifies the role of power

structures within the policy process, although his definitions remain at arm's-length due to the generalness of the quote below, whereas the thesis seeks to bring in and define the partners in relation to the power they exercise within the SSA process:

> *"Policies typically posit a restructuring, redistribution and disruption of power relations, so that different people can and cannot do different things; again "relations of power" are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relationships), but are immanent in the latter…Power is multiplicitous, overlain, interactive and complex, policy, policy texts enter rather than simply change power relations. Hence again the complexity of the relationship between policy intentions, texts, interpretations and reactions."* (Ball, 1993, p13).

Ball's (1993) analysis of power is very apposite within the context of this thesis. The behaviour of the devolved administration governments and indeed English 'regional' governments explored in this thesis re-shaped the implementation of the SSA to fit within their governmental ethos and plans, which illustrates this notion of power. The ability to ignore, twist and manipulate central policy into a regional form is well documented in this thesis, as is the 'command and control' method of managing SSCs during the process by the SSDA.

The messiness that Ball (1993) describes above is also identified by this thesis, although this is perhaps best seen as being an evolutionary development in the procedures of policy development that has not been identified by Ball (1993) or other academics cited within this thesis. Through in-depth analysis, the evolutionary development of policy implementation is discussed within this thesis, as understanding the drivers/mechanisms of this evolutionary change may impact on theorising of policy, or at least underpin academic notions of the policy implementation and development stage.

Hamilton and Hillier (2006) make a similar point of 'policy manipulation' writing about adult literacy, which describes within a different context the experience that the author of this study is discussing within the SSA:

> *"The creation of a policy does not always lead to implementation. If it does, the policy may be subverted, diverted or ignored by those responsible for enacting it. Once policy has been created, changes continue to be made to the stabilised problem even though these may not be controlled by the original policymaker. Policy may drift or be neglected due to other, more pressing demands on government. There are also policy lacunae: gaps where there is no policy activity, even though there are emerging issues."* (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006, p34).

Hamilton and Hillier (2006, p34) continue by talking about a group of critical policy analysts who have developed an argumentative and discursive approach, which focuses on how language and culture shape the way in which we (as human beings) make sense of the world, and the possibilities there are for action in it. The language that is used is not neutral, and therefore the way in which policy-making occurs can be examined in terms of narrative and discourse as it develops through a never-ending series of communications and strategic moves. In this way, various policy actors in loosely coupled forums of public deliberation construct inter-subjective meanings (Hoppe, 1993, p77; Hamilton and Hillier, 2006, p34).

The author of this study feels that the difficulty with the argument of Hoppe (1993) and Ball (1993) is that it is based on theorising significantly before New Labour devolution, and therefore cannot take cognisance of new pluralistic powers working against central government through the devolved nations and the English regions.

Ball (1993) also, refers to policy creation and presumably policy implementation as a discourse (relying on the work of Foucault (1977) for his definition of discourse) between the various actors in the policy mix. Ball, having earlier sought to distance

himself from pluralism, then begins to question whether indeed what he is describing could be a kind of 'new pluralism'. Ball (1993) states:

> *In [policy] there is plenty of social agency and social intentionality around. Actors are making meaning, being influential, contesting, constructing responses, dealing with contradictions, attempting representations of policy. Much of this stuff of policy can be engaged with by a realist analysis in the different contexts of policy. But maybe this is a new pluralism. Maybe this is caught within an ideology of agency; by dealing with what is or can be done it misses the big picture. In other words, perhaps it concentrates too much on what those who inhabit policy think about and misses and fails to attend to what they do not think about. Thus we need to appreciate the way in which policy ensembles, collections of related policies, exercise power through a production of 'truth' and 'knowledge', as discourses."* (Ball, 1993, p14)

What is difficult from the perspective of this study, is that having launched the concept of 'new[34] pluralism', Ball fails to substantiate it, with a form of definition other than through the implicit descriptive definitions that he incorporates throughout his paper. The author of this study has found this deeply frustrating, as he has not been able to find any further work by Ball that has sought to elaborate on the question or develop it. This study agrees with the concept of new or neo-pluralism, and utilises the concept in this work to explain the phenomena of policy implementation within Government policy. The neo-pluralism within this thesis contains many of the traditional elements of pluralism, but has at its centre in relation to policy-making a more power-centric core than is claimed by pluralistic writers of the twentieth century (see Chapter 3), and therefore might rightly claim to be a theorised 'new pluralism'.

This thesis is arguing for policy manipulation through agencies working in pluralistic partnership, as in the project boards or through the Regional Skills Partnerships in relation to the SSA at regional and devolved nation level, to obtain leverage over national policies. Where the author of this study thinks that this new pluralism is

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[34] Ball's use of 'new pluralism' is not deemed to be an attempt to distinguish it from neo-pluralism, but is just semantics on Ball's part.

different from the twentieth century variant is that the national government is not the referee or arbitrator of conflicting 'pressure group' values, but has its own beliefs and values subjugated through the devolved nation/English regional partners and stakeholders. In this study, the out-workings of this new pluralism can be seen by academics in the final conclusion of the policy as indicated by the quote by Hamilton and Hillier (2006), but understanding how this occurred remains within the confines of 'informed speculation', which it is the objective of this thesis to 'ground' in more understanding in relation to the SSA.

A definition of the term 'neo-pluralism' used by this study, which will be expanded further later within this thesis, might be as follows:

Neo-pluralism through the notions of devolution of power to devolved nations and English Regions is a phenomenon where the national government in Westminster or its appointed agents (in the case of the SSA the SSCs) cease to be able to direct the implementation of policy. National government is confronted at implementation level by a regional conglomerate of partners and stakeholders, constituted either formally (in England in relation to the SSA the RSP would be an example of this) or informally (the project boards in the devolved nations would be an example of this) who manipulate the policy implementation to meet and align with their 'regionalised' [35] agenda.

This thesis also challenges the rather simplistic notions of policy development such as that by Yeatman (1998) (although writing in 1998, before New Labour had got a foothold, and many of the circumstances, particularly devolution, had not been implemented), who refers to 'policy levels' where policy action may take place. Yeatman (1998) saw six levels; first, there are public servants responsible for turning

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[35] In this case the author is using regionalisation to include the devolved nations.

general policy directions into operational policy, then into programme management, and to co-ordinate this with any NGO involved. Secondly, there are the service providers who deliver the policy on the ground.

Thirdly, there are the potential and actual users of the policy. Fourthly, there are those who then give evaluative feedback on policy, including professional evaluators, citizens, lobbying groups and political parties. Fifthly, there are those who enforce due process and legislation. Sixthly, there are those involved with monitoring and auditing policy (Yeatman, 1998; Hamilton and Hillier, 2006, p34). This definition is interesting in that it is cited with approval by Hamilton and Hillier (2006), suggesting that they did not fully understand how the underlying process of policy-making and implementation had changed from the pre-New Labour days. The complexities identified within this thesis challenge the rather simplistic and layered approach taken by Yeatman (1998), substituting it with a messier, adhockery and 'neo-pluralistic' methodology for policy implementation.

'Traditional' philosophies impacting upon an analysis of the SSA

In the previous sections of this thesis, the theoretical drivers created by academics to explain policy development were considered and critiqued. The author of this study, however, perceives the theorising of the SSA within this thesis as being divided between the policy-specific theorising as above, and the more traditional theorising within a traditional modernist and postmodernist framework.

When considering 'modernist' concepts, then this study believes that there are two theories through which the SSA can be analysed and these two theories are antithetical to each other, namely neo-liberalism and Marxism. This thesis has

already discussed the neo-liberalism championed by the Thatcher/ Major
Conservative Government from 1979 to1997, which has been continued and
expanded by New Labour from 1997 to 2010, with free labour markets and
globalised capital (Bevir, 2003, p463; Watson, 2001,p202).

This study perceives the neo-liberal agenda to be modernist in nature, in that it
contains a Grand Narrative view of the world (also central to Marxism) that peace
and prosperity will only be obtained through capitalist development. This 'brave new
world' is to be achieved through free world markets, and movements of goods and
services. From these neo-liberal assumptions the implications for the skills agenda
within the UK are that labour or 'human capital' (to give it its neo-liberal, rather than
Marxist designation) must be skilled to attract inward investment of this free-flowing
capital in the world to the UK. Once one specific market has evaporated through
natural progression (and rapid advances in technology are perceived to increase the
time between the development of a product and its demise and replacement by a
more superior product), then this creates a requirement for human capital to re-skill
to attract the next wave of inward investment. These assumptions underpin a type of
'hegemony' that is described by Carnoy (1984), who states:

> *"Through hegemony, the hegemonic-class leadership is able to present
> itself as incarnating the general interest of the people-nation and at the
> same time condition the dominated classes to a specific political
> acceptance of their domination. Ideology, by hiding the class
> relationship and subsequent exploitation implicit in the ideology of
> individualisation and reunification of the Nation-State, therefore enables
> the dominant class to reproduce social relations in such a way that it
> remains dominant. In other words, ideology legitimates the existence
> and functioning of a class state."* (Carnoy, 1984, p102)

This study believes that the SSA perpetuates this neo-liberal hegemony, in that it
promotes the value of skilling as a social good creating individual prosperity and
sustaining/maintaining the UK as a competitive entity in a global world. The author of

this study believes that it is a class-based policy (and it is proposed to consider issues of class later within this chapter) in the way that the focus of the SSA developed, if not in relation to initial inception. This is predominantly because eventually it focussed on the skilled craft and technician professions, rather than on vocational or academic curriculum within the elite University sector, or the 'Gold Standard' of GCE 'A' levels, which remained untouched in relation to the scope of the SSA.

The argument accepted by this thesis is that the 'middle class' through a network of social and political forums has managed to gain a significant degree of power and control over the education processes. The 'middle class' as a collective body has protected the educational settlement around 'A' levels and perpetuated the educational/vocational divide along class lines (MCraig, 2001, p201). Despite the original intention in DfES (2003) that education and skills training would be related to employer demand in the SSA, this was effectively reduced into only vocational education at the Further Education level[36] before the SSA was even developed. Political success through the 'pacification' of the 'middle class' depends on the maintenance of this 'educational apartheid' based nominally on class and aspiration, in the way intimated by Bauman (1998):

> *"The welfare state came nowhere near the fulfilment of its founding fathers' dream of exterminating once and for all poverty, humiliation and despondency; yet it did produce a large enough generation of well educated, healthy, self assured, self-reliant, self-confident people, jealous of their freshly acquired independence, willing to cut the ground from beneath the popular support for the idea that it is the duty of those who have succeeded to assist those who continue to fail." (Bauman, 1998, p61)*

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[36] Some consideration was made of Higher Education in the SSA, but there was no mechanism to enforce employer demands on the university sector, nor in the author of this study's experience did universities engage in changes in their curriculum as a result of SSA work.

This 'aspirational middle class' is now the target for the main political parties and was a key constituency for the 'New Labour' project:

> "After the Conservative interregnum, the aspirational middle class is now attracted to individualist forms of organisational and signals of opportunity and excellence. New Labour's electoral success has been built on creating an association with such individualist responses to aspirational demand" (McCraig, 2001, p201).

New Labour achieved its electoral success by tapping into the aspirations of the 'middle class' and developing policies that sustained or at least did not challenge this group. The effective exclusion of 'A' levels from the SSA remit therefore did not open to scrutiny a qualification valued by the middle class as a passport entry into the best universities (McCraig, 2001). This thesis also accepts some of the ideas related to the concept of the 'working class' postulated by Evans (2007), namely, that the working class has remained stubborn in its inability to develop from its traditional roots into a "classless' group of individualists. In this 'classless' class theory, labour (provided by the traditional working class), now transformed into this 'classless group of individuals', is able to move from job to job and project to project, undertaking re-skilling/ education as required to meet these globalised capital needs. Although neo-liberal in context, this theory was also enshrined in the 'third way' concepts of 'New Labour' (Giddens, 1998).

In rejecting this neo-liberal/third way argument, Evans concludes:

> "Some right of centre Conservative commentators were angered because they like to believe that opportunity is equally available to all, that there is no such thing as the working class in Britain anymore and that overcoming the limitations of poverty is all about taking 'individual responsibility'. The problems with this point of view are threefold: firstly it is assumed that the institutions which deliver opportunity to the people of Britain function equally well at all times and in all places, an idea that the study of educational failure completely undermines. Secondly, it is assumed that all people have the necessary educational, financial and emotional resources to stand alone as individuals (who have no need of society) …Finally, this 'individual responsibility' perspective ignores

children completely, An analysis of social class is meaningless without an in-depth account of what childhood is like because if opportunity were equally available to all, children would no longer be constrained by the social and economic position of their parents." (Evans, 2007, p xiv)

Taking the above quote from Evans, the study accepts her analysis for the failings of the working class (although further comment is outside the scope of this thesis). Evans also captures the frustration of the 'New Labour' government that investment in education and training was not producing the results that were expected for it. Employer groups were also making complaints about the responsiveness and quality of provision on the supply side, which coupled with the neo-liberal hegemony urging the development of skilled human capital to attract inward investment led to the re-invention of the perception that employers should drive the demand for skills training.

The impersonal conception of human capital as a factor of economic production is not new, and, the author of this study believes that inadvertently the SSA was intended as a vehicle to create a skilled flexible worker able to move between economic sectors in response to the expansion and contraction of economic activity. The lack of an analysis as part of the SSA of what the impact of the creation of the multi-skilled flexible worker might have on the sociological well-being of that worker does present a moral dilemma. An analysis of Marx's concept of 'alienated Labour' seems appropriate here, as the worker becomes flexible and moves from industry to industry and job to job, they become alienated from a sense of identity that working in a particular industry for life would give.

"The externalization of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, and external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien" (Marx, 1975, p324).

The worker therefore co-operates in a process where his skills are harnessed to make/create capital value for the globalised capitalist, who may then take the 'design' and manufacture in a 'lower wage 'economy. Once the lifecycle of the product has 'run its course' or ceased to generate acceptable profit margins, it will be terminated as capital looks around the globe for alternative lucrative forms of investment return. Consequently, this leaves the workers looking for work, and at this stage under the SSA the government intervenes to theoretically re-skill the worker to form the caucus of a new capitalist venture. In this capitalist theory, the nation state with the highest skilled labour is in a position to most successfully attract this international capital. The role of SSCs and the SSA in this globalisation hegemonic process is to identify demands for labour by the sectors they represent, and the skill needs that these workers want/will need to attract international capital. SSCs are also encouraged to work together to develop core skill needs, which while not expressly stated, allows transferability of skills into other sectors quickly, creating free flow of labour (Bevir, 2003;Watson, 2001).

Within the author's SSA, the amount of labour wishing to train as a plumber was, for example considerably higher than the numbers required by the Labour Market Information projections. This, and the lack of apprenticeships, meant that many learners with Vocationally Relevant Qualifications (VRQs) were unable to find work, as they did not have the necessary skills required by industry. This lead to the industry turning to migrant labour to meet its skill needs, rather than investing in training indigenous staff (Hammond, 2006; Hammond, 2007). Under the SSA process as perceived within the author's SSC, surplus labour would be directed to other sectors within the economy, and there is an assumption that they would have 'basic tool skills' and basic skills (Hammond 2006) from which some up-skilling could be undertaken to make them job ready for another economic sector. Additionally,

plumbing employers (for example) would dictate the content of apprenticeships and VRQs to make learners job ready and more productive to meet employers' needs.

This concept is also not unknown within classical Marxism, as the disenfranchised skilled worker was identified by Gorz (1982) who argued that Marx identified the trend in modern capitalism of a move away from unskilled labour to a 'polytechnic worker'. What is very interesting is that in the recent Leitch (2006) report, the concept of the 'polytechnic' worker is described, using the exact terminology found in Gorz's analysis of Marx's concept of the polytechnic worker. This suggests to the author of this study that Marx's analysis of the development of capital was correct, and that the concepts underpinning the role of human capital remain fundamentally unchanged since the nineteenth century, despite the claims by Giddens (1998) that they are new.

> *"[Marx] in the Grundrisse think[s] it possible to discover the material foundation of the proletarian capacity of self-emancipation and self management. He anticipated a process in which the development of the productive forces would result in the replacement of the army of unskilled workers and labourers and the conditions of military discipline in which they worked by a class of polytechnic, manually and intellectually skilled workers who would have a comprehensive understanding of the work process, control complex technical systems and move with ease from one type of work to another."* (Gorz, 1982, p27).

In the global capitalism model expounded within this thesis, Gorz (1982) with his Marxist interpretation of capitalism would disagree with Blair (2007) and Giddens (1998). Within Blair (2007), the 'New Labour' model of the 'polytechnic' worker continues to adapt and meet the needs of capital, but still remains the 'slave' of the capitalist system. This differs from the conclusion of Gorz (1982, (p28), which was that the 'polytechnic' worker would take control of the means of production, thus removing the capitalist from the 'equation' in what this study would argue is classic Marxist dogma.

Denham (1983, p275) critiques Gorz's (1982) description of the 'polytechnic' worker, arguing that 'capitalism' has continued to remove control of the productive process from manual, technician and supervisory workers, meaning that Gorz's theory is unlikely to be correct. Leitch (2006) however, is using the 'Blairite' concept of the polytechnic worker, and not the Gorz (1982) 'Marxist' interpretation as a theoretical concept through which to formulate policy, which (at the time that Leitch (2006) was written) included both SSAs and SSCs. The utilisation by Leitch (2006) of the concept of the 'Polytechnic' Worker emphasises the utilisation and re-definition of socialist (even Marxist) concepts by New Labour, to place them within a neo-liberal context. This is a constantly recurring theme within this thesis. Leitch (2006) utilises a socialist concept as a base to define a neo-liberal context of a flexible skilled worker able to move between sectors at the whim of capital, which the SSA was designed to help create.

Therefore using a Marxist modernist theoretical critique, the Sector Skills Agreement is primarily a mechanism to skill the proletariat to meet the needs of, and attract to Britain global capital, and to retain and perpetuate this global capital through a network of re-skilling and movement of labour between sectors within the economy. In achieving this aim, the 'polytechnic worker' is created. This hegemonic discourse is couched in terms of the SSA helping to create a demand-led system that meets the needs of employers. Carnoy (1984) depicts most effectively the hegemonic discourses that the author of this study believes were at work within the Sector Skills Agreement process.

The next section it is proposes to look at the theoretical concept of regionalisation. The concept of regionalisation, and how it adversely impacted on the implementation

of the Sector Skills Agreement policy, is a fundamental part of the analysis of this thesis.

Regionalisation

A principle underpinning the 'Regionalism' of 'New Labour' is the concept of new institutionalism (Goodwin et al, 2002). The importance of new institutionalism as a philosophy underpinning the regionalism of 'New Labour' is such, that it is proposed to devote some time within this thesis to understanding and defining it. 'Bevir (2003, p458) describes new institutionalism as consisting of a diverse cluster of attempts to preserve the mid-level analysis through emphasizing social embededness and thereby the role of institutional structures and cultural norms as determinants of social life. Neo-liberals, however, apply assumptions about utility maximising agents to describe the market as a form of organization. Institutionalists typically argue that agents are embedded in institutions and that networks are the organisations best suited to this embedded nature.

Institutionalists use the concept of a network to describe the inevitable nature of organisations, given the social embededness of society. Networks suggest that human action is always structured by social relationships, with institutionalists arguing that networks are better suited to many tasks than hierarchies or markets. The concept of 'embeddedness' and 'network' provide institutionalists with a rebuttal of the neo-liberal policies of the New Right since they imply that the state should turn to networks not markets; to trust and not competition, and to diplomacy not new public management to achieve their goals. Typically, institutionalists combine these two ways of conceiving networks by suggesting that although organisations take the form of embedded networks, those that best resemble the ideal type of a network

reap the benefits of so doing. Institutionalsits thus accept neo-liberal arguments about the inflexible and unresponsive nature of hierarchies. Instead of promoting markets, they appeal to networks as a suitably flexible and responsive alternative, one that recognised that social actors operate in structured relationships (Bevir, 2003, p459).

Goodwin et al (2002) argue that 'new institutionalism' is central to the concept of 'new regionalism' as it is through institutions that geographical regions are able to respond effectively to stimulus emanating from the European Community, for example (p201). The constituents of this theory are: first, that in the region there is a strong institutional presence through which a plethora of bodies that represent firms and non-capital relations may be found. Secondly, the physical regional 'closeness' permits interaction between these institutions through networking and co-operation, which in turn creates structures building from the dominance of the network. Ultimately, through this network of institutions a common territorial agenda is created, which is owned and controlled at regional level. Although it is outside the scope of this thesis to undertake a detailed analysis of institutionalism, some understanding of these concepts in relation to the SSA would appear to be apposite. Goodwin et al (2002) in their analysis of new institutionalism point to the fact that the majority of Europe is regionalised (and unlike the UK, where the concept of regionalism is not a developed concept, in Europe regions are more established[37]) and thus the European Union likes to consider geographical regions for funding and analysis purposes. The enthusiasm for regionalisation within New Labour may be based on recognition of this fact.

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[37] Examples can be found across the EU, but to take just one of many examples, Italy, which has a strong regional culture based on a historical basis as Italy did not become a united nation until 1861, being before a range of regions under the control of various foreign powers including Spain, regional 'Ducal' families and the Vatican, through Papal states. Within Italy political parties still remain who champion the break up of the Italian state and a return to self-government within the regions. This is particularly strong within the north of the country, where LEGA (Northern League) still receives significant political support.

'New regionalism' has been subjected to some academic critique. MacLeod (2001) defines 'new regionalism' primarily as 'soft institutionalism' and 'thin political economy'. MacLeod (2001) argues that the 'new regionalists' have a tendency to read-off institutional developments from selective successful economies and then through policy transfer present a universal (and often functionalist) argument that institutions make economies work (Goodwin et al, 2002, p211). What this approach fails to do is to pay close attention to the cause and effect processes associated with explaining economic circumstances in institutional situations in particular geographical locations. The assumption that economic concepts are transferable between regions without cognisance of idiosyncrasies that might be present within different or even similar regions is often not taken into account, leading to unsuccessful transference.

MacLeod's (2001) argument on the 'thin political economy' builds on this concern, as it stresses the need to focus on the roles played by the national state in the remaking of regional economies and regional structures of governance[38]. Goodwin et al (2002, p211) argues that having created an implicit and at times non-existent theorization of the capitalist state (which it is suggested is not surprising given the heavy emphasis on supply-side innovation and the replacement of formalized government with the less formal networks of economic governance), the way that the state produces, reproduces and articulates the scales and sites of economic governance is a recursive and dialectical process. This is because devolved economic development is geographically uneven, and the developed territories could have the potential to act both as 'agents' and obstacles to the strategies of the nation state, depending as it does on concepts of regional social relations.

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[38] A good example might be the policy towards heavy industry by the Conservative government in the 1980s leading to significant changes in economic infrastructure in many parts of the North of England, Scotland and Wales.

Harrison (2006, p22) points to the work of Cooke and Morgan (1994), Florida (1995), Stroper (1997) and Scott (1998) as indicating that in the view of the 'new regionalists' contemporary capitalism and its territorial configuration are best regulated and governed in and through the decentralisation of socioeconomic decision-making and associated policy making to sub-national institutions. This is an important point, as in effect the theories of new regionalism are anti neo-liberal, and are there to challenge the neo-liberal hegemony of globalisation described in the previous section.

This contention by Harrison (2006, p22) concurs with the fundamental philosophy of this thesis, which is that by devolving skills policy into the remit of devolved national assemblies within Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and the English regions, 'New Labour' effectively undermined the neo-liberal thrust of the SSA (described above) .'New Labour' therefore created the mechanism through which its own central (neo-liberal) policies were thwarted. This study believes that this concept epitomises the dualistic national neo-liberalism of 'New Labour' thinking juxtaposed with a commitment to 'new regionalisation' with a contradicting anti-neo-liberal ideology, which is focussed more on concepts of inclusion and social justice. Why the regions and devolved nations opposed the neo-liberal paradigm of the SSA will be consider in Chapter 4.

Harrison (2006, p26) critiques the whole theoretical nature of new-regionalism for being chaotic in nature, caused he suggests by the bundling together of too many diverse theories. The author of this study, would also find it difficult to theorise the concepts of 'new institutionalism', notwithstanding that in relation to the devolved nations there would appear to be some evidence of nationalism as well, to add to the general anti-capitalist undertones of 'new regionalism'. The 'New Regionalism' identified within this thesis has made the study seek to develop and populate the

concept of 'neo pluralism' espoused by Ball (1993), which has already been discussed earlier within this chapter.

Regionalism per se therefore is deemed to create two specific occurrences, the first of which is to meet social demands for a localised sense of identity below that of the nation state:

> "Regionalism denotes social demands in regions for greater autonomy from the central institutions of their state. Its bottom-up character distinguishes it from traditional ideas of top-down regional policy. National law responds to the demands that may range from federalisation as in Belgium or devolution as in the United Kingdom, to more deconcentration of central institutions through the state. The legal significance of the responses may be expected to vary depending on whether legislative or merely administrative powers are allocated to regional level or merely delegated to regional institutions" (Evans, 2002, p219)

The second occurrence has already been discussed and refers to the development of a regional identity that begins to frustrate the national government objectives. Evans (2002) continues, however, by arguing that the process of globalization means that central government cannot represent the needs of the various regions it seeks to serve, and only devolved government can meet this need. The 'speedy' rejection of the regional concept in favour of 'new localism' by the coalition government and the total lack of political response or public objection to the demise of regionalism within England does not negate the argument of Evans (2002) in relation to this study. This is because it is only being used for illustrating the philosophy of the 'New Labour' government. The political ease with which the coalition has dismantled regionalism does, however, suggest that the concept was not grounded in the 'public psyche'.

> "However, the challenges of regionalism go beyond national law. Regionalism also involves an increasing tendency for regions to identify and pursue interests divergent from those expressed in

> *international and European organizations by the central institutions of the state. The divergence reflects the diminishing capacity of the state, in the face of globalisation, to act as a coherent entity whose collective interests can be represented as expressed by central institutions. In other words, the denationalisation of territory, which is a global process, may lead to a search for a new architecture of statehood. In practice there is said to be split over regional competencies into the international arena"* (Evans, 2002, p219-220)

This thesis therefore accepts the first contention of Evans (2002, p219-220) in that it accepts that regionalisation makes it possible for policies desired by central government to be 'changed', perverted or ignored in the ways already described within this thesis. The central globalisation philosophy that is postulated and promoted by the SSA is resisted through this regionalisation (and the influence of the European Union) process by making it subservient to devolved policy. This being the case whether it is devolved legislation in the devolved nations or the Regional Skills Partnership (RSP) policy within the English regions. The post-modernist adhockery and messiness, conjoined with the belief that the regional solution is the primary one made the failure of the central neo-liberal SSA policy inevitable.

The decision of the 'New labour' government under the Prime Minister Gordon Brown (who held the office from 2007 to 2010) of devolving responsibility for 16-19 provision back to local authorities may involve engagement in 'New Localism', whereby devolution of power reverts to the local authority region or a sub-set thereof. This is a proposal that the 'coalition government' of David Cameron seems keen to extend even further and suggests that localism at a sub-regional level is more likely. White (2005, p78) argues that the main driving force behind 'new localism' is a localism that excludes the traditional local authority! Further comment on this phenomenon is outside the theoretical scope of this thesis.

Thornton (2000) has suggested that the concept of devolution or its subsets of regionalism and glocalism can be conceived within the philosophical concept of post-modernism.

> *"The postmodern cult of the local is incapable of resisting anything except on a cosmetic level, the banality for the global. By constructing glocal difference, mainstream (or what I call first turn) postmodernism provides the necessary referent for what John Urry calls the tourist gaze (1980). A more 'revolting' localism (and/or regionalism) arises when culture girds itself for real resistance (i.e. Pazian resistance) to the international logics of modernism and post modernism roughly corresponding to the ideological needs of industrialism and postindustrialism respectively."* (Thornton, 2000, p82)

In seeking to theorise the SSA, the author of this study has certainly identified within the development of the SSA, and its manipulation and management both by national bodies such as SSDA and regional bodies such as the RSPs within the English regions, the messiness and adhockery identified by Thornton (2000). Notwithstanding the attractiveness to this study of theorising a modernist centralism resisted by a postmodernist regionalism. Fotopoulos (2001, p58) contends that society is moving into a postmodern construct but that postmodernists while rejecting the grand narrative themes of Marxism appear to be swallowing without protest the neo-liberal grand narrative story of how prosperity and liberty have been achieved through the neo-liberal free market. Further consideration of this concept is, however, outside the scope of this thesis.

It ultimately appeared to the author of this study to be putting undue emphasis on the post modernist characteristics of messiness and adhockery, without the presence of other identifiable factors that could put the SSA implementation (as opposed to the SSA policy concept, which this study has implicitly implied is within a modernist concept) into a post-modernist context. For example, the author of this study does find in the devolved national and English regional policy documents attempts to

'regionally' contextualise (modernist) concepts such as globalisation. These regional policy documents adopt the language of neo-liberalism in for example talking about the need to create a skilled workforce to entice inward investment into the region[39].

Another way that the whole centralist/regionalist/localist debate can be theorised is through viewing the whole debate as being cyclical in nature, with emphasis oscillating between centralising and regionalising contexts over time and within and between governments of all political colours. This thesis therefore accepts, that there is an observable cycle of power being shifted from central to regional, and from regional being 'clawed' back to the centre again, which in recent times can be identified even from the time when neo-liberalism appeared to 'triumph' under Thatcher[40].

> *"The arguments used to justify regional policy have changed substantially over the past two decades. The onset of Thatcherism resulted in the run-down of regional policy during the 1980's on the grounds that regional policy could be defended only on social grounds. The economic case for regional policy was regarded as weak and unproven. Regional policy was viewed as a zero sum game, in which one region could benefit only at the expense of other regions. The crudest version of this view is that jobs created in Assisted Areas simply displace jobs in non-assisted areas. Indeed regional policy could result in a negative –sum game with firms locating in inefficient locations. Taking this view of the world, the only benefit of regional policy is to achieve a more equitable regional balance of employment opportunities so that there are no efficiency gains for the UK economy as a whole".*
> (Taylor and Wren, 1997, p838)

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[39] See Chapter 4, the devolved national documents discussed within that chapter contain the same neo-liberal concepts that can be found in national documents such as DfES (2003). The implementation, as this study seeks to show, is different from the neo-liberal aspiration found therein.

[40] This study accepts that examples of the cyclical central to regional power shifts can be traced back in political history far further than Thatcherism; however this thesis predicates the notion that neo-liberalism exerted itself in the Thatcher era to be the predominate philosophical paradigm in the UK through the Thatcher government, and as the SSA this thesis has argued was predicated on a neo-liberal theory, it would seem sensible to start an analysis of the cyclical shifts at the point that neo-liberalism became the predominant economic philosophy.

Tensions and policy swings in the cyclical nature of central-regional governance, can take place within governments of the same political persuasion as evidenced by Jenkins (1981) a minister in the Thatcher government advocating regionalism for the NHS in 1981. As Taylor and Wren (1997) point out, however, Thatcherism came to deride regionalisation in favour of centralist control[41].

> *"Local initiatives, local decisions, and local responsibilities are what we want to encourage. This is the main purpose of the current re-organisation of the National Health Service" (Jenkins, 1981, p1)*

During 'New Labour's second term and over twenty years after the speech by Jenkins, a New Labour minister would echo exactly the same points. Milburn (2004) signalled another move to regionalised/localised policy-making, again in relation to the NHS.

> *"I believe that we have reached the high water mark of the post 1997 centrally driven target-based approach. That view is also widely shared in Government. Reforms to enhance choice, diversify supply and devolve control are all now taking hold as Government moves from a centralised command and control model to what has been called new localism. The issue now is how much further to go…Public services cannot be run by diktat from the top down. In this next period, accountability needs to move downwards and outwards to consumers and communities. Empowering them is the best way to make change happen."* (Milburn, 2004)

This thesis, however, shows the interesting dichotomy between how the New Labour government sought to devolve power to the regional/ local, but at the same time the SSDA used the command and control model (Newman (2001) to manage and control the SSCs. SSDA sought ultimately to create through the SSA a uniform product, which it achieved by capitulating to the neo-pluralism of the partners and stakeholders in the way described in Chapter 4. Lowndes (2002) in the 2001 White

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[41] As already intimated within this chapter, the political philosophy of the Conservative dominated coalition currently seems to be centred on 'new localism' showing a shift from traditional policy pursued under the Thatcher/Major Government of 1979 to1997.

Paper "Strong Local Leadership- Quality Public Services" (DTLR, 2001) identifies a similar "schizophrenia" between central and regional control concepts within New Labour policy-making that has been identified within this thesis in the SSA.

Lowndes (2002) argues that centralist trends and philosophies remained a part of government strategy, regardless of the commitment to devolve to regions or locations. The emphasis of the White Paper was really on the devolution of 'implementation' rather than the devolution of policy development, such that it actually reflected perceived regional/local differences. Where the thesis would disagree with Lowndes (2002) would be in her dismissal of the achievements of 'new regionalism', as this study feels that she fails to understand the power that the regions have developed within the regional settlement in implementation.

Lowndes (2002, p142) (also citing others) also talks of centralism and regionalism creating tensions in the management of policy, which were resolved in the SSA context in favour of regionalism rather than the UK nation neo-liberal perspective.

> *"As Mike Pitt from SOLACE asks: Is there an irreconcilable mix of philosophies within the White paper ranging from authoritarian to the transformational? (Pitt, 2002). The contradictions are further evidence of what Janet Newman has called the Oscillations between commitment building and control based strategies within the New Labour Modernisation project (Newman, 2001, p99). Even the unusual punctuation of the White Paper's title reveals its internal contradictions; the hyphen gives the impression of an equivalence of some obvious link between the two phrases 'strong local leadership' and 'quality public services' , even though this is far from self- evident, not subsequently established through the White paper's proposals. It is a way of avoiding either prioritising one of the two objectives (as would be the case if they were divided by a comma), or positing some sort of cause-and-effect link (as would be implied by a colon). Commenting on the evident tensions in the White Paper there are signs of an ongoing struggle between centralists and between champions of local democracy. Rhetorical gestures to local democracy in the White paper are greatly to be welcomed, but will they be enough to stem the centralist tide? (Watt, 2002, p14)"*

This study concurs with Watt (2002) in that it believes that the SSA contains the tensions and contradictions that were identified by Watt (2002) and Newman (2001) and these were reconciled by a 'retreat' from the centre and an assertion of power from the regions and the devolved nations. This reduced the SSA policy to a 'direction of travel' document instead of a document which led to the creation of an employer demand-led system of policy development, which this thesis contends is a policy failure.

Within 'New Labour' at that time, there were different concepts existing between the then Prime Minister (Blair) and the then Chancellor of the Exchequer (Brown) on the concepts of new localism. Stroker (2004) points to this 'difference of emphases[42].

> *"There are differences of emphasis among Government ministers about how to take forward the New Localist agenda. The Blair camp is more willing to go along with user or consumer choice and the Brown Camp is less keen but still interested in the issue of how public services can be personalised and made more responsive to users. Sometimes the emphasis is on managerial reform, giving more power to head teacher or community based police commanders; on other occasions it is much more explicitly about giving communities or citizens' control, wrapped up in a wider expansion of civil renewal as suggested in the speeches of David Blunkett. For some, established local government needs to be brought back into the frame as central to New Localism, others are not so convinced and have other institutions to steer local governance in mind."* (Stoker, 2004, p117)

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[42] It is outside the scope of this study to engage in a detailed analysis of the differences of opinion between Prime Minister Tony Blair (1997- 2007) and Prime Minister/Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown (Chancellor 1997- 2007: Prime Minister 2007- 2010), and whether they demonstrate fundamental differences between the two camps within 'New Labour'. So whether it was either a fundamentally different perception of the philosophical concept of the 'state' or whether it was merely substance is not certain. Brown appeared to prefer the traditional local organ of local authority, with Blair preferring newer concepts of local power excluding local authorities, as organisations of the past. If asked to declare an opinion, the author would suggest the latter explanation; it was more of substance than philosophical difference.

While in opposition, New Labour developed the concept of the 'third way' as a way of developing a philosophy that united the conflicting philosophies of neo-liberalism, with that of Labour's traditional support for social democracy[43]. This was done in an attempt to portray the Labour Party as friendly to business and the free markets. It was the third way discourse that put the 'and' into New Labour policy in relation to education and skills, as Avis (2007) et al point out. Under New Labour, the pursuit of neo-liberal principles will lead to competitiveness, prosperity **and** social inclusion **and** social justice. Edwards commenting upon Fairclough's (2000) analysis of the language of 'New Labour' and the use of 'and' notes:

> *"[6] [Fiarclough] argues that "and" is used in the third way discourse of the government to try to bring together elements that were previously considered to be opposites, contradictory, or in tension with each other. In this way the government presents itself as able to realise a range of irreconcilable goals, such as economic competitiveness and social inclusion."* (Edwards, 2006, p123)

Although the Blair government had long moved on from many of the tenants of the 'third way', usage of the word 'and' to bring together the irreconcilable/contradictory within government policy in relation to the LSS is emphasised in the 2006 White paper: *Further Education : raising skills improving life chances.* So, for example, in one sentence the potentially contradictory concepts of 'life chances of young people' and 'skills of the workforce' are co-joined with the word and, thus:

> *" Urgent requirements a transformation of the life chances of young people and the skills of the workforce are the drivers for the reforms set out in this white paper"* (DfES, 2006, p17)

Again within this white paper, the needs of business and the personal needs (social justice, inclusion etc. implied but not stated) are placed together with allegedly one

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[43] The term 'social democracy' is used in this study to represent concepts of social democracy that were traditional within democratic socialist governments and parties, rather than totalitarian socialist governments.

leading to the other, although in reality the personal needs and aspirations of learners may be at variance from the needs of employers and industry.

The 'Third Way'

The 'third way' guru who influenced 'New Labour' was Antony Giddens, and it is his ideas that underpinned much of the thinking of the modernisers within the Labour Party. The concept of the 'third way 'is important in understanding the processes through which neo-liberal concepts inherited from the 'right' were added to the policy lexicon of governments ostensibly emanating from a traditional social democratic basis.

The third way is postulated on a rejection of both neo-liberalism and traditional socialism:

> *"There is a general recognition almost everywhere that the two 'ways' that have dominated thinking since the Second World War have failed or lost their purchase. Traditional socialist ideas, radical and reformist, were based on the idea of economic management and planning- a market economy is essentially irrational and refractory to social justice. Even most advocates of a 'mixed economy' accepted markets only grudgingly. But as a theory of the managed economy, socialism barely exists any longer. The Keynesian welfare compromise has been largely dissolved in the West, while countries that retain a nominal attachment to communism, most notably China, have abandoned the economic doctrines for which they once stood."* (Giddens, 2001, p2)

Giddens (1998) contention was that economic planning is dead, and as this was a central plank of 'socialism' per se, then socialism itself had failed. While pronouncing the failure of economic planning, and accusing socialism of failing to appreciate the power of capitalism to re-invent itself, Giddens (1998) appears to couch this rejection in implicit acceptance of the modernist neo-liberal model of globalisation that has been defined earlier within this chapter.

> *"The economic theory of socialism was always inadequate, underestimating the capacity of capitalism to innovate, adapt and generate increasing productivity. Socialism also failed to grasp the significance of the markets as informational devices, providing the essential data for buyers and sellers. These inadequacies only became fully revealed with the intensifying processes of globalisation and technological change from the early 1970s onward."* (Giddens, 1998, p4-5).

The 'third way' rejects the importance of class as being a force in political affiliation, and the need for political parties to appeal to people outside their traditional class structures. This was due to the decline of 'blue collar' workers and the entry of women into the workforce, which changed the traditional class structures beginning after the Second World War (Giddens, 1998, p20).

Earlier within this chapter the concept of the 'middle class' and the effective middle class opt-out of the SSA process was discussed. The need for 'New Labour' to attract people form outside its traditional social class is articulated by Giddens (1998), which increased the importance for 'New Labour' of developing policies that would underpin the educational aspirations of this class[44]. The author of this study believes that this obsession with not 'upsetting the middle class' led to the restriction of the SSA to craft and technician occupational levels, which are traditionally the preserve of the 'working class' blue-collared workers. Evans (2005) argues that the modus operandi of New Labour was that everyone was now middle class.

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[44] Many texts speak of the middle class creating 'social' capital, which works at the individual 'family' level as the 'middle class' seek to use the education system to obtain leverage for their offspring and perpetuate living standards and class consciousness (Ehrenreich, 1989, p15; Power, Edwards, Whitty and Wigfall, 2003). Part of this process indicated by Giddens (1998) is that one method that this class use is that of voting for parties they perceive to be supportive in promoting and retaining this ethos. Criticisms of the rigidity of the 'A' level curriculum have been circulating since the Dearing Report (1996), but employers were effectively stopped from commenting on the appropriate or otherwise of the A level system, or indeed whether A levels should be superseded by a baccalaureate qualification, as per the suggestion by Dearing (1996).

Giddens (1998, p47) uses the term 'human capital' when articulating what he thinks Governments should achieve in relation to supporting citizens through the education and training system. Earlier within this chapter, the term 'human capital' was identified as being the language of neo-liberal economic theory, and therefore the adoption of it by Giddens (1998) is interesting, as it appears to align the 'third way ' thinking of the role of labour with the neo-liberal concept of globalisation. The 'third way' thereby accepted in relation to skills the neo-liberal hegemony that preceded it, which in turn it is suggested impacted on the impetus of the SSA.

Earlier in this chapter the concept of neo-pluralism suggested by Ball (1993) was discussed, and this study has suggested that this thesis is seeking to theorise a concept of 'new pluralism' within the theoretical 'void' that Ball (1993) has left in the definition of what 'neo- pluralism' is. Giddens (1998, p66) also seeks to expand the definition of pluralism, and talks about 'cosmopolitan pluralism'. This appears to be defined as the government arbitrating across a range of different claims and interests. Giddens (1998) appears to play with the concept of 'cosmopolitan' pluralism, in the way that Ball (1993) does with 'neo-pluralism', in that both these writers raise the possibility of there being a shift in the concept of defining pluralism, without actually developing what this 'neo'[45]pluralism actually looks like. These writers have produced undeveloped concepts which they have termed neo-pluralism, encapsulated in additions to traditional pluralistic concepts, which it is not possible to critique, as they are undeveloped, but which have 'captured' the definition.

A further set of ideas that derive from 'third way 'thinking are the concepts of equality, inclusion, social cohesion, and 'social justice', which in the education and

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[45] The term 'neo' is used here to indicate that both Ball (1993) and Giddens (1998) are proposing a form of pluralism that is different to traditional definitions of pluralism and thus is neo. The term is not being used as a definition of theoretical model of 'neo pluralism' presented in this study in this instance.

training discourse of 'New Labour' becomes the "redistribution of possibilities" (Giddens, 1998, p110)[46]. Although the language seems to be favourable to a neo-liberal interpretation, it is argued that this concept derived from third way thinking became an important weapon that the 'new regionalists' within the devolved nations and English regions were able to use to facilitate the failure of the SSA policy agreement (see Chapter 4).

Conclusions

The research question underpinning this work is that the SSA failed to deliver the employer demand-led system of curriculum development that was intended by central government. In identifying the reasoning why the SSA policy failed, this chapter has contributed a number of significant points. First, this chapter has grounded the concepts of a 'middle classes' opt-out related to the SSA, which was endemic within the design of the SSA from its inception. The exclusion of A levels in the opinion of the author of this study condemned the SSA to be a 'working' class-based document aimed only at vocational skills at craft and technician level, rather than an encompassing skills and employability policy (despite the rhetoric of the Government in DfES (2003)). This in the opinion of this study, has devalued the SSA, and contributed to its diminished status, and its failure as a policy.

Secondly, this chapter has identified the concepts of pluralism, and critiqued these against the theories of traditional pluralism, and from this developed a theorisation of the SSA incorporating concepts that this study has sought to place within a theory of neo-pluralism. Thirdly, this chapter has sought to critique the current theorisation of the LSS in relation to policy development by academics and contextualise where this

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[46] Although these concepts have differing meanings, they are related to each other, and as a detailed analysis of each of them is outside the scope of this thesis, it is therefore proposed when referring to them, to 'lump' them together under a general heading of social justice.

thesis can add to current theoretical understanding of how policy becomes transformed through implementation.

Fourthly, this chapter has identified and critiqued the '**and'** in New Labour policy, which seeks to reconcile seemingly conflicting policies and concepts, such as the neo-liberal concepts of labour as being 'human capital', and the social democratic notions of inclusion and social justice. This theorisation underpins the work in Chapter 5, which analyses the way that the devolved nations and English regions harnessed the 'social justice' arguments as a force to challenge the neo-liberal globalisation policies emanating from the SSA. The word 'and' may join contradictions together to give a holistic impression, but this does not mean that the two concepts will ultimately remain mutually inclusive. This study believes that disentanglement of these contradictory policy aims precipitated the failure of the SSA once negotiations for implementation began in the devolved nations and English regions.

In conclusion therefore, this chapter suggests that the structure of government under 'New Labour' and its 'philosophical eclecticism' contributed significantly to the failure of the SSA policy. In the next chapter, the practicalities described within this chapter of how the SSDA used command and control techniques to manage the SSA process are discussed, and their influence on the failure of the SSA policy are described. The subsequent chapter will define the neo-pluralistic behaviour of partners and stakeholders, and elaborate on its contribution to the failure of SSA policy discussed within this chapter.

Chapter 4: Management and Development of the Sector Skills Agreement

Introduction

This chapter continues to develop a rationale for why the Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) can be deemed to have failed. The chapter commences by examining the various theoretical models devised to understand the governance adopted by the 'New Labour' Government (1997-2010). These are then related to practical examples and vignettes from the SSA, to seek to place the SSA within a theoretical framework.

The chapter analyses the 'command and control' techniques that SSDA utilised in the management of the SSA process. The chapter also examines how this command and control technique adopted by SSDA affected the development of SSAs, and how the drivers within the policy were changed from those envisaged in DfES (2003).

Finally the chapter identifies the 'evolutionary' nature of the SSA implementation process, and how this changed policy. It examines the changes in guidance to SSCs from SSDA, the demise of the England project board, and how the fundamental changes made to the proposed Stage 6 of the SSA policy impacted on the overall policy context. This chapter seeks to show how these evolutionary experiences contributed to the failure of the SSA to deliver the employer demand-led system of curriculum development that was intended.

Impact of 'New Labour' Governance and Policy on the SSA

The concept of 'New Labour' and command and control has been identified by the study in Chapter 1 as having a major influence on the implementation of the SSA

process. This thesis also identifies this feature as contributing significantly to the failure of the SSA process.

The influence of neo-liberalism upon the LSS policy agenda is discussed within Chapter 3. The tensions that this has created within the New Labour philosophical lexicon, with the traditional (social democratic) notions of inclusion and social justice are discussed within Chapter 5, particularly in relation to the devolved nations and English regions. Newman (2001), however, rejects the 'bald' statement that 'New Labour' is simply a neo-liberal concept; in that she argues that 'New Labour' has sought to create a new set of political alliances, with a modernising agenda to tackle some of the perceived deep seated problems in UK society. This has included poor schooling and the skills for employment.

This has entailed a watering down of neo-liberal solutions to public sector reform, with an emphasis on 'joined-up government', 'public participation and partnership. The 'third way'[47] was an attempt to retain the economic gains made by Thatcherism, while seeking to invoke moral and civic values to re-shape society. At the same time it was recognised that the government was *"restrained"*[48] in a new way by the perceived forces of globalisation (Newman, 2001, p1-2). Hall (2003) argues that while New Labour adapted itself to the neo-liberal terrain, it did so in a significant and distinctive way. Although how this worked and how the elements combined was not clear in 2003 according to Hall (Hall, 2003, p320). DuGay (2002) writing on entrepreneurial government talks in terms of the 'reinvention of government' by New Labour and concludes that it has its philosophical roots in neo-liberalism. Hall (2003, p325) states:

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[47] There is a discussion of third way concepts in Chapter 3 of this thesis.
[48] The use by Newman (2001) of the word 'restrained' is contestable, as a reading of the New Labour texts cited in this study suggests an enthusiasm for, rather than a reluctant acceptance of the neo-liberal concepts of globalisation, which might be inferred from Newman's use of the word 'restrained'.

> *"The proposition by Hayek, adopted by Mrs. Thatcher, and reinvented by New Labour, has been swallowed, hook, line and sinker. Marketization in this deeper sense is now installed in every sphere of government. This silent revolution in 'governance' seamlessly connects Thatcherism to New Labour. It is the code which underpins the 'jargon' which New Labour Minister spout in their sleep. It is uttered as 'truth' by New Labour's welfare intellectuals from the hallowed walls of places like the London School of Economics."* (Hall, 2003, p325)

Hall (2003) goes on to suggest that marketization has supplemented some of the more 'social democratic' notions of 'social justice' from the lexicon of 'New Labour' governance. The author of this study believes that the evidence within this thesis suggests that while the neo-liberal agenda may have been predominate in New Labour policy-making at central government level, the 'and' principles enunciated in Edwards (2006)[49] created a dichotomy in New Labour thinking[50]. A belief developed that successful neo-liberal economic principles led to the social inclusion and social justice of social democracy (Edwards, 2006). This thesis suggests that in the policy implementation of the SSA, the neo-liberal elements of the policy were undermined by 'government'[51] in the nations and regions (see Chapter 5). When citing their reason for the rejection of many of the employer-led proposals emanating from the SSA, they argued that they did not fit into existing policies relating to social justice. In this way, the 'and' identified by Edwards (2006) effectively reverted back to an 'or', which the study believes challenges the New Labour concept of reconstituted neo-liberalism.

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[49] A discussion of the 'and' in New Labour policy can be found in Chapter 3.

[50] This argument can be seen in Chapter 5 particularly where in implementing the SSA at devolved nation and English regional level SSAs were subjugated to the national and regional skills policies, which were more 'social democratic' than the central policies of DfES (2003), which this study suggests are more neo-liberal in nature.

[51] The term 'government', is used in a loose sense to include all the devolved nation governments, as well as the regional development agencies within England.

Newman (2001) defines four models of governance[52]. The problem with Newman's (2001) four models is that while the SSA process may be seen to have some of the features, in actuality no one model accurately covers the actual experiences of the author of this study in the SSA process. As will be seen in this chapter, the approach adopted by the SSDA in the governance of the SSA was very hierarchical with the SSDA providing a very strict guidance framework. This was coupled with what can only be described as an assessment system that sought to define performance in a pseudo academic format. Co-joined with this, the study can identify the rational

[52] The hierarchical model is orientated towards predictability, control and accountability, as one might expect in a hierarchy, and is to do with state control of policy development through hierarchies. Change is slow, but this model offers the strongest possibility of accountability. This model values security, order, standardisation and minimal risk (Newman, 2001, p33-34).

The rational goal model seeks shorter time lines and the attempt to maximise outputs. Power is dispersed across a wide range of agencies, rather than concentrated in hierarchies, and this model is characterised by managerial rather than bureaucratic power. Change is achieved through incentives, and although delivery is located down through targets to individual teams, there is still a centralist approach, as directives emanate from government. Policy is based on the assumption that organisations will behave as rational actors, responding to incentives, such as special funding, light-touch inspection, or publication of league tables (Newman, 2001, p34-35).

In the 'open systems model', power is dispersed and fluid, based on the interdependence of actors and on the resources of others to pursue their goals. Relationships are dynamic and are constantly being reshaped to respond to new challenges or demands. Experimentation and innovation are important facets within this model. In this model, Government might attempt to steer or influence action, but is unable to exert direct control. Power is decentralised to create differentiation, experimentation and innovation. The boundary between policy and implementation becomes fluid, allowing feedback and learning during the policy cycle. Accountability is low, with change being accomplished by autopoesis, through self-organisation and self-steering, rather than as a result of external intervention (Newman, 2001, p35; Kickert, 1993; Kooiman, 2000).

The self-governance model is orientated along long time lines, and focuses on building sustainability by fostering relationships of interdependence and reciprocity. It emphasises the role of the civil society, highlighting the relationship between citizen and the state, rather than seeing governance as being the actions of the state. Governments under this model may seek to work in partnership with citizens, as well as seeking to create social integration by fostering civic, familial and communitarian values that emphasise mutual responsibility. This model spans a number of conceptions related to the state, from the state producing social integration and cohesion, to a focus on citizens and communities as agents of political change (Newman, 2001, p35-36).

Newman (2001, p39) argues that while New Labour appears through devolution, partnership, policy evaluation, long-term capacity building, public participation and democratic renewal to favours open and self governing models, other behaviour suggests a move back to more traditional control models.

implementation model from Newman (2001) in relation to the devolved nations and the English regions. In the SSA, the power to control the implementation of the SSA was dispersed between the devolved nations and English regions, such that they determined the eventual direction of the policy. This is explained in more detail in Chapter 5. There may also be an example of the open systems form of governance in the SSA, coupled with the hierarchical behaviour of the SSDA.

In terms of the overall philosophy of the SSA, the author of this study believes that a case can even be made for the self–governance model identified by Newman (2001). The SSA sought to promote partnership between employers, the supply side (FE providers) and government at national and regional levels (SSDA 2006a). While being a good starting point for an analysis of government policy in relation to the SSA, Neman's (2001) models are inadequate in relating the reality of how a policy like the SSA policy metamorphosed from a employer demand-led system of learning and skills into a 'meaningless' 'direction of travel' document. This is because facets from each of the models can be found in the implementation of the SSA agreement. As will be seen later (Chapter 5), the author of this study has sought to theorise this gap with references to pluralism and neo-pluralism.

Some of the ideas found in the concept of the SSA, particularly the ideas of agreements, partners and stakeholders for developing policy implementation, can be found in New Labour thinking when it was elected to power in 1997. 'New Labour' can also be perceived to have brought a change as to how policy is arrived at. A former permanent secretary at the Department of Employment explained:

> *"The thing which surprises me is the way in which over the past 20 years the development of policy has not received much attention. Within Whitehall and beyond, all the focus has been on the way we manage executive agencies. I think the way we develop policy now needs a radical rethink. In the old days we said good policy is politically safe and intellectually clever. This government is now saying: No it's a lot more*

> *than that'. It focuses on issues not bounded by bureaucracy. It should be research based, and properly evaluated. It is about including more people…in the development of that policy. That takes you towards social inclusion rather than away from it, as many current government policies tend to. More seriously, Whitehall has not been nearly as creative as it needs to be (Bichard, 1999, p7).*

Marr (2000) states that in policy creation, New Labour has actually reduced policy creation opportunities at the policy creation stage to a minimum. It is therefore not surprising that the SSA policy received most of its manipulation through the 'partners and stakeholders' during the implementation phase. Marr (2000) concludes:

> *"Policy is made by professionals in London, behind closed doors; sold and attacked through the national media and debated on chat shows. A whole tradition of political participation, based around direct argument in school halls, trade union offices or front rooms, plus annual pilgrimages to seaside resorts to vote on policies, is dying away (Marr, 2000, p28).*

In Chapter 3 of this thesis a dichotomy in New Labour philosophical thinking was identified, which was circumvented through the use of the word 'and' (Edwards, 2006). The impact of the word 'and' being that neo-liberal and social democratic concepts could be attached to each other as policy objectives, which this thesis concludes is untenable. This thesis effectively suggests that the 'and' is substituted by 'or' within the SSA, thus causing it to fail to deliver on the neo-liberal agenda of an employer demand-led system for the LSS. This can be seen in this chapter with the methods adopted by the SSDA to control SSA production and similar behaviour by the partners and stakeholders within the devolved nations and English regions discussed in Chapter 5.

Newman (2001) also identifies a further dichotomy within the governance philosophies in New Labour, where it would appear that one can have 'open and inclusive' management techniques and 'traditional command and control' management techniques at the same time :

"Two conflicting discourses are in play in the Labour government's programme of public service modernisation. One is that of 'partnership', the other of 'principals and agents'. A partnership discourse was associated with the attempt by government to learn from and draw on developments arising within the public sector, to consult with its staff and include them in the development of policy, and to influence their actions through communication and persuasion rather than the exercise of direct control…A rather different contractually based set of discourses ran alongside these, which was designed to ensure that the local notion of a principal-agent relationship arises where one party (the agent) carries out work on behalf of another (the principal), where the interests of the principals and agents may not coincide (Ross, 1973; Walsh, 1995). This principal-agent form of relationship captures the way in which local services were mandated to deliver government policy but under conditions of tight monitoring and control" (Newman, 2001, p84-85)

Within this thesis, the exertion of 'principal-agent' forms of management control is discussed within this chapter, whereas the neo-pluralistic 'manipulation of the SSA' through partners and stakeholders is considered within Chapter 5. The author of this study believes that ultimately these two facets of approach to the implementation of the SSA policy transformed it from the intended employer demand-led system into the rather 'feeble' direction of travel it became. It was therefore the 'dual' approach identified by Newman (2001) that caused the failure of the SSA, as both the partners and stakeholders and the command and control mechanisms of SSDA were the dual approaches causing the SSA failure...

'Dichotomy' appeared to run throughout the policy development process of New Labour, with the rhetoric of partnership and devolution of power down to the English regions and the locality, sitting alongside the desire by ministers to retain control (Stewart, 2000,p4).

"The difficulty confronting the Blair government in managing this complex vertical/horizontal system is that whilst in principle the aim is to devolve downwards to regions and local government, in practice the centre (ministers and officials) retains tight control. Whilst integration and joining up is embodied in the rhetoric of policy, in practice few of the

interests are willing or able to concede the flexibility across programmes which genuine action requires (Stewart, 2000, p4).

It would appear that while control of policy development has remained in the power of ministers, the author's experience of the SSA suggests that the 'battle ground' for influencing policy direction under the then Labour government reverted from policy development to policy implementation. So in relation to policy development, the study would agree with Stewart, but in relation to policy implementation, the study does not agree with Stewart, but believes that central government lost control of the SSA, and that it was shaped and moulded by the devolved national and regional forces identified by Stewart.

In essence Stewart's analysis is flawed, in that it does not accurately define the difference between policy development and policy implementation, and therefore the difference between what a policy is intended to achieve, and what it actually achieves once implemented. The author of this study believes that this concept is not unusual in academic analysis of policy[53].It is to contribute to an understanding of policy within academia that this thesis seeks to add knowledge.

Initial SSDA Control

This section of the thesis identifies the process of developing an SSA by SSCs and the relationship that the SSCs enjoyed with the SSDA. As described in Chapter 1, the pathfinder SSCs had completed their SSAs and the SSCs in tranche 2 were coming to the end of their SSAs, with the SSCs in tranches 3 & 4 were developing their SSAs at stages 1-3 at the time the author of this study was engaged in this process. Because the then twenty-five SSCs were at different stages within the process, the

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[53] A critique on this issue can be found within Chapter 2 of this study

SSDA consistently continued to 'tinker' with the SSA process and guidance. This was done with a view to improving it, as there were 'real or imagined' concerns being raised by stakeholders on the quality of the outcomes that were coming out of SSC SSA documents. This section of the chapter looks at this command and control by SSDA in the process, to illustrate how first the SSDA controlled the purpose, and secondly used this command and control to change the thrust of the SSA. These changes being allegedly in accordance with pressure they were having put on them from the devolved nations and English regions (discussed within Chapter 5).

Throughout this thesis the two concepts are presented as the two main contributors to the failure of the SSA policy. They are both contradictory and complementary, in that command and control is exercised by the SSDA to obtain contract compliance for a central government purpose originally. This thesis goes on to suggest (in Chapter 5) that ultimately this changed so that the command and control was exercised by SSDA on behalf of the partners and stakeholders rather than central government.

The influence of partners and stakeholders in the development of SSAs can be seen in their pressure on SSDA to move timelines for the production of the SSA ostensibly to facilitate the quality of research phases. This study believes that this was evidence of an interest in the research findings to influence their own policy decisions, rather than a commitment to developing SSA-driven employer solutions. This contention is discussed further in Chapter 5.

Turton[54] (2005) concludes:

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[54] Turton was a senior civil servant in SSDA responsible for developing and managing SSA programmes on behalf of the SSDA throughout the UK.

"The strongest message from the consultation is that quality and robustness of SSAs are the most critical requirements. Partners were clear that variations to the timing and volume of SSAs can be accommodated where SSCs demonstrate reliable and validated research, together with full employer engagement and stakeholder involvement." (Turton, 2005, p1)

Consultation was another way in which partners and stakeholders also influenced the direction of the SSA process. For example, in the same consultation exercise described in Turton (2005), the partners and stakeholders suggested that milestones should be built into the timeline to allow for evaluation by partners. SSDA was also asked to support the SSCs in developing and delivering a high quality end product. Although this sounds very positive in tone, it actually hides the fact that the totality of partners and stakeholders were either from the supply or policy sides (see Chapter 5), there was no effective voice of employers. The use of consultation endorsed by SSDA therefore allowed the supply side influence to input directly on SSAs very early in the process (Turton, 2005, p2).

A further key recommendation from the consultation from the partners and stakeholders was that the SSA timeline should be aligned to partner planning cycles where appropriate. This is predominantly the language of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in England (a similar approach was adopted in the devolved nations also), and again although it looks a benign and indeed helpful suggestion, this was to suit the partners and stakeholders rather than/ and not the employers. This ultimately led to potential time delays before SSA solutions could theoretically be considered by partners and stakeholders. This also effectively made the SSA a supporting document of the LSC policy agenda, and therefore was put on 'a par' with submissions made to the LSC by providers etc.

 LSC guidance to SSCs was that recommendations made after the completion of consultation for an academic yearly planning cycle could not be considered until the

next planning cycle, thus potentially rendering an SSA inert for a period of a year. This caused the SSA to lose the momentum of employer support (Turton, 2005, p3). The LSC therefore made effective use of their own planning cycles to resist radical proposals and control and funnel SSC work towards a single time frame, through which they were able to control their responses. This behaviour therefore weakened the effectiveness of 'radical' SSC proposals, and contributed to the failure of the SSA. Turton (2005) though seemed quite relaxed about this, and effectively used SSDA control of SSCs to support the LSC position. This phenomenon is considered in more detail in Chapter 5, but this vinaigrette is placed here to emphasise how SSDA used command and control on SSCs not only on their own behalf, but on behalf of partners and stakeholders.

SSDA's behaviour in controlling SSCs contractually in a command and control way can be seen in the way SSDA managed the initial SSA production process. SSCs were required to complete a 1a Pre-Stage SSA Approval Process Document (SSDA, 2005)[55] prior to commencing their SSA. This form was developed around a specific number of points/themes, which required SSCs to provide a detailed description of how they would carry out the particular task/ theme (see footnote 9 for the headings under which the SSC was to provide information).

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[55] The form contained the following heading under which the SSC was required to provide information.
- Your (SSC) understanding of the role and purpose of the SSA.
- Your (SSC) capacity to develop a high-quality SSA.
- Your (SSC) ability to plan and manage the SSA.
- Part 2 project plan, project aim and rationale.
- Project aims and rationale.
- Pre-stage 1 Production of detailed project plan and preparatory work.
- Stage 1, Assessment of current and future skills needs (SNA)
- Assessment of current provision
- Stage 3, Analysis of the gaps and weaknesses in current workforce.
- Stage 4, Assessment of the scope for collaborative action by employers.
- Stage 5, Developing a costed action plan.
- Schedule of outputs, timings and costs

The particular difficulty with this exercise was that SSCs were filling in the form 'blind' and according to their perception on the issues that were important to them and their employers. What it was not possible to do, with accuracy, was to second-guess the way that the SSDA would perceive that a SSA should be developed. This led to an often protracted discourse between SSDA and SSCs; as SSCs were required to develop their 1a Pre-Stage SSA Approval Process Document and have it approved by SSDA before the SSC could commence developing their SSA. Even before it was submitted to the SSDA project team, the SSDA manager for the author's SSC was suggesting some potential shortcomings in the filling in of the form.

> *"Having skim-read this, the form appears to be completed OK in terms of the sections etc, so I will put it into the assessment process. To remind you of what that means I will circulate this to relevant colleagues within SSDA and receive their comments over the next week or so. Based on these comments and my own assessment, I will make a recommendation to the SSDA Sector Skills Agreement Project team, a week on Tuesday, and we will make a decision. I will then be able to feed back to you on the decision and whether there are any areas for further information or development before moving to contract stage"...* (SSDA6)[56]

It is important to understand here that this process was quite bureaucratically unnecessary, as the SSDA were tasked to work with SSCs to produce an SSA as part of a ministerial government directive. There were twenty-five SSCs, thus there was a requirement for twenty five SSAs. So in reality it seems to the author of this study that the discussions within the SSDA could only have served the purpose of instilling in SSCs the concept that SSDA were in charge and SSCs were beholding to them. SSDA would not have been in a position to advise ministers that an SSC was unable to carry out an SSA, without potential political embarrassment, as SSDA had recently licensed the SSCs as competent to represent their sectors.

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[56] SSDA6 was a member of a group of civil servants working at SSDA with responsibility for managing and monitoring a group of SSCs as they went through the SSA process.

SSDA 6 then continues to illustrate the quality control function of SSDA, even though, as intimated above, it was very difficult for the SSC at the time of completing the 1a Pre-Stage SSA form to appreciate the particular nuances that might be required by SSDA. This was particularly true for the author of this study in dealing with the devolved nations, and the different systems of LSS that were present there, as these were unfamiliar to him. Also the guidance for filling in form 1A was scant in its information relating to the political importance of responding appropriately to the devolved nations (see footnote 9).

What the 1a Pre-Stage SSA form, and the critique that followed it, did appear to achieve in the author's mind was to focus SSCs away from a primary 'employer' focus, and onto working with supply-side partners and stakeholders. Particular emphasis was placed by SSDA on developing relationships with partners in the devolved nations, as there were particular 'political' sensitivities that SSDA was experiencing working with devolved nations. This came out clearly in the initial response from SSDA6 to the author of this study.

> *Just on the basis of my skim-reading this morning , I can anticipate that my colleagues working with the devolved administrations are likely to ask for more information on your plans for dealing with issues and partner organisations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (including how you would plan to use your own nations and regional staff).* (SSDA6)

There was no guidance in Form 1A, nor did the headings in footnote 9 give an indication of what was required to be written underneath it. SSDA 6 continued by criticising the author's SSC submission for omitting these details.

> *It would also be useful to know what you plan your outputs to look like for example, I remember from our meeting last month that [X] said he thought it would be essential to produce separate reports for the English regions, etc- this is good stuff and gives us reassurance as to the approach you are planning to take, but my colleagues wouldn't know it from the info here. Or again, you might also be thinking of sub-sectoral reports-others have done this, but others still have taken a whole sector approach to each document while emphasising geographical variations. There is no right or wrong answer to this since it depends on the nature of your sector, but an explanation of how you plan to do this, and your rationale, would be helpful. I won't delay the process above, but if you could give some thought to these issues over the course of the next week, I can take account of it alongside comments from colleagues and we may be able to short-cut things a little".* (SSDA6)

What is interesting about this critique by SSDA6 is that although Form 1A was developed right at the start of the SSA process, there was an expectation of a considerable amount of detail by SSDA. There was no concept of the process developing by organic means within the broad report structures headings. SSDA appeared to show no recognition that the data should be presented in a way that worked best to represent the needs of the employers that each SSC represented as the process developed. Instead there was an expectation that the answer would already be in place and follow a specific line. It is perhaps not surprising that there were complaints that the SSDA process was merely a template followed slavishly by SSCs (see Chapter 5).

When the feedback was returned, it was quite detailed, as can be seen from the email below from SSDA6, who was the SSDA's SSA manager for the author's SSC. The first part of the email is positive enough.

> *As discussed by phone, I am writing to give you feedback on the outcome of the SSDA SSA Project Team's discussion of your SSA proposal. Colleagues across SSDA had read and discussed your proposal, and we could see that you had clearly taken account of the guidance provided. I was able to explain to people that you were clearly committed to the SSA process, including the crucial buy-in from [the*

Executive]. Your supplementary information provided to me after the initial proposal showed that you do have clear plans for engagement with key partners in the nations and regions , which has in fact already started, and our staff will be happy to help you make the right connections there. Having said that, the balance of comment from colleagues was that more information was needed before we could be happy that the approach covered all the necessary issues". (SSDA 6)

The email then goes on to show a degree of control over the SSC by seeking to discuss the capacity of the SSC to undertake the exercise. SSDA had been aware of the capacity of SSCs for some time before the commencement of the SSA process, as they had only recently licensed them to be SSCs. It therefore seems to be an interesting point to raise at this stage, and one that should have been raised at licensing, or at the inception of the SSA process. If the SSCs were not deemed to have the capacity to carry out an SSA, which was the most important piece of work that government had given them to date, then why had they been licensed? To have therefore raised it now, when an SSA had to be produced seems a little strange.

The issue that probably most discussion related to was concerns over your organisational capacity to undertake the research elements, given that you personally are the lone researcher in [your SSC]. This is likely to affect in particular the first two stages. You are personally clearly well qualified to lead a team to do this work, but we are certainly not aware of any of the other SSCs trying to undertake the significant amount of work involved in an SSA with just one person in their research team. We had assumed that this work would need to be contracted out to consultants (although in our conversation you suggested quite the opposite, which would make us consider even more that it would be extremely difficult to have one person undertake all the work). (SSDA 6)

The author of this study therefore was required to elaborate on how he was to carry out a process that at that stage had not been worked out. This meant that some thought had to be given to additional resources that actually were never used, as the process was managed in-house contrary to SSDA contentions. The email continues

by confirming what had been agreed within a telephone conversation between the author of this study and SSDA 6, which appeared to appease SSDA for the time being.

> *When we spoke today, you suggested a couple of things that might mitigate this, including the possible use of another member of staff, and your operations managers in the nations and regions possibly being responsible for retaining consultants. Clearly, measures like this may make a difference, and we would like to see how you could show us that you can in fact expect to undertake a good analysis in the timescale you have set out, and that you have allocated the staff resource to achieve it…* (SSDA6)

As can be seen below, the email concludes by requesting further information on a range of other issues. The material point that angered the author's SSC and other SSCs that the author of this study discussed the issue with, was that Form 1a asked certain questions for which answers were given and it was impossible to determine what SSDA were actually looking for. SSDA 6 continued by discussing the role that employers would play within the primary data collection process.

> *Other than that, the following points were raised, and we would like to see a response from you on how you plan to go about addressing them:*
>
> - *There seems to be a need to increase the involvement of employers in this process, both in gathering information and in giving it quality assurance or a reality check. You refer repeatedly to key employers we would like to be reassured that this did not mean only large employers and that this did not preclude addressing the needs of many small and micro-sized businesses in your sector...*(SSDA6).

It was again difficult to determine what was required, as the author of this study had clearly told SSDA that 450 employers would be interviewed using semi-structured interviews, and that these would be cut by both industry and company size from small to large. As the author of this study had stated the extent of the employer engagement within a methodology included in Form 1A, the point seemed unnecessary.

- *You referred today to developing your research methodology. We would like to see this, since it was a bit difficult to assess the appropriateness of research methods where you had not identified them...* (SSDA6)

The methodology was stated, the paradigm defined, and the data collection tools described by the author of this study in Form 1A. This led him to wonder whether there was some sort of 'checklist' that SSDA were using that their SSA managers were uncertain about interpreting. The author of this study in Form 1A spoke of developing methodology to allow for the changes that he expected to discover during the research process, although the main data collection tools were stated. The SSA managers for SSDA were not qualified researchers, and therefore they possibly struggled to adequately assess the quality of research proposals. SSDA 6 continued:

- *You refer to considering the SSA's coverage, and we would need to be assured that this does not mean you were considering not covering the whole footprint. (Following the Pathfinder experience, the guidance is clearly that the SSA needs to have sector-wide coverage across your defined footprint)...* (SSDA 6)

Actually that is exactly what the author of this study meant! It was not possible to cover both manufacturers and installers and designers of diverse products related to the author's SSC core footprint. These had been loosely thrown together by SSDA during the development of SSCs and the licensing process. Design professionals and installers had similar issues, but it was deemed manufacturers did not, and so these were excluded. Although raising this issue here, interestingly, SSDA never pursued it, possibly because they did not really understand the coverage of the footprint.

- *Higher level skills should be considered in the analysis...* (SSDA 6)

This was interesting as SSDA appeared not to consider whether there was actually Higher Education provision within the footprint of the SSC. Within the author's SSC, there was, but it was extremely minimal, and therefore played only a very minor part in the SSA process[57].

- *We were not sure that you had built in the need to plan resources for project boards and teams across the UK, and the associated engagement with partners.*(SSDA 6)

This was another interesting one, as the author's SSC had no previous knowledge or understanding of the project boards. Neither had SSDA distributed information to tranche 4 SSCs on project boards within the guidance for Form 1A, so it is not surprising that the author of this study failed to include this.

- *As presented, the plan seems to leave consideration of Stages 4 and 5 until very late in the process, and it is unlikely that, for example, a single conference to identify collaborative actions would be enough...* (SSDA 6)

This also seemed a strange critique to the author of this study, as he believed that the Stage 4 and 5 processes would be determined by what happened in the research stages 1-3. Given that the author of the study believed that some adjustment would be made during the first three stages, only a cursory plan would be needed for Stages 4 and 5. For SSDA to be raising this at this early stage seemed precipitous, as in the mind of the author of this study at that time was the view that Stages 4 & 5 would be organic developments. It became clear later that SSDA was working to a very rigid template that took

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[57] This invariably meant Higher Education delivered in Universities in practice, which did not sit well in many SSC footprints. For example GoSkills dealt primarily with large transport companies, the majority of whose workers would not be required to be qualified beyond NVQ2 to carry out the roles required of them. SkillSmart Retail was similar as the majority of workers were shop workers, for whom there was little by way of recognised qualifications.

no allowance of the potential for organic development. The email from

SSDA6 concludes:

> *We do understand that some of the above may already have been considered, but if that is the case we would appreciate clarification, Once we have a response from you, particularly on the issue of research capacity, we will be able to re-assess the approach and hopefully move on to the contracting stage.* (SSDA 6)

. Subsequently in discussions with other research managers in the author's tranche of SSCs it was interesting to note that the majority, if not the totality of SSCs who had filled in the form had received similar if not identical critique. This had left them like the author of this study, also feeling annoyed and frustrated. Given the fact that SSCs were going to be required to produce an SSA regardless, the time spent on Form 1A seemed pointless. The fact that the SSCs the author of this study spoke to had had similar criticism of their submissions, there seemed to be an attempt made by SSDA to use the Form 1A process to establish their authority, and steer the direction of the SSA from the very beginning of the process in the command and control way identified by Newman (2001).

Three months later in the case of the author's SSC, some agreement appeared to have been reached, which subsequently allowed the SSC to commence the SSA process. This process had been quite protracted, and created a certain degree of nervousness in the SSC network over whether time would be lost on the SSA by a failure to achieve a contract by the time the tranche SSDA had put them in was launched. With hindsight, this was an overreaction as the SSDA was under pressure from Ministers to deliver twenty-five SSAs as quickly as possible a factor that was not known to SSCs at the time, but was disclosed at the end of the process in a report by Bacon and MacManus (2008). Ultimately SSDA had to get the SSA process going, to

meet ministerial demands. Having reiterated the issues, and progress made to date,

in a further email to the author's SSC in December 2005, SSDA6 concludes:

Could you confirm that my understanding of the points above is correct, and let me know whether there are any similar supplementary points that you would like me to make about these issues? Once I have your response, I will discuss with the [SSDA Head of Sector Skills Agreements] whether there are any more steps needed before we can give approval to draw up a contract for your Sector Skills Agreement. (SSDA6)

SSDA wished to instil within the minds of SSCs commencing the SSA process the

need to integrate partner and stakeholder demands into the SSA. They achieved this

end through the organisation of 'kick start' events. An example of an email

advertising a stakeholder 'kick start'[58] event to SSCs is shown below:

> *"Speakers will include officials from the Department for Education and Skills, the Department for Trade and Industry, Sector Skills Councils, Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly Government, Department for Education and Learning Northern Ireland, Learning and Skills Council. We will also be hearing from the consultants who evaluated the Pathfinder Sector Skills Agreements process and are now refreshing the stage 1-5 guidance and developing quality standards."* (SSDA, 2006b, p1)

As can be seen from SSDA (2006b) the emphasis was on listening to the

stakeholders setting out their aspirations for the SSA. There was certainly no

intention that SSCs would tell partners and stakeholders about their ambitions for the

SSA. These 'kick start' events also involved consultants telling SSCs beginning the

process what a 'good SSA' looked like. This in itself suggested a uniformity of

document, which this study believes failed to take account of economic diversity of

the various employment sectors covered by the SSA.[59]The assertion of the supply

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[58] The terminology is SSDA's and it is supposed that it meant to indicate an intention to get the SSA agreement process moving from its initial inception.
[59] It is outside the scope of this study to discuss this in any detail, however, within Government, there is a belief that in relation to skills the whole of the UK economy can be considered in a holistic way, without allowance being made for differences in economic

side in the development of the SSAs this study believes can be identified as beginning with these 'kickstart' events. This is because they began the transfer of the thrust of the SSAs from employers to the supply side, thus enabling the retention of the status quo the SSA was supposed to change. This status quo being ultimately defined by Civil Servants and the policy/supply-orientated bodies such as the LSC, ELWA, SFC and DELNI, to name but a few of the main supply side partners within each nation. The author of this study left the kickstart event understanding very clearly from the speakers that an SSA was only acceptable if it met the needs of the partners and stakeholders within the devolved nations and initially the central government departments (ultimately as this thesis suggests, this became the RSPs within the English regions).

As part of ongoing monitoring and leading by SSDA, other meetings were arranged by SSDA to facilitate the development of SSAs. In SSDA (2006c) the agenda for a meeting in London for tranche 4 SSCs was to explore the Stage 2 SSA guidance and quality standards of the SSA process within the context of the four UK home nations. To standardise the quality and performance of SSCs and their SSAs, SSDA had a 'marking schedule' for measuring quality on SSA documents, and this meeting was promulgated first to provide an overview of the guidance and the quality standard for Stage 2, with an underlying assumption that if one followed the guidance, then one would get a good grade!

SSDA was therefore able to exert considerable control on SSCs and the SSAs through the development of a grading system/scheme for assessing quality. There were three grades: 'developing' grade being the lowest, and effectively a euphemism for failure, "meets the standard" a pass, and "exemplar" being very good. Work

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sectors. The author believes this view to be a short sighted over simplification of a very complex issue.

graded as 'developing' had to be re-written and re-submitted such that it met SSDA requirements. Within the grading criteria, emphasis was placed on the subject of national differences, with one of the themes being to: *"Identify key differences between the four UK home nations related to policy landscapes, data sources, endorsement of employers, funders, stakeholders and tailored outputs" (*SSDA, 2006c, p4). The author of this study felt that this assessment was driving SSCs and the SSA away from the demands of employers and towards the needs of the policy and supply side (SSDA, 2006c, p1).

SSDA were also keen to experiment within the SSA process, to develop new ways of engagement between SSCs and the (supply-orientated) partners and stakeholders. An initial analysis of the email below may interpret this move as being a positive and helpful one. This study however sees this as yet another example of SSDA effectively developing and controlling relationships between SSCs and the supply/policy side of the relationship. This thesis suggests that this effectively changed the nature of the SSA process negatively from the development of a employer demand-driven system, to a 'watered-down direction of travel'. It was this 'marketplace' procedure that effectively directed the SSCs along the path to the unacceptable[60] outcome of the SSA policy that this study describes.

> "The interactive session lasts for up to 2 hours. This is based on a
> 'market place' scenario with SSCs playing the role of 'shopper' and
> partners as the 'trader. Each partner lists their key organisational goals/
> business plan priorities onto a flip chart on the wall and stands next to
> them, in separate corners of the room. Each SSC lists their SSA
> solutions on 'post it' notes. The SSCs then each undertake a 5 minute
> 'speed date' with each partner to explore where the SSA priority may
> contribute towards the partner priority. 'Post it' notes are attached to the
> partner chart in the appropriate place to reflect the discussion… SSA
> solutions that do not seem to fit with any partner priorities are posted on
> a separate flip chart…SSA solutions that are identified as cross-cutting

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[60] Unacceptable in that the outcome differs from that, which was intended by Government in DfES (2003), because as already stated, this study is not seeking to make any moral judgements on whether the SSA should have been successful.

themes and needing a collective SSC approach can also be placed on a separate flip chart…Following initial identification of shared priorities in the speed dating session, an opportunity for further more detailed dialogue is provided. The outcome of the speed date and further dialogue is: an agreement on shared priorities; contact details for further discussion; identification of further work required to progress the solution; an identification of any other partners that need to be involved; any obvious barriers/hurdles that need to be overcome; when further dialogue will take place, etc." (SSDA, 2007, p1)

In the description of the 'speed dating 'approach described in SSDA (2007) above the command and control elements of the SSDA can be seen, as the whole process is developed by SSDA to facilitate agreements. There is no thought as to whether this is always an appropriate manner to discuss potentially difficult and challenging issues. This being particularly the case when an employer view might challenge an existing policy, although the challenging of polices by SSCs, as will be seen in Chapter 5, was effectively discouraged by SSDA. SSDA (2007) can also be seen as seeking to match SSA objectives to existing policy objectives, but having no real purpose for SSA priorities that do not meet stakeholder priorities. There are also initial signs of cross-sector policy objectives emerging from SSAs. This by its nature meant that these objectives lost their current and specific edge for each sector, being instead consummated into homogeneous and vague concepts, such as 'leadership and management'. These concepts therefore became distanced from the employers who generated them, and became effectively located within the policy and supply side in relation to ownership.

The rationale behind relegating individual SSA solutions to cross-sector solutions was to enable partners and stakeholders to deal with an issue on behalf of a lot of SSCs together. This was meant to reduce the length of time for which partners and stakeholders would have to engage with individual SSCs. The study believes that in addition to distancing employers from the process as described above, it also

contributed to the changing of the SSA policy from the potential for specifics to the general direction of travel that the SSA became.

A further example of where the supply side partners could also control and influence the development of the SSA was in the provision of data to support SSA development. Initially, the supply-side holders of data on learners in the SSCs sectors such as the LSC agreed to provide data. As can be seen from the email below however, the supply of data was controlled, and specialist requests were for example denied by the LSC. An example of where the LSC refused to support SSCs with supply-side data that they required is shown below in LSC (2006), which was sent to SSCs.

> *"To support Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and their development of the Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs), the LSC previously developed an agreed specification for the issue of supply side data. This specification was developed in consultation with SSCs and has been trialled during 2005/06 using the latest set of full year data available…This data has been well received, although we don't believe that it has been consistently used by all SSCs and, furthermore, we have had very few discussions to agree key messages resulting from the data to be published in Sector Skills Agreements. Over the last few months there have been a significant number of requests for supplementary analysis. The LSC is not in a position to handle all of these requests, and therefore for the foreseeable future SSCs must rely on the supply-side data that has been provided. The LSC will however continue to support your queries about the data provided and advise you of our future plans…The LSC recognises that the detail of the data specification may not be sufficient for every SSC. The LSC is committed to carrying out a review of this data with a plan of implementing a new specification and format for the provision of 2005/06 learning data due around April 2007."* (LSC, 2006, p1)

The data supplied to SSCs by the LSC for SSA purposes was also two years out of date, with 04-05 data being provided in academic year 06-07, for example. The data was therefore of limited quality in the first place. The author of this study discovered that the LSC were able to say to the author's SSC when challenged in the SSA Assessment of Current Provision (ACP) stage that the situation that the SSC was

identifying from their data, that was detrimental to employers had been already addressed. The number of requests that the LSC could have received could not have exceeded seventeen SSCs at the time the email above was written, as eight SSCs would have either been completed or past the data requirement stage when the requests were alleged to have been made. Furthermore, the reasoning seems to be that the LSC did not feel that SSCs were putting the data to effective use, rather than an explicit reference to resource constraints. Although this might be implied, it is not stated in the email. The author of this study, however, had a meeting with the LSC at which the head of data at the LSC told him that the LSC were unhappy at the ineffective use SSCs had made of the data in the SSA process. This unhappiness at the performance of the SSCs in utilising the LSC data effectively probably did not help the SSCs in the eyes of the LSC in proving that SSAs would impact on them effectively.

There was also within SSCs themselves at times a reluctance to produce findings that could upset other organisations involved even obliquely in the SSA process, even providers. For example, in the author's SSC, OfSTED grades were shown for each provider with courses within his SSC's footprint, as this was a requirement laid down by SSDA. The report clearly stated that these were the grades currently given by OfSTED and did not include recent inspection grade, not reported upon the OfSTED website. Nevertheless, this prompted the following email exchange, instigated by an SSC operations manager within the author's SSC with the author.

> *"Please find below some more recent data for [X] College than that just published in our [Regional] ACP report.*
>
> *The background: [X College] have just gone through a period of intensive change and successful hard work; I see what they mean when they feel that the old OfSTED report does not represent where they are now.*

It is possible to include the new data in the next corrected version of our report or, alternatively, if our cut off date is before the publication date of the new report, please can we keep [X's] updates on central record in another way". (SSC3)

The email from SSC3 to the author of this study shows some reluctance over support for the data produced by her own organisation. Even though it was accepted that the grade for the college was the most recent one, and notwithstanding improvements that the college might have made in the meantime; the new report had not been published at that time the ACP was written. This fact is conceded by the provider making the complaint in many ways irrelevant, but obviously the operations manager felt under pressure as a result of it.

[Copy email begins]

Many thanks for sending me a copy of the draft report from [X] for the new Sector Skills Agreement. I sincerely hope that it is in <u>draft</u> [61]format as I can update you with some comments below that I hope could be corrected for the next publication.

1.   *OfSTED inspection report (table 66, page 98)*

The report summary states [X Colleges] result from 5 years ago. I feel that this does not represent 'current provision'. Our last inspection was 7 months ago. Obviously this was published after you went to print, however the up to date information is as below:
(SSC 3)

No change was made to the report despite the provider's request; however, it shows the willingness that partners, stakeholders and providers exhibited in challenging SSCs over findings in SSA reports. This was even when these findings were derived from official sources such as OfSTED.

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[61] The use of draft on the reports emphasised by the provider was unfortunate, as the report was not draft unless it was graded as 'developing' by SSDA, as SSCs had no time to change suggestions on reports that were graded above this. The author's SSC never produced any final SSA reports for Stages 1 & 2.

SSDA Guidance and Standards

SSDA produced copious amounts of standards, guidance and advice to SSCs during the SSA process. The guidance for each stage of the SSA process was produced in a report that was almost 'book-sized'. The full title of this rather ponderous tonne of guidance was 'Managing the Sector Skills Agreement Process Guidance and Standards Final Version 3.0', and was published in January 2007 (SSDA, 2007). This was not the first version; there had been others before it, as earlier tranches went through the process. Trance 1 (pathfinder trench) and tranche 2 had completed their SSAs, and tranche 3 were on Stages 3-5, while tranche 4 the last tranche was completing Stages 1 and 2. The changes proposed seem to be at odds with some of the work that already had been done by many SSCs, and had an unsettling effects on SSCs, which is well emphasised by a SSC Senior Officer email to SSC CEOs and research managers.

> *[To the Chief Executive of SSDA]*
>
> *Having now had the chance to consider the changes and additions to the SSDA guidance on the SSA process from the document produced by [Consultants to SSDA] "Managing the Sector Skills Agreement Process Guidance and Standards], I am concerned that the whole thing appears to have significantly moved the goalposts once again in places across all the stages… (SO1)*

There is also within this email a complaint about the messy evolutionary process that has already been identified and is discussed in more detail later within this chapter. This was because through the guidance documentation, the emphasis and the whole thrust of the SSA documentation was changed from being an employer-driven model to a partner and stakeholder-led model. SO1 continues:

> *Stages 4 and 5 in particular now take on a new dynamic between employers and other partners with the process becoming much more*

> *stakeholder not employer-led. It is also clear that the SSC will be held accountable to the SSA even allowing for the responsibilities of key partner, over whom we have no 'authority'... (SO1)*

This thesis argues that much of the failure of the SSA was that it moved from being employer-driven to being supply-side-driven, and this complaint is made here by SO1.The control ultimately afforded to the supply side by SSDA meant that the supply side were dominating and changing the agenda.

> *There are also a great many additional perspective 'requirements' stipulated in the guidance (with attendant additional costs) which have been devised without any consultation with ourselves as far as I am aware. Was anyone in the Network consulted?* (SO1)

The lack of consultation identified by SO1 also shows the intent of SSDA as the originators of the document that they would determine the outcome of the SSA. To fail to follow the guidance might lead inevitably to the SSDA using the concepts of contract compliance referred to in Newman (2001). This could lead to SSDA simply refusing to pay SSCs for the work done, presumably alleging some form of 'breach of contract'. This ploy was adopted by an SSDA performance manager with the author's SSC, when the SSC refused to amend part of their SSA, although the threat was never carried out, the monies were paid, and the document was never amended.

The language of command and control through the medium of determining success and good practice can be seen in the first paragraph of the guidance. The 'embolding' of the word *"required"* by SSDA, it is suggested, is meant to leave the reader SSC in no doubt of who controls the SSA process. In essence the guidance takes originality or academic freedom from the SSCs, thereby reducing the SSA to being a document produced to the SSDA specification.

"This report provides management guidance on the Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) process. It gives an overview of the whole process, from the set-up and planning phase through to the publication of the final SSA; to help Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) understand what needs to be achieved at each stage as you move through it towards agreement. It sets out what is **required** [their emphasis] at each stage what good practice looks like and the quality benchmarks for each stage." (SSDA, 2007, p1)

The early guidance emanating from SSDA and the concept of the SSA as originally perceived was that the SSA was a UK national document that would allow for UK-wide solutions. By the time the SSA policy was reaching its conclusion, this had changed to effectively a regional and devolved national process. The SSA now had to take into account the devolved nation and regional solutions of each of the nine English regions. These were determined by a Regional Development Agency in each English region, and the devolved governments in each of the three devolved nations. In essence the SSA had changed from a UK-wide sector document to a document that was UK wide in coverage, but was localised (theoretically) to the needs of the devolved nations and English regions. Nevertheless, SSDA clung to the notion of some sort of UK-wide solution to training needs citing that some employers worked across nations and regions. How SSCs through their SSAs were to meet the needs of these employers with a UK strategy, while at the same time complying with the policies of the three devolved nations and nine English regions was never explained by SSDA.

*"**The SSA is UK wide…**Each of the home nations of the UK has a different set of institutional and a policy arrangement for delivering public funded education and training and each faces different circumstances in addressing improved economic growth. At the same time many larger employers and supply chains function across the UK as a whole and internationally. Individuals may move around the UK and sectorally based improvements in education and training and the labour market need to apply equally across the whole of the UK. In drawing up the SSA, Sector Skills Councils need to balance the need for a UK-wide approach and the differing priorities and institutional arrangements of the home nations. The UK-wide approach to SSAs is being co-ordinated by the SSDA and by SSA project boards in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland."* (SSDA, 2007, p5).

From a supply side and policy perspective, the 'winning' of the argument that employers' needs could not be determined UK-wide was fundamental to changing the nature of the SSA. By implication, SSDA accepted that SSA solutions could only be determined geographically, by taking account of national or regional policy. Acceptance of this notion by SSDA therefore changed the impetus of the SSA from meeting employer need to meeting supply-side need at the national and regional level within the UK. The conclusion that employer solutions could only be devised geographically is, however, contestable. For example, the author's Sector Needs Analysis (Stage 1) document did not discover major differences in employer needs across the UK. In fact quite the contrary, there was a certain degree of homogeneity about employer needs in the UK, which could have been solved by a UK sectoral solution (Hammond, 2006). This contradicted the geographical differences accepted by the SSDA in favour of a sectoral analysis that SSDA were supposed to champion!

SSDA also instructed SSCs not to challenge partners and stakeholders on the 'perceived failings of their skills systems'. This injunction is perhaps the more surprising given what this study would describe as being one of the unwritten justifications put forward by the government in DfES (2003) for the SSA in the first place. This being that the skill systems were not working for employers and that by placing employers in the driving seat the SSA would make these partners and stakeholders (and their policies) responsive to employer need. From an academic perspective, it is hard to envisage how an employer demand-led system of curriculum development could be created without such a critique.

> *"The majority of the partners are aware of the issues associated with skills supply in their area and are already working on solutions and improvements. Be sensitive in the way you present perceived weakness. You are more likely to be moving in the same direction of travel than contradicting each other. Ensure that you show awareness*

of existing sector-specific work that partners are supporting." (SSDA, 2007, p14)

There is also the somewhat naive assumption within the quote above that the partners and stakeholders would probably be working towards similar solutions. It is the rejection of this assertion by the author of this study that forms the basis of why the SSA failed described within the thesis. This is because ultimately the SSAs did not at the behest of the SSDA challenge the existing problems in the skills systems. Neither did they seek to promote solutions that while challenging existing policy were supported by their sectoral employers.

In the same document, SSDA was effectively changing the SSA from being a 'defining' document to more of a support document. It is suggested that this can be seen within the comment from the guidance document below. The author's interpretation of the SSA policy as defined in DfES (2003) was that it was meant to change the whole thrust of the LSS in the UK, not inform policy at a time specified by the partners and stakeholders, which is what it became.

> *"Is the timing wrong? Perhaps you have an excellent solution and proposition but you are just presenting it at the wrong time e.g. the wrong time in the planning cycle or the budget is fully committed. If so do be persistent. When is the right time in the planning cycle? If you want to continue discussions get the negotiations built into the stakeholder's future work plans and programme"* (SSDA, 2007, p56).

If the concept of the SSA was that it would radically alter education and training within the Learning and Skills System, this study wonders how could the timing be wrong? The SSA programme was devised by the SSDA with supposed ministerial support to create radical solutions. SSDA has effectively relegated the SSA process to one of negotiation by SSCs with partners and stakeholders with a view to getting their solutions into a possible stakeholder plan. Given that the plans of the LSC for

example were drawn up/produced annually, it was effectively accepting that a year's delay for implementation was inevitable. This was assuming of course, that the LSC (for example) accepted the need for this change. There was also the matter of whether the solution was still relevant to the situation one year on, and more importantly, the interest and motivation of employers had been retained.

Another statement from within this document also indicated the political disharmony that existed within the Learning and Skills Council network in England. It appeared to SSCs that communication and co-operation with the central LSC and the regional/local LSC offices had almost broken down in places. Under the heading of *"Don't rely on LSC National Office to broker the LSC deal"* SSDA (2007, p58) concludes:

> *"Most [62]LSC Regional Offices are keen to work with SSCs, but you do need discussion with them separately. One SSC put a lot of work into a bilateral relationship with the LSC National Office without realising they do not control the spending decisions of regions. Another said that, although the National LSC does not have control, they can help smooth the path in the regions."* (SSDA, 2007, p58).

The regional LSCs in England therefore effectively steered the SSA process down the regional route in England. Whereas the national LSC could take an all- England approach, the regional/local LSCs were signatories and major players within the Regional Skills Partnership (RSP) in the regions. As is shown in Chapter 5, the RSP exerted considerable control on SSA development in the English regions. This contributed significantly to the failure of the SSA to create the employer demand led system identified in DfES (2003). SSDA then utilised the guidance document to effectively control the development of the SSA by providing strict guidance. SSDA also provided a degree of independent assessment on the criteria through

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[62] The use of the word 'most' appears to concede that not all regional offices were 'keen' to work with SSCs, emphasising the lack of uniformity of co-operation that SSCs discovered across the LSC network specifically and the UK as a whole.

assessment of the SSCs using consultants. The difficulty of this approach was that these consultants acted as both supporters to SSA development and examiners of the output from the SSAs. For example the consultants on the Sector Needs Analysis of the SSA provided guidance to SSCs on secondary data sources to use (Lanz and Walsh (2005a, p7-15), Scenario Planning (Lanz and Walsh, 2005b, p1-3) and criteria for assessment (Lanz and Walsh, 2005c, p1-5).

This process continued through the Stage 2 of the SSA, the 'Assessment of Current Provision' stage (ACP), where, How (2006), the consultant for Stage 2 explained to delegates at a specially arranged SSDA conference for SSCs the requirements for producing a "Successful Stage 2". At this event, Toppin (2006, p1-2) gave SSCs advice on presentation of data, which would be axiomatic to a researcher. Downey (2006, p1) spoke about the skills arena in Northern Ireland, which at that time predominantly focussed around the merging of sixteen colleges in the province down to six. Jones (2006, p1-2) made a similar presentation on the Skills landscape in Wales. Pontin (2006) also presented the skills landscape in Scotland. These presentations therefore took delegates through the various skills policies within the devolved nations. The majority of the speakers on that day were employees of SSDA. The conference, as with the guidance, was used by SSDA to underscore the SSDA requirements from SSA documents. The drivers for a successful SSA were moved effectively towards the needs of the partners and stakeholders and away from employers as a result of these events.

Ultimately, however, SSCs were graded on their SSA reports, and these were judged to be either exemplar, satisfactory or developing (a euphemism for fail). There was often no time to respond to SSDA grading of work, as other parts of the agreement had to continue simultaneously to meet the timelines. Nor was there a mechanism to challenge the gradings of 'developing'. For example, one SSC produced an SNA that

was 'bottom-up' in nature, with the production of regional reports that were presented to regional audiences and built into a national report. A national report was then presented to a national audience, with the national report being produced last. This was fine except that the national report was the only one graded. Despite being enthusiastically received by the employers and stakeholders within the sector concerned, the final piece of work was 'declared' developing by SSDA. Despite considerable excitement from employers, SSDA recommended that the report not be published until significant re-writing had taken place.

In the email below a director from the SSC (SSC5) explains why this was not an option for the SSC. SSC 5 also questions why a copy of a regional report had been defined as 'competent; with recommendations for improvement. SSC 5 points out that these recommendations had been followed for the national report. Then, subsequently, the national report had been downgraded to 'developing'[63].

> *"Many thanks for this response, which is helpful, in that it put the feedback better into context. As you know we have the UK event on … and will be issuing the report on the day. I have given the matter considerable thought since discussing it with [X] last Thursday, but we are in a very difficult position, given the type of representatives (particularly from industry bodies) that will be in attendance. Most of them know about the regional reports. Many of them have seen the reports, are very supportive of the research, what it concludes and recommends. In short, holding the conference on… without the report is not an option for us.* (SSC5)

In the mind of the author of this study, this shows the tension between an employer-supported document that had been produced by an SSC and one that was

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[63] The author is of the opinion that this shows that the pseudo assessment system adopted by SSDA was flawed, as those who had to operate it were not experienced in assessment or in the process of undertaking research of the type they were required to assess. None of the consultants or the civil servants in SSDA that the author is aware of was an academic. Damage was thereby caused to the SSA process by the SSDA utilising command and control concepts incorporating pseudo academic forms of assessment without the individuals involved having the requisite skills or training in assessment or understanding of what they are trying to assess.

acceptable to the SSDA criteria. The criteria was increasingly being created with

little understanding or interest in employer needs by SSDA, although this guidance

was produced with partner and Stakeholder consent. As will be shown in Chapter 5,

however, partners and stakeholders themselves were often critical of the SSDA

guidance and criteria. SSC5 continued:

> *We need to strike a balance here. On one hand we do not want people*
> *to take the report away thinking it is the final version. On the other we*
> *do not them to think the final report will be so different that their version*
> *has little relevance. The way I am dealing with this is:*
> 1. *Printing draft clearly on the front cover.*
> 2. *Reminding participants within the closing presentation that the report*
>   *is draft and the final version will be issued once further feedback has*
>   *been incorporated.* (SSC5)

Actually the final report was never published, as the SSC went into dispute with the

SSDA over the report. Subsequently the dispute was never settled. SSDA although

threatening to withhold contractual monies in actuality paid the full contractual fee for

the work. A lack of consistency in assessment was also complained about by SSC5.

SSC5 points out that a regional report was graded satisfactorily, improvements were

made according to the recommendations of the consultant, but the final report was

graded as 'developing' i.e. a fail.

> *[…] I have one primary issue with the feedback I cannot understand*
> *why the East of England report on one hand was related overall as*
> *competent, then after a largely implementing the feedback into the UK*
> *report, we now have a report that is rated as developing and which does*
> *not have the SSDA endorsement.*
>
> *Currently there is some difference between [X SSC] and SSDA on the*
> *feedback and I feel it is essential for us to deal with this before we*
> *action plan and begin the necessary work. My preference would be a*
> *round table meeting involving [the main participants] to bottom this out*
> *as soon as possible. We will not resolve this either through*
> *correspondence or by telephone.*
> *(SSC 5)*

When giving feedback and grading to SSCs, SSDA did not appear to perceive the

right to an appeal against the grading. This of course it is suggested is axiomatic in

the grading of academic work in a university or college. The evaluation form merely prescribed the process for meeting the 'contractual' needs of the SSDA by re-writing the report. There was nothing about engaging in a discussion to determine the validity of the assessment. It is the author's contention that the addition of grades, like the grading of a degree in a university, without the academic discourse or right of appeal, destroyed potential academic credibility or academic freedom. While appearing to promote quality, in essence the grading took the emphasis of the SSA away from employers and onto partners and stakeholders. Through this command and control model of contracting for services, SSDA guaranteed the product they required. Having received feedback, the procedure for re-submission is described by Consultant 1 below:

> Please find attached the stage one SNA evaluation feedback proforma…Also just to reiterate the process from here onwards. After we have our discussion SSDA will be expecting you to develop an action plan for the SSDA in terms of how you will address the comments and agree a date for a revised draft with [your SSDA contracts managers] at SSDA. Finally, in terms of actions that could be taken before your meeting…you may want to concentrate efforts into re-writing the executive summary for distribution at the event, giving you more time to re-write the main body of the report over an agreed time frame with SSDA (Consultant 1)

When subsequently challenged by this SSC about the criteria for judging SSAs, SSDA 9 retorted with the following email.

> I feel that it was worth setting out for you the background to the evaluation process as your email seems to suggest that there may be some queries about this. The SNA guidance was developed by [an academic working for the SSDA and another] at the SSDA. [The other] was also fundamental in developing the evaluation criteria for the SNA, which closely links to the SSC Standard. All SSC's are evaluated against this criteria in a fair and consistent way. To help ensure this is the case, [X consultants] were selected to support SSC's in SNA development and to review SNA's based on skill and background knowledge demonstrated in their tender. When reviewing the SNA, the SSDA research team reads the document in parallel to [the consultants] in order to ensure that the feedback is fair, accurate, and constructive… (SSDA9)

While SSDA9 justified the development of the assessment criteria, and the involvement of an academic[64] in the process, no mention is made of the possibility of appeal. There is however, a vague promise of further discussion about the process.

> *If you have any concerns about this process, please do not hesitate to contact me to discuss further. But I hope that you can see from [consultants' feedback] evaluation form that we do feel that your report had a lot of strengths, in particular:*
> *- going further than just description into analysis and thoughts for what the findings mean for the sector.*
> *- a very strong sector voice, based on all the work that you have done with employers and stakeholders in your sector.*
> *-information that is relevant to a number of people e.g. regions and nations.*
> *By the same token, we would like to help you improve the document still further which is why [the consultants] has tried to provide you with some constructive pointers. If you'd like to discuss these further or clarify any points, please get in touch with [the consultants] in the first instance. Ultimately, we are working with you to produce a final SNA that is SSDA- endorsed to meet the conditions of the SSA contract.*
> *I recognise that a lot of work has gone into your SNA and it's worth saying that we're not suggesting that any further research is needed, but that you can work with what you already have to make further improvements based around [the consultants] feedback* (SSDA 9)

The email continues by seeking to pacify the SSC by regurgitating some points of praise, but is ultimately as already stated a contract compliance document. The essence of *"we are working with you to produce a final SNA that is SSDA-endorsed to meet the conditions of the SSA contract"* means that the SSC will do what it is told and do it the SSDA way. The meeting subsequently took place between the author of this study, SSDA9 and SSC5, and other SSDA officials, with no satisfactory conclusion being reached, as SSDA were not prepared to consider that their interpretation of the criteria was open to challenge, or that the views of the employers who supported the document in its current form were valid. Ultimately the conclusion of the meeting was that the report was changed to meet their criteria, or payment would be withheld. Ultimately, the report was not changed, and money was not withheld.

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[64] The academic concerned was a professor in economics and business studies in Higher Education for a number of years.

SSDA were even prepared to interfere with what was to be put in the SSA. In the example shown below, SSDA interfered on behalf of another public sector organisation, instructing SSCs to put agreed wording in an SSA. This was done regardless of whether it had been identified by the SSC as an employer need (it certainly had not in the author's SSC). So the National Centre for Languages (CILT) wished to bid for funding, and SSCs were contacted by representatives of CILT, with SSDA support, asking that SSCs incorporate wording (which CILT provided) into SSAs. This was to enable CILT to cite them in support of drawing down funding through the SSA. SSDA 8 in the email below writes to SSCs extolling the benefits of CILT and why CILT should be embedded in the SSA. There is however a clear instruction by SSDA8, to incorporate the language provision within their SSAs as appropriate.

> *Please also remember it is important to include CILT in your SSA negotiations. X has already spoken to some of you with regard to embedding language provisions within your SSA…*
>
> *Why should SSCs include international communication needs in their strategies? Communication skills are at the top of employer needs wish-lists, especially for middle management.*

While international communication might be of interest to some companies, the majority of companies (85%) in the author's SSC footprint are sole traders with localised markets. This suggests that there is some discrepancy between SSDA8's contention and reality. SSDA 8 continues:

> *CILT/RLN offers a way into framing a SSA that will provide effective help in developing international communication skills of your people:*
> - *Intercultural awareness and communication skills*
> - *Language skills*
>
> *Whether your Sector skills need is in the field of exporting, migrant labour or managing a multi-workforce, these skills are essential to the development of your management teams.*

> *CILT/RLN can offer*
> - *Mapping of current qualifications*
> - *Development of NOS[65] for languages and inter-cultural competencies*
> - *Development and design of new qualifications to meet employers' needs* (SSDA 8)

None of the skills mentioned above by SSDA 8 this study would deem to be relevant for the sector he worked with. Nevertheless, the requisite statement provided by CILT was inserted into his SSA.

Further support for the contention that SSDA was moving the SSA towards a supply-side rather than an employer demand-side orientation can be seen by the joint working and declaration made at the time of the SSA process by SSDA and AoC[66]. This press communication talks about developing a common alliance to lobby Government. Contextually it might be argued that this is akin to the TUC and the CBI joining together to lobby Government. SSDA was supposed to be a employer-facing organisation, while the AoC is unashamedly a supply-side-facing organisation representing FE colleges (particularly FE college principals). This fact appears to have been lost on the SSDA. This study would suggest that to work harmoniously with an organisation created to represent the views primarily of FE College principals, SSDA would have had to change its messages significantly. Whether this intended alliance ever got 'off the ground' is less certain. The mere fact, however, that the SSDA would countenance it, at a time when SSAs were still being delivered, does suggest to this study a mindset more akin to the supply side.

> *In support of the SfB Network developing better relationships across the FE sector and prompting direct working links between SSCs and Colleges, a joint SfB AoC FE Strategy Group was set-up in late 2006 with both SSC CEOs and FE College Principles in membership.*

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[65] National Occupational Standards or NOS are developed by SSCs as the underpinning criteria for developing 'vocational' qualifications.

[66] AoC = the Association of Colleges, an organisation that represents FE College Principals, and is therefore very supply-side-driven.

> *One of the key outcomes for this group is the production of a joint statement directed at Government and key partners/stakeholders, which clearly sets out and demonstrates how both sides now intend to work together to achieve future common goals and this is attached for your information. The statement is now being launched and supported by a joint press release with the AoC, which is also attached and the intention of going forward is to build towards a joint parliamentary skills event in October 200 (AoC & SSDA, 2007).*

As a result of this perceived partnership, SSCs were then encouraged by the SSDA chief executive to incorporate this announcement into communications that they made to employers. SSCs were also encouraged to show examples of effective working with the FE sector, thus promoting the FE Sector, from whom the membership of the AoC is derived. Given that in the ACP (Stage 2 of the SSA), the author's SSC (as shown earlier within this Chapter) had identified poor quality provision (according to OfSTED). This instruction by SSDA appeared to be contrary to the original intention of the SSA.

> *With a Green Paper on Skills anticipated over the summer, you may wish to build on the statement and press release in your own sector and any examples of effective partnerships which you, or your employers are developing with FE providers would be very valuable in enabling us to build a comprehensive picture to underpin awareness-raising, continue the momentum and use as part of the October event (AoC & SSDA, 2007)*

At the same time as this joint working was being proposed by SSDA and the AoC, the SSCs were having problems with the supply side in implementing the findings of their SSAs. For example, the author's SSC had an issue in relation to the removal of funding for Technical Certificates[67] . This was a very sensitive issue for providers, as it meant the reduction in funding to the sector of some £22MN in total in England and £3MN in Wales. This money had been utilised for full-time learners with no

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[67] Technical Certificates are a type of Vocationally Relevant Qualification (VRQ) which purported to provide vocationally relevant training to full-time learners predominantly in FE Colleges, to prepare them for work in the relevant sector. The SSC argument with these courses is that they operate on learner demand, and take no notice of the potential for employment at the end of the course, leaving a considerable number of learners disappointed when they are unable to find employment.

employers who wanted to work as plumbers. The numbers of learners wishing to undertake learning to be plumbers vastly out numbered the numbers of people the industry wanted or needed based on labour market information published by the author's SSC. It was, however, a useful income stream for the FE providers. Employers' representatives within the author's SSC footprint had complained that this provision was impacting on their business by providing a route for 'partially qualified' operatives to 'flood' the market. This measure, therefore, was supported by employers.

These employer driven 'tough suggestions' coming out of SSAs such as the author's were resisted by providers as the wholesale removal of £22MN could have meant the virtual closure of many construction departments and redundancies among lecturing staff. The AoC also wrote in very strong terms to the CEO of the author's SSC, objecting strongly to the proposal to remove funding for Technical Certificates.

The Provider Group South East (email March 2007), while accepting the principle that courses that were not suitable to the industry should be removed from LSC funding, opposed the removal of funding from stand-alone Technical Certificates.

> [Providers Network] considers the recommendations that Technical Certificates be only funded on part of framework apprenticeships as short-sighted and will significantly put at risk capacity building amongst learning to enable them to progress to apprentices. This affects both the young people and adults and this recommendation would deny opportunities to "pull through" key groups who need to reach level 2 standard as part of the wider government Strategy for Skills under the Leitch Review.
>
> NVQ qualifications are only suitable for those already employed as plumbers. Technical Certificates allow learners in full-time learning to gain plumbing skills, competence and confidence prior to gaining jobs or transferring to employed apprenticeship programmes. Not all school leavers have the maturity, confidence or technical skills which would enable them to find employment in order to gain an NVQ as a part-time learner or apprentice.(Provider Group South East)

These learners may meet a government target proposed in Leitch (2006), but no consideration is made about what happens to them if they are unable to find employment in the author's sector. This was occurring because their qualifications are not recognised by industry, and there are insufficient employers to offer employment for the vast majority of these learners. It is this issue that the study has had difficulty reconciling with Provider Group South East's arguments. They continue, however, by advocating what might be deemed to amount to an argument to flood the market with 'part-qualified' craft operatives.

> *Technical Certificates are the only route for p/t mature students who are currently in alternative employment to gain the skills to transfer into plumbing as an employment. Many part-time learners go on to start their own business. (Provider Group South East)*

The Provider Group South East assertion that many of these learners can start their own businesses is actually a major concern for employers within the author's footprint. The author's employers argue that these learners are often unqualified, undercut existing companies on price, and then produce sub-standard work. This remains a concern of the author's SSC stakeholder trade associations. Despite this being a 'key' recommendation of the author's SSA, little or no progress has been made on this issue by the author's SSC with the provider network. This shows ultimately the lack of power SSAs had in implementing change.

A further contributor to the failure of the SSA policy was often the attitude of employers and employer bodies themselves to the process. The development of SSCs was often viewed with suspicion by existing trade associations, for example. In the email below, sent to the author's SSC, a trade association makes a number of complaints about the SSC, and infer that they intend not to support the process. This effectively deprived the SSC of a legitimate employer voice, although in the end the trade association did

support the SSA. The email relates to a presentation by the author of this study and the SSC in the South West of England. At this presentation, research findings were provided to an audience of employers and stakeholders. The feedback that Trade Association 1 refers to was given to them by the President of the Trade Association for the South West Region.

> *We've had some feedback reference the SNA project regarding what is the low level of participation of micro- businesses in particular. Having now had the opportunity to review the list of participating employers that were involved in the plumbing sector initial survey meeting work there are several regions where the organisations surveyed cannot be regarded as representative of a good cross section of the local employer population micro businesses being particularly weak… (Trade Association 1).*

The criticism about the numbers of micro-employers was valid, however this assumption takes no account of the fact that they were invited, but either declined to come, or failed to turn up on the day.

> *This has now been followed through in feedback that we are getting from our participating employers through the regional meetings, where there appears to be a particularly low level of micro-small business participation and moreover a heavy contribution from training providers. The [Trade Association] concern is essentially that the reports for the regions look to be largely desk-based with very little testing of the data with a key section of the employer population in either the initial survey work or the later workshops.*
>
> *Are there any assurances that can be provided that will deal with addressing the points raised particularly given the importance of the project in setting the future education and training agenda for the sector.* (Trade Association 1)

The statement that the research was desk-based was wrong to the point of mischief-making, as the research was the findings of primary research with employers from 450 companies across the UK of various sizes and types. The allegation that the sessions were supply-side dominated was also not true. This study shows an attempt by that trade association to 'rubbish' the SSA so it could not have an impact on the sector. Although financial supporters of SSCs for licensing purposes, trade associations often

saw the SSC as a threat to its existence. Trade associations were very keen to make sure that SSCs did not undertake work that might supplant what they were doing for their members.

The use of trade associations within the SSA process was imperative for the author's SSC, as this was the only way that employers could be seen to be supporting the process[68]. One of the main failures of the SSA was the failure by Government to understand that employers are not a homogeneous body in many sectors of the economy that can be identified and consulted. This meant that the SSC was in many ways a 'hostage' to trade associations and other employer bodies, rather than actual employers. Trade associations have their own political agendas, and could threaten to withdraw their support from SSCs and the SSA unless their wishes were complied with. As stated earlier, no guarantee could be made that these employer bodies would support an SSC or SSA. Faced with an often non-homogeneous or unidentifiable group of employers in many sectors, it is not surprising that the supply side was able to 'capture' the SSA agenda. The author of this study believes this weakness in the SSA process contributed significantly to its eventual failure.

In previous sections within this chapter, the behaviour of the SSDA, and how it began to control the direction of the SSA through memorandums, email dictates, 'kick-start events', guidance and pseudo academic assessments was described. In the next section, the way that SSDA continued to exercise control over the actual negotiation through their directives is explored.

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[68] This was because 85% of the author's footprint was in micro-companies, and therefore the only bodies that could be said to represent them were the trade associations within the sector. This was the argument the trade associations made, which was supported by the author's SSC.

Stakeholder Management

Once the Research phases had been completed,[69] the SSA moved towards a

stakeholder management phase, which involved the SSC going out and negotiating

primarily with the supply side[70]. SSDA not surprisingly, was very prescriptive in

dictating how SSCs should approach this process. SSDA developed tools that SSCs

were expected to use in the management of their stakeholders. Fig. 1 is a

Stakeholder Management Plan given to SSCs by SSDA to enable them to develop a

stakeholder management plan for subsequent approval by SSDA.

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[69] The main research phases were the Sector Needs Analysis (SNA) and the Assessment of
Current Provision Report (ACP) reports; there was some research in the Gap Analysis report,
although this is when the stakeholder management that this section considers actually
started. SSDA therefore having controlled the research elements naturally moved on to try to
control the negotiation phase too.
[70] Originally it was intended that this process would involve employers too, however many
SSCs were unable to identify a homogeneous body of employers they were able to negotiate
with, and so the negotiation was primarily with the supply side. The author's SSC used trade
associations to demonstrate employer negotiation.

Fig. 1

A Stakeholder Management Plan is key - create audience maps
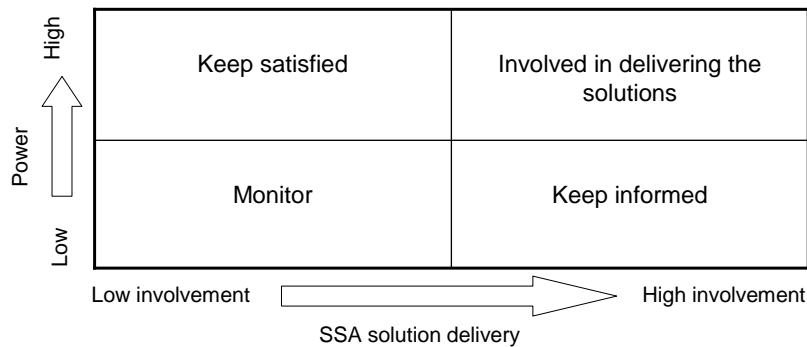
SSDA (2006d)

Within this stakeholder management plan, the SSC was tasked to identify key people in the various (supply-side) organisations. They were then required to rank them according to importance. This would then allow the SSC to prioritise those individuals with high power, who were capable of delivering solutions that the SSC were seeking to implement/achieve through the SSA.

From Fig. 1 then, the SSC was supposed to use the full audience matrix shown in Fig 2. The purpose of Fig. 2 was for the SSC to record their involvement with each partner and stakeholder. This was to help the SSC, identify the strategy to be adopted. Furthermore, in the event of difficulties in reaching an agreement there was provision to include a member of the executive to help facilitate the negotiations. This audience matrix suggests that there is a tacit acceptance by SSDA that the solutions emanating from the SSA are likely in some cases to be received in a hostile manner by some partners and stakeholders. There was a directive by SSDA in SSDA (2006d) to avoid confrontation with partners and Stakeholders as has already been

discussed. The provision to SSCs of these templates/tools by SSDAs might be seen as helpful to the SSA process. The insistence by SSDA, however, that these tools were used by SSCs, did allow SSDA some considerable control over the SSA process.

Fig 2

A Stakeholder Management Plan is key - full audience matrix

Name	Likely success	Key barriers	Strategy	Appoint-ment booked	Exec to attend

- Appointments are the biggest problem
- Real value is placed on management attending
  - *"Attending 'persuasion meetings' as early as possible to unblock as appropriate"*
  - *"It will be noticed... shows how serious you are about the nations or regions"*

SSDA (2006d)

The process of completing the SSDA templates was subjective in nature[71]. There was therefore scope for disagreement on the categorisation of participants. The

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[71] One SSC West Midlands regional manager gave the author his attempt at the exercise of apportioning partners within the West Midlands into the categories suggested by the SSDA stakeholder management plan described in Fig 1, and this is shown in Fig 3.

Fig 3: West Midlands audience map

Keep satisfied (high power/low involvement)	Involved in delivering the solutions (high power/ high involvement
Trade Association A	AWM
Trade Association B	RSP
Association of Colleges	LSC
Employment and Skills Boards	WMBS
Monitor (low power/low involvement)	**Keep Informed (low power/ high involvement)**

purpose of including Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 within this thesis is to show the control SSDA gained over the SSA process through the construction of these templates. In the next section, the evolutionary nature of the SSA process is described. This evolution of the SSA as it moved through the various tranches added to the confusion surrounding the process, and contributed to its failure. This is well illustrated in the manner of the demise of the English project board.

The beginning and end of the English Project Board

SSDA created project boards across the four nations of the United Kingdom in 2003. The project boards in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are considered in chapter 5. The development of the English project board was different from those of the devolved nations, as it was effectively dissolved before the end of the SSA process, as SSAs moved from an England national concept to an English regional concept based on the geographical boundaries of the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs).

An analysis of the circumstances behind the demise of the English project board is important in gaining an understanding of the evolutionary nature of SSA policy during its implementation. It also adds to an understanding of why the SSA process failed.

Connexions WMCCE WMHEA Trade Association C Professional Body (related to relevant sector) West Midlands Ethnic Minority Business Forum	Training Manager A Training Manager B

There are at first sight a number of organisations that, were the author to undertake the exercise, he would place differently; although it is unlikely that there are strictly speaking any wrong answers to this exercise, as by its very nature it is very subjective. An immediate/obvious critique is that the SSC manager has not identified all the members of the RSP, and by identifying the RSP as an entity (which it is not) there is effective by double counting. Examples of this include the omission of the Institute of Directors could be a weakness, as theoretically they could be very influential in some agreements.

The demise of the England project board effectively changed the SSA from a national project in England into a regional one devolved to the English regions. The regionalisation of the SSA in England is seen by the author of this study as being a major contributor to the failure of the SSA policy. This is because in the his experience it made it impossible for SSCs as relatively small organisations to respond to the competing demands of the regional bodies and the RSP and maintain the employer focus of the SSA. This led to capitulation by SSCs in the face of these regional pressures (encouraged by SSDA), allowing their SSAs to reflect existing regional policy. This led SSA to become a 'direction of travel' document, rather than a 'pathfinder' document. This process is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

To commence an investigation of the English Project Board, it is, however, important to consider the composition of the English project board. This was heavily biased towards the SSDA, which interestingly was not the case in the devolved nations (see Chapter 5 where it is shown that the devolved governments had control of the project boards). SSDA had six representatives, DTI (as it then was) had one, DfES (as it then was) two, QCA had one representative, Jobcentre Plus had two members, LSC (National Office)[72] had one, Higher Education had one representative, and the Health Education Authority had one representative[73]; with RDAs having two representatives (SSDA, 2006c, p1). This appeared to give SSDA more control of the SSA in England[74], and also reflected a more national rather than English regional perspective than eventually became the case.

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[72] It has already been pointed out within this Chapter, that the National LSC had little or no influence on the regional/local LSCs with the problem then being that major stakeholders had no engagement with the process, as the National LSC was unable to effectively represent the regional bodies of its own organisation.
[73] It is assumed that this representative was there as Skills for Health were going through their SSA.
[74] It is only possible to speculate on whether the dominance within England by the SSDA was an admission that SSDA felt they had more chance of success in delivering the employer demand-led system of curriculum development postulated by DfES (2003) in England; therefore SSDA was less interested in the devolved nations. Or whether the composition of the project boards in the devolved nations, were arrived at by pressure from the devolved

There was still some confusion in England in as late as April 2006 about the SSA process. A point from the minutes of a meeting of the English project board suggests that even though tranche 2 was coming to the end of their SSAs and moving towards agreement, there was still confusion about how the final agreement would look. The confusion over what an SSA agreement was is shown below:

> *"Following discussion, it was agreed that the Tranche 2 sign-up in England would involve each SSC reporting into the 15 August Project Board what stage they were at with each solution and whether any further action is required… [X] then led discussion on what Stage 5 could look like and presented the template. In the discussions, it was agreed that the Stage 5 documents should be simple and use of the template would give a consistent look to the document across the SSCs. [X] confirmed that the template will be included in the overarching guidance document. [An SSC] said that there was a risk of the duplication and a large volume of data so it was agreed that the Stage 5 should major on agreements with robust cross reference to existing data with a logical progression and flow to solutions." (SSDA, 2006e, p3-4)*

It seems to this study bizarre that a discussion should be taking place about what a Stage 5 SSA should look like when allegedly the pathfinder SSCs had already gone through this process. This minute shows the total confusion, messiness, and evolutionary development in the implementation process that existed three years after the policy was defined. Another comment from the minutes again shows how policy decisions taking place during the SSA were in some cases helping and in others possibly hindering the SSA process. This particular initiative from the minutes suggests a policy that could be a help to SSCs.

> *"HEFCE are holding 2 events… with SSCs to explore sign up to solutions. HEFCE intend to respond to all Stage 3 consultations in this way. HE now has broader remit to work on employer engagement. UUK have set up a new Skills Task Force. Potential of more HE engagement through 'Train to Gain' HE pilots which will be announced in the summer." (SSDA, 2006e, p4)*

nation governments to reduce the influence of SSDA. The homogeneity in the devolved nations of project board membership (discussed in Chapter 5) in the devolved nations could have occurred by either means.

The problems with such initiatives by bodies such as HEFCE were that they were grabbing the agenda. They were as the note intimates using the SSA to populate the policy initiatives of HEFCE, rather than coming to SSCs and seeking to work with them. While appearing positive, this approach (and others like it), were an attempt by HEFCE to re-structure SSAs to meet HEFCE needs rather than vice versa. A further 'cynical' observation that might be made is that UUK like many similar bodies would struggle to achieve satisfactory employer engagement such as to satisfy their own contract obligations under 'Train to Gain'. By incorporating the 'employer engagement' element of the SSA into their own returns to 'Train to Gain' UUK may have created some increased perception of employer engagement, which they had not actually carried out, but which UUK were required to undertake, to satisfy their contractual requirements. The grouping of SSAs by organisations such as HEFCE allowed them to arrive at 'top-line' solutions to issues raised rather than actually responding to the specifics within each SSA.

The final point from this meeting was that SSCs were struggling to get their SSAs published due to the attitude of the LSC and its rigid adherence to its own planning cycle. SSCs, as has already been stated within this chapter, were required to adapt their work to these planning cycles.

> *"LSC will respond at the start of the business cycle in October to whatever documents are ready at the time. However any specific information involving detailed changes to volumes, types and levels of qualification will go through the detailed regional process which reports back outcomes in March. Policy agreements will be able to be facilitated more quickly. Some SSCs were concerned that this could have an adverse effect on when they could publish their SSA and could result in the timeline being substantially delayed. It was pointed out that the Pathfinders had agreed direction of travel arrangements with the LSC on solutions in their published SSA on volume levels and types of qualifications. Tranche 2 have also followed this approach (SSDA, 2006e, p6).*

This position by the LSC usually meant that solutions emanating from SSA implementation could be delayed up to twelve months as changes could not be made after the planning cycle deadlines. Direction of travel arrangements did not appear to further solutions considerably, as for example the author's 'Technical Certificate' issue was never addressed within a LSC planning cycle. Within SSDA (2006e) there is no indication that DfES (who had two representatives on the project board) were prepared to challenge the LSC (whose budget and management they allegedly provided) to make them change their policy. This leaves the author of this thesis speculating on the seniority of the DfES civil servants who were members of that project board, as this problem remained throughout the whole of the SSA process[75]. Perhaps it was the type of ineffectiveness described above that led to the demise of the England project board.

Effectively, the last meeting of the England Project Board took place in June 2006, and from a paper submitted to the meeting it was decided to wind up the board forthwith and create a virtual board, although this study is not aware that the virtual project board ever convened as the author of this study never received any correspondence from it.

> *Dear English Project Board. This note picks up on some of the action points from Wednesday's meeting and outlines future arrangements for the project board in England. I have reattached the paper that outlines changes to meeting arrangements so that you are clear of the rationale. Please note that the English Project Board now becomes a virtual group receiving notifications of SSA outputs and bimonthly SSA reports… The tranche meetings are to enable SSCs to begin constructive dialogue on a bilateral basis with partners and begin early discussion on solutions. Where SSCs feel that they already have relationships with these partners in hand, you may choose to regard the meetings as optional. (SSDA 7)*

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[75] This point is made by Bacon and MacManus (2008), questioning the commitment of DfES to the SSA process.

The particular note from where this decision to effectively wind up the project board emanated is recorded below:

> "The English Project Board has served the pathfinders and tranche 2 well, both in terms of policy development and coordination of the development phase for each tranche. The role and purpose of the meeting now needs reviewing so that it is fit for purpose for partners and tranche 3 and 4 SSCs and builds on the lessons learned so far." (SSDA, 2006f, p1)

The justification for this recommendation seems to be that the process was maturing now, and therefore the England Project Board had no purpose:

> "The experience of the pathfinders and tranche 2 has been used, along with the SSA process evaluation, to inform detailed guidance for stage 1 to 5 of the SSA process. SSDA now have an account management structure in place which enables the learning from early tranches and each subsequent tranche to be passed down to newer tranches…In addition, partners have developed mechanisms to work with SSCs during the development phases, building on the lessons learned and experience to date working with pathfinders and tranche 2 . For example, LSC and DfES have an account management approach. HEFCE have coordinated tranche meetings at Stage 3 involving staff from across HEFCE. The TUC have also coordinated meetings with each tranche and the relevant TUs." (SSDA, 2006f, p1)

Given the existence of 'real' problems in England in relation to the SSA process being experienced by SSCs recorded in the English Project Board minutes. Then the decision to wind up the board seems strange to the author of this study. A more sensible solution should have meant the continuation and indeed strengthening of the board to tackle these. Nevertheless, the decision by partners and stakeholders to develop mechanisms for addressing issues related to the SSA without the project board is seen as a positive step in SSDA (2006d). Responding to the SSAs was subsequently subjugated into each partner's and stakeholder's own internal policy mechanism for dealing with them. This ultimately led to a reduction in specific employer demands in SSA documents, by transforming them into more general overarching demands. This was achieved as SSAs from different SSCs were

amalgamated together by supply-side partners and stakeholders into themes for implementation (SSDA, 2006e). In this respect, the specific became the 'general' and led to a direction of travel, rather than a sector employer solution (SSDA, 2006e) as proposed in DfES (2003). The demise of the project board, however, gave the SSCs no forum through which to challenge non-cooperation from partners or stakeholders. Having set the scene in SSDA (2006f), the conclusion therefore was that the English Project Board was no longer fit for purpose and could be effectively abandoned.

> *"To recommend to the English Project Board an alternative approach to partner engagement throughout the process, involving replacing the Project Board and establishing an alternative mechanism to Stage 3 consultation."* (SSDA, 2006g, p1)

The demise of the English Project Board, although not stated in SSDA (2006g), led to an effective withdrawal of DfES and DTI (as they then were) from effective engagement in the SSA process. This point is noted by Bacon and MacManus (2008) as a reason why they felt that the SSA process had not succeeded. The end of effective national engagement led to the regional control that is described in Chapter 5. This therefore became the dominant paradigm with the demise of the English Project Board in England.

A second example of where the SSDA controlled the evolutionary[76] nature of an SSA process such that it fundamentally changed a policy proposal can be seen in the Stage 6 SSA proposal. As is shown in the next section, it did the exact opposite of what was intended. This stage was a proposed addition to the five stage SSA process, with the intention of improving implementation.

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[76] The word evolutionary is being used within this thesis to describe a phenomenon where although the policy has been enunciated in DfES (2003) the implementation was not settled when the policy began, and became subject to change and amendment as the policy proceeded. This is such that in some cases what is delivered is actually different to what was intended. It is the contention of this study that the evolutionary nature of much of the implementation of the SSA policy actually contributed to its demise.

Stage 6: Implementation of the Sector Skills Agreement

A problem with the five stage SSA process was originally identified by the pathfinder tranche.

> *"Four pathfinder SSAs completed the development process between June and September in England, Scotland and Wales (Northern Ireland completion is due by June 2006) and began implementing the solutions agreed at Stage 5. Although a number of successes have been achieved through the implementation process, a number of barriers have also been identified. The response by partners has varied but for some solutions, it has been slow, is often seen as optional and sometimes restricted by Government targets". (SSDA, 2006b, Para 1.2, p1)*

Gavan (2006) in an open letter to CEOs of SSCs and the English Project Board also conceded that the SSA process had been far more difficult than had at first been envisaged. He stated:

> *"In reflecting on the pathfinder work from the first reviews, it has become clear that moving an SSA into full implementation is a more complex and time-consuming development than first envisaged. There are a number of policy blockages that are impacting on the speed of partner response and resulting in lack of progress on some solutions and ultimately running the risk of disengaging employers from the process." (Gavan, 2006, p1)*

It would appear, however, that the impetus for Stage 6 came from ministers rather than civil servants. Gavan (2006) continues:

> *"There is a clear need to identify the policy blockages that are holding up implementation and develop methods for escalating and resolving them. One way forward which was raised at the meeting between the pathfinder and second tranche SSC CEOs with Phil Hope , the Minister for Skills in England, Alan Wilson, the Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning in Scotland, representatives from government departments and the Devolved Administrations was the introduction of a formal Stage 6." (Gavan, 2006, p1).*

It is not known if any meetings actually took place with ministers in the way that Gavan (2006) intimates. It is suggested not. SSDA (2006a) suggests that the amount of negotiation and effort required with both employers and stakeholders to develop a successful SSA had not been anticipated when the policy was first developed.

> *"Experience with the pathfinders and second tranche has established that to produce quality outputs requires in-depth analysis and a substantial amount of employer buy-in and confidence. It also requires a substantial amount of work with partners to ensure their buy-in. The requirement to ensure buy-in from partners across the home nations together with devolved decision-making in the English regions has had a huge impact on the approach and resources needed to complete an SSA. The regionalisation of the LSC and creation of Regional Skills Partnerships also raises questions about where SSA deals are done. This has resulted in a more complex and time-consuming development and, particularly, implementation process for the pathfinders, than first envisaged. The lack of progress on some solutions runs the risk of disengaging employers form the process."*
> (SSDA, 2006h, pares: 2.1 & 2.2, p1).

SSDA (2006h) proposed that implementation stage would consist of the following components. First, an annual Ministerial meeting with the Chief Executive Officers of both SSCs in the implementation mode and delivery partners to assess progress. Secondly, a bi-annual evaluation report from each partner to demonstrate what systems had been put in place to deliver SSAs. This would also report on the progress on delivery of SSA solutions against clear milestones and any barriers to implementation. Thirdly, it was intended that there would be an overarching monitoring system to track progress. Fourthly, action plans would be produced with clear roles and responsibilities to address blockages and barriers. Finally, it was envisaged that SSA targets would be incorporated within partner target frameworks (SSDA, 2006h, Para: 3.1, p2).

The method for obtaining funding for the Stage 6 was through the European Social Fund (ESF). SSCs therefore had to bid for funding to the ESF. Ultimately the funding bid was made on behalf of the SSCs by SSDA. ESF funding is match funding, which means that the SSCs had to provide equivalent funding to that which they were getting from ESF. As match funding was done by SSCs from monies already allocated for SSA work, SSCs that had completed their SSAs or were near to completion would not get as much funding as those SSCs who were in tranches 3 & 4 because they had less unspent SSA money to match fund. This led to SSCs in pathfinder and tranche 2 being less enthusiastic about this proposal than SSCs in tranches 3 & 4. The author does not believe that this reluctance affected the outcome of the Stage 6.

In addition, the ESF funding was to be used by SSCs to provide, first, greater coverage of the sector footprint where these were originally incomplete. This was to be achieved by SIC codes. Many SSCs have such large and diverse footprints that it was not possible in the SSA to cover all of their smaller industries[77]. Secondly, there was funding for greater research analysis, and solution building. Thirdly, the ESF bid provided for more work with employers, through which it was anticipated that there would be a greater understanding of the employers' future skill needs. Fourthly, the ESF bid provided for further research to explore specific issues raised by SSA work completed to date. Fifthly, it provided for more work with partners and employers to develop appropriate actions and solutions. Sixthly, the money was also to provide increased capacity in SSCs to successfully complete the SSA process (SSDA, 2006i, p1).

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[77] Notwithstanding the insistence of SSDA6 discussed earlier within this chapter in relation to form-1A, that SSCs should cover the whole of their footprints in their SSAs, there was an implicit acceptance by SSDA here, that this was not always possible.

From SSDA (2006i) it can be seen that even at the inception of Stage 6, the emphasis was being changed from being a 'blockage' remover to becoming an 'up-lift 'of the original SSA. If there is a doubt in the mind of the reader that the original implementation of stage 6 was changing in SSDA (2006i) to something far less potent, then SSDA (2006j) should remove them. The title of SSDA (2006j) is very enlightening: *"Proposal for how the SSA Checkpoint Review (Formerly Stage 6[78])* would operate in Nation". From an implementation model, where stakeholders could be brought to account in front of a minister, what is left is 'review' of the performance of the SSA. The name change post Stage 6 lead to a complete change of emphasis. This seemed to be putting the emphasis of the policy back on SSCs, and the quality of the SSAs, rather than the performance of the partners and stakeholders.

This development arose it would appear because SSDA put the concept of an implementation stage to the Project Boards across the UK. As is discussed in Chapter 5, the project boards were 'stacked' with supply-side and Government departments rather than employers in the way that was probably intended when the concept was first developed. An implementation stage of the type described by SSDA (2006l) would bring some accountability to them, rather than the SSCs. Therefore, to the mind of this study, this explains why the policy changed from driving implementation of the SSA to enhancing it. The consultation raised the following issues. First, there was a commitment to strengthening shared commitment to delivery. This was to be achieved by recognising that Stage 5 of the SSA was not the end of the process. Rather it was a point, at which an action plan to implement the required changes are agreed. Secondly, there was a commitment to strengthening opportunities to develop longer term constructive dialogue (SSDA, 2006j, p1). SSDA (2006j) continues:

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[78] The author is unaware when or by whom the decision was taken to change the title and move away from the concept of describing the ESF work as Stage 6 of the SSA, as was originally intended, it just seemed to happen from within SSDA.

> *"The responses were supportive of a formal implementation phase that allows for continued opportunity to develop longer term, policy- led solutions with partners. It will also allow the SSCs to understand the commitment of partners to accept SSAs as a document which outlines and informs strategic policy and funding decision-making. In some cases initial action plans will outline direction of travel and it will be over the succeeding months that any detailed activities will emerge."* (SSDA, 2006j, p1).

In SSDA (2006a), therefore, the inference is made that 'direction of travel' is not the place that the SSAs should have been in at Stage 5 of the process, but by SSDA (2006j) this vice has become almost a virtue. The commitment to create *'policy-led solutions with partners'* is a strange one; as there is no definition of what this means, but it appears to suggest that SSCs would be consulted in the development of policy by Government and supply-side organisations. If this is the case, it is not where the SSA was intended to be.

SSDA (2006j) reports that the respondents to the consultation process were concerned that (and apparently this came from both SSCs as well as stakeholders) a formal implementation phase would create additional bureaucracy, if SSDA (2006l) were to be adopted. This then gave SSDA the opportunity to water down the proposals yet further. SSDA (2006j) continues by seemingly identifying the Stage 6 process as being in essence a furtherance of good practice that should already be within the original SSA. It is therefore now a tool for 'partners' to use for monitoring and evaluation.

> *"Of the component parts identified for both partners and SSCs, it was recognised that much of this was, in fact, good practice for SSCs to incorporate into their Stage 5, and thus inform their business planning and for partners to incorporate into existing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms."* (SSDA, 2006j, p1-2)

The analysis of the Stage 6 policy above shows how a policy emanating from ministers intending to facilitate the achievement of SSA solutions. This was proposed

by ministers to achieve an employer 'demand-led system of curriculum development'. Through SSDA leadership, this changed into an 'official' confirmation of the development of a 'direction of travel' document. The re-named Stage 6 changed therefore from being a 'blockage removal 'document making partners and stakeholders accountable into one making SSC accountable.

The 'localised' evolution of the Stage 6 document was useful to this study as it shows the reader in a microcosm the processes that were at work within the SSA as a whole. It shows how a policy could be manipulated and changed to achieve a contra- performance to that which was intended.

Conclusions

The chapter commenced by looking at the theoretical academic work that has been produced to try to explain policy development and implementation of policy within the New Labour government. This chapter has identified the models for governance expounded by Newman (2001). It has described how within the management of the SSA process by SSDA, elements of her models can be identified to a greater or lesser extent, although no one model has every facet found in the SSA governance process, only parts of many of them. The chapter has critiqued Neman's theorising in that she fails to take cognisance of the pluralistic power struggles identified as a force acting on the SSA policy. This force is achieved through the concept of partnering in the implementation as opposed to the development of government policy.

This chapter has defined the command and control methods of management that SSDA utilised in managing SSCs through the SSA process. It has shown how SSDA made the process unnecessarily complex even from the initial proposal and Form 1A.

Given that SSDA were obliged to deliver to the government twenty-five SSAs (Bacon and MacManus, 2008), the insistence on such detail at the inception of the process seems strange. It suggests to this study a desire by SSDA to establish control over the SSA process. The author of this study believes that the command and control methodologies adopted by SSDA changed the SSA outcomes from the employer demand-led system of curriculum development to a more 'direction of travel' document that the SSA became. This was a major reason for the failure of the SSA to actually deliver on the government's requirements as enunciated in DfES (2003).

The chapter continues by demonstrating the way that SSDA used memoranda, emails, guidance documents and what the author of this study has described as a pseudo-academic quality assurance system on SSA report outputs. These techniques allowed the SSDA to control SSCs and control the outputs of the SSAs. These then largely met the SSDAs needs, and by implication the supply side and policy partners and stakeholders who dictated to SSDA (see Chapter 5). These command and control techniques exercised by SSDA regulated the whole of the SSA process, and in the opinion of this study guaranteed the failure of the SSA policy process.

A further failure by SSDA that this chapter has identified is that SSDA allowed partners and stakeholders to develop their own response mechanisms. It also failed to challenge organisations such as the LSC to release information to SSCs. This phenomenon allowed partners and stakeholders to make the SSAs subservient to these partners' policies and procedures, rather than the other way round. SSAs became the supporting rather than the leading documents for partners and stakeholders. One example of this which appeared to get SSDA approval was the grouping of SSA issues into generic themes. This automatically created high-level general solutions, rather than developing specific solutions which were proposed

within the individual SSAs. This technique was justified by SSDA as enabling partners and stakeholders to respond to the SSA reports. The study believes, however, that this actually developed general rather than specific policy needs. Specific rather than general needs might have been more beneficial to employers, but more difficult to negotiate with partners and stakeholders.

A further issue identified within this chapter is the evolutionary nature of the implementation of the SSA. Specifically, this chapter has in different places identified three examples. First, the changes to the guidance document, which appeared to take no account of the work those SSCs, had done before the changes. It is noted that this created confusion for SSCs. Secondly, the demise of the English Project Board. This chapter has stated that this had two outcomes: first, that this led to the abandonment of a forum in England for SSCs to challenge the partner and stakeholder engagement processes. The chapter has, however, also suggested that SSDA were not really interested in facilitating a challenge to partner and stakeholder policy. In reality, they were rather admonishing SSCs to seek agreement with partners and stakeholders and to blend SSAs into existing policies. Secondly, the demise of the English Project Board led to departments such as DfES and DTI abandoning the process, and transferring it effectively to the English regions. This created a regional rather than a national SSA England, and compounded the problems of obtaining agreement for SSCs (see Chapter 5).

A further example given within this chapter is the evolutionary way that skills policy changed. During the SSA process this can be seen in the development of the Stage 6 implementation policy. This chapter describes how this changed the Stage 6 from a policy directed by Government ministers to remove 'barriers' to the implementation of SSA recommendations to an insipid 'direction of travel' document. This in turn allowed partners and stakeholders to incorporate SSA data into their existing

monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, rather than the SSA radically transforming these mechanisms. It was also anticipated that SSCs would use SSAs to inform their business planning.

In the opinion of this study, these factors contributed to the failure of the SSA policy. In the next chapter, the way that the SSA policies were manipulated by the partners and stakeholders within the devolved nations and English regions will be developed further. This will then be theorised to demonstrate how this factor coupled with the factors of command and control by the SSDA etc. also contributed to the failure of the SSA policy.

Chapter 5: The neo-pluralistic impacts of 'devolution' and 'regionalism' on the Sector Skills Agreement

Introduction

This chapter identifies the theoretical concepts related to pluralism. Having identified where the implementation of the process contains facets of traditional pluralism, this chapter continues by defining neo-pluralistic concepts. This thesis then seeks to describe where the implementation of the SSA develops pluralistic concepts in relation to the development of policy within a modern state.

This chapter also identifies the use of command and control methods of management by SSDA and the governments of the devolved nations, through their utilisation of project boards designed by SSDA to facilitate agreement in the devolved nations. This chapter shows how these project boards were dominated by government bodies and the supply side. The thesis shows how the supply side controlled the SSA process by demanding incorporation of existing skills legislation into SSAs and rejecting proposals that did not suit existing policy.

In relation to England, the impact of the demise of the concept of an 'all England' SSA to one that was devolved to nine English regions is discussed. The subsequent subjugation of the SSA to the Regional Skills Partnerships (RSP) of the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) is also described. It is suggested that many of the outcomes experienced through the project boards in the devolved nations also occurred through the process of RSP approval of SSAs. In this way this chapter seeks to further show how the SSA process failed to deliver the policy initiative that was intended for it.

Traditional concepts of pluralism

The term pluralism has been utilised across numerous academic disciplines including (but not exclusively) political science, international relations and political theory, with anarchists, socialists, liberals and conservatives deploying the term in the service of their political theorising (see Laborde, 2000; Hirst, 2000 ; Smith, 2006, p21). Nichols (1975) indicates some of the problems that the author of this study has encountered when seeking to use pluralistic concepts within the theorisation of this thesis.

> *"The principle causes of confusion has been the fact that the term has been used by separate groups of thinkers who have rarely attempted to relate their particular use of the term to its other usages".* (Nichols, 1975, p1).

Dunleavey and O'Leary (1987) in their introduction to theories of the state define pluralism in the following way:

> *"Pluralism is the belief that there are, or ought to be, many things. It offers a defence of multiplicity in beliefs, institutions and societies and opposes 'monism'- the belief that there is, or ought to be only one thing. Pluralism began as a philosophy which argued that reality cannot be explained by one substance or principle. Similarly, political pluralism recognises the existence of diversity in social, institutional and ideological practices, and values that diversity. (*Dunleavey and O'Leary, 1987, p13).

The rejection of absolute, unified and uncontrolled state power is a hallmark of pluralism, as pluralists assume that societies are characterised by "ubiquitous change and conflict". This would lead to a disintegration of society without political institutions that manage the numerous conflicts of interests and struggles for power that mark a modern complex society (Dunleavey and O'Leary, 1987, p21). Galbraith (1953) spoke of 'countervailing power' as a response to conditions of power struggles between organised labour in the form of the TUC and employers in the form of the CBI.

Galbraith's (1953) also accepted that even within a pluralistic model, between different groups there existed an inequality of power that would ultimately influence the formulation of policy. This is a useful concept when theorising the SSA, as the SSA policy impacted ineffectively on wider policy and stakeholders due to the pre-existing inequalities of power between small SSCs and the larger public partners and stakeholders they sought to influence. It was in that sense an unequal power struggle between the SSCs and these larger bodies such as the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), the Scottish Executive (SE) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in Northern Ireland. These problems were further exacerbated by the apparent political stance of appeasement adopted by SSDA, and described later within this chapter, as well as in Chapter 4. In most of its manifestations, pluralism retains a benign view of the existing state in a democratic society (Smith, 2006). This is probably its main critical limitation (Smith, 2006, p21).

This thesis is seeking to 'utilise' the theories of pluralism to explain the ways that the political bodies used their power to turn the SSA from an employer demand-led curriculum development policy into a 'direction of travel document'. This study believes that the neo-liberal aversion to pluralism is evident in policy formation at national level. At devolved nations and English regional level, however, the pluralistic process was used by power partners and stakeholders to infiltrate regional policy initiatives into the national SSA to conform it to the regional or devolved nation policy agenda. What this thesis is describing therefore is not pluralism in the conventional sense.

Merriam (1964) in his work talks of the Government performing a 'balancing function' between the competing demands of groups, because these by their nature cannot be reconciled in totality. Therefore, it is a primary function of Government to balance

these demands in a policy context. In this balancing act, Government seeks to appease each group sufficiently, such that there are wins and losses on all sides as it works toward a common good, but with Government achieving the balance (Knuttilia and Kubik, 2000, p74). Merriam (1964) concludes that the better organised and more influential a group is, the more likely it is that Government might favour this group or groups over others, creating a less pluralistic approach as common interests give way to group interests. The important principle enunciated by Merriam (1945) in relation to this thesis (which empirically is probably axiomatic) is that some groups have more power than others. This is clearly enunciated within this thesis, and these groups can have more influence ultimately with Government than the smaller, less powerful groups (Merriam; 1964, p144).

Where this thesis would differentiate Merriman's (1964) concept of pluralism in relation to the pluralism of the SSA is that under New Labour the government directs policy, often adopting what the rigid neo-liberal standpoint described above, rather than acting as a conductor of various interest groups of Merriman. This thesis argues that it is at the policy implementation stage that the pluralistic powers of the partners and stakeholders were able to transform the policy, and contribute to its failure.

Bentley (1935) one of the first and leading American pluralists also sought to determine pluralistic government through the theory of groups, and the political pressure that disparate groups bring to bear on the political process. He stated that Government could only be analysed through the medium of groups (Knuttila and Kubik, 2000, p69). Bentley (1935, p222) concluded that these groups would then compete with each other to obtain their agenda, over and above other groups with an interest in the process.

The inter-groups struggles defined by Bentley (1935) are not easily discoverable within this thesis in relation to the SSA, as the partners and stakeholders at regional and devolved nation level appear to act seamlessly in the way that they transformed the ethos of the SSA process. This could be explained in the devolved nations (see later in this chapter) by the dominance of the devolved nation government, and the English regions by the RDAs leading on behalf of the Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs). The study can only speculate on whether the partners and stakeholders had internal tensions between themselves, but they always appeared united against the SSA and the SSCs. At meetings that the author of this study attended, there did appear to be a considerable amount of homogeneity among the partners and stakeholders in relation to the SSA.

Bentley (1935) contextualises a concept within the patterns of US Government policy at that time, with agencies (and individuals) rising and falling in the prominence of policy creation:

> "In governments like that of the United States we see these manifold interests gaining representation through many thousands of officials in varying degrees of success, beating some officials down now into delegate activity, intrusting representative activity (in the narrow sense) to other officials at times in high degree, subsiding now and again over great areas while "special interests" make special use of officials, rising in other spots to dominate, using one agency of the government against another, now with stealth, now with open force and in general moving along the route of time with the organized turmoil which is life where the adjustments are much disturbed. Withal, it is a process which must surprise one more for the trifling proportion of physical violence considering the ardent nature of the struggles, than for any other characteristic." (Bentley, 1935, p453).

There is much in what Bentley (1935) writes that has some resonance to the study in relation to the SSA. Under the Rt. Hon. Charles Clarke the Secretary of State at the Department for Education and Science between October 2002 and December 2004, SSCs and the SSA process were very prominent, and in Chapter 1 a civil servant is quoted as saying that Clarke could talk of little else but the Sector Skills Councils.

With Clarke moving on to the Home Office in December 2004, it may be that the new

Secretary of State then lost interest in the project, which might have explained the

loss of central Government interest commented on by Bacon and MacManus (2008)

from the SSDA.

The influence of Deputy PM Rt. Hon. John Prescott may also have contributed to the

development of the political strength of the Regional Development Agencies in

England. Mr. Prescott was Deputy Prime Minister from May 1997 till June 2007.

Local Government and the regions were the responsibility of the Office of the Deputy

Prime Minister between May 2002 and May 2006, when the concept of devolution of

Skills to the RDAs was stated as a policy in *"Your Region, Your Choice"* (DTLGR,

2004). In Scotland and Wales, the 'Celtic' influence in the Labour Party[79] might also

have contributed to the power of the devolved nations in challenging central policy.

The power of these regional and devolved nation bodies ultimately contributed

significantly to the re-structuring process of the SSA policy and to its ultimate failure.

 A generation or so later to Bentley, Dahl (1965) was to make the same point about

the diverse groups and power structures influencing the US policy creation process:

> *"Important government policies would be arrived at through*
> *negotiation, bargaining, persuasion and pressure at a considerable*
> *number of different sites in the political system- the Whitehouse, the*
> *bureaucracies, the labyrinth of committees in Congress, the federal*
> *and state courts, the state legislatures and the executives, the local*
> *governments. No single organized political interest, party, class,*
> *region or ethnic groups would control all of these sites"* (Dahl, 1965,
> p325)

 Devolution and regionalisation in part explains (from a Dhalian perspective) the

pluralistic notions of the SSA, as the UK Government may control Westminster but its

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[79] In the 1997 general election, for example, the then Conservative government lost all
parliamentary seats in Wales and Scotland to other parties, with the Labour Party holding the
majority of seats in those two nations. This situation continues still within both nations even
after the defeat of New Labour in the 2010 General Election.

influence was more diluted in Edinburgh, Belfast and Cardiff, not to mention the English regions. Vincent (1987, p189) explained Bentley (1935) by suggesting that the collective will of the pluralistic groups is the national interest, and policy is the outcomes of group pressure. This thesis modifies Vincent by suggesting that the eventual implementation of the policy is the outcomes of group pressure.

> *"One of the early American pluralists, A. F. Bentley, was concerned to direct our attention away from legal and institutional studies towards the behaviour of groups. The political arena was composed of a diverse range of groups all articulating interests, and putting pressure on government. The distinction between types of government was based largely on the way interests were articulated, accommodated and adjusted. All groups were seen as interested in striking some kind of bargain. The government was not there to seek some abstract national interest. The national interest, in a minimal sense, is the final bargain struck between interests in the policy sphere. Policy is the outcome of group pressures."* (Vincent, 1987, p189).

This thesis therefore both challenges and agrees with this notion of Vincent (1987), in that the policy groups at devolved national and English regional levels supplanted their wants over those of the employers, as enunciated by the SSCs, and this became the policy. This thesis argues that the devolved nations were effectively supported in achieving this outcome by SSDA, the central government agency responsible for the supporting SSCs and developing SSAs.

The story of the SSA portrayed within this thesis is one of capitulation by SSCs under the direction of the SSDA, rather than the striking of a meaningful compromise deal in the way that Vincent (1987) infers. This thesis, however, would specifically disagree with Smith (2006) when he claims the demise of pluralism within policy making in the UK, although the pluralism that this thesis defines, while in some respects similar to the pluralism of the traditional theorists, is different in some other facets, which is why the study has referred to it as neo-pluralism (see later).

Smith (2006, p24) concludes:

"The British state is based on the notion of indirect, individual representation, a decision-making elite isolated from civil society and unresponsive group interests, combined with an indivisible notion of internal and external sovereignty. The epitome of anti-pluralism was the Thatcherite conception of state with its suspicion of groups and intermediate institutions and emphasising the direct relationship between a sovereign government and the individual. As a consequence of these developments, pluralism had little purchase in Britain" (Smith, 2006, p24).

This thesis seeks to demonstrate that a form of neo-pluralism has impacted on the SSA, through the concepts of devolution and regionalisation and the various groups within that process. This neo-pluralism is centred on groups, but it acts to transform government policy in implementation, rather than at inception as in the traditional pluralistic model. Within this neo-pluralism, new power relationships are used to enforce change in policy, transforming intention through contention and challenge into something different from what had been intended. It is this pluralistic transformation that this thesis argues contributed significantly to the failure of the SSA policy. In the neo-pluralism described by this thesis, the government does not act as referee or arbitrator in the SSA process, but the regional/devolved nation groups within the pluralistic process described within this thesis act against the will of national government to sublimate policy to fit (in the case of the SSA) existing policy concepts at the national and English regional level.

Finding a definition of this pluralism, described within this thesis, or fitting it within the work of other academics that have began to theorise about pluralism has been difficult. Ball (1993) talks about neo-pluralism, which he does not go on to define within that work; however, Provis (1996, p477) talks about neo-pluralism as being pluralism centralised around the concept of values, which to the mind of the author contradicts the emphasis that Ball (1993) appears to have been intimating for neo-pluralism within his work. Ball (1993) appears to be talking about the way that policy

formation was developing and changing in the last parliament of the Thatcher/Major Conservative governments. The author of this study therefore when he refers to neo-pluralism within this thesis is not seeking to second-guess Ball (1993), but is using the term to seek to theorise the pluralistic concepts that impinged on the SSA and contributed to its failure.

To conclude, therefore, the definition that this thesis has placed on neo-pluralism is one that involves groups working against neo-liberal central government policy dictates at devolved nation and regional level, to undermine, change or water down government intention, and substitute it with their own policy agenda at the implementation rather than the formulation stage.

The next section of this chapter will examine briefly the policy framework that existed within the devolved nations. The SSDA (as will be elaborated later) instructed SSCs that their SSAs were to complement existing skills policy at devolved nation and regional level. This study believes that this also, contributed to the failings of the SSA. These devolved nation and regional skills policies were framed in a way that was not supportive to the production of an employer demand-led system of curriculum development. The consideration of them by SSCs in the SSA process therefore began almost immediately, taking the implementation of the SSA away from a purely employer influence.

Another important facet in the creation of the pluralistic control mechanisms exercised within the devolved nations considered within this section was the control that the public sector partners and stakeholders exercised over the SSA process through the project boards. It is here that the neo-pluralistic facets that are described above actually subsisted in the devolved nations. The power given to the project boards by SSDA meant that these project boards could control SSCs through the

threat of withholding 'sign-off' of the 'agreement', and thus prevent SSCs from receiving stage payments for SSA production.

The pre-existing and developing policy context within the Devolved Nations during the development of the SSA

It is important to understand that within the devolved nations of the UK the concept of skills was already the subject of a great deal of legislative interest by the respective devolved nation governments. SSCs were expected both by the SSDA and the devolved national project boards to understand these policies and incorporate them into their SSAs. The material point that this thesis seeks to make about these policies is that ultimately they contributed to the failure of the SSA, because the devolved nations did not accept the value of the SSA being an 'employer-driven challenge' to the legislation, requiring amendment of the legislation to facilitate a truly 'employer driven-demand system. Rather they saw the legislation, and the policy document within, as the standard when compared with SSC. SSA documents and SSA documents should therefore reflect this existing policy. This, it is suggested rather undermined the 'employer-driven' principle of the SSA.

Existing policies within the devolved nations

The first devolved nation to be considered is Northern Ireland. The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in Northern Ireland was the main stakeholder for SSCs working within the province to get their SSAs approved. The major policy document for the Learning and Skills Sector (LSS) within the province was the *'Northern Ireland Skills Strategy'*. Other reports that were influential on the development of the SSA in Northern Ireland were the *Success through Skills*

Progress Report (DEL, 2005), *FE Means Business Report (DEL, 2004),* the *Workforce Development Forum (Del, 2006a),* the *Public Accounts Committee Report on Job Skills (PAC, 2005), Training for Success, Leading to Success: Management and Leadership Development Strategy and Implementation Plan (DEL, 2006b)* and the *Essential Skills Strategy (Del, 2002).* These policy documents were in place, or coming into being, when the SSCs started to develop their SSAs.

A key policy document which indicates the way that policy makers in Northern Ireland envisaged the role of the SSA was entitled the "*Policy Specification for Sector Skills Agreements in Northern Ireland".* This policy strategy document was produced to coincide with SSA production, and described the four themes that the DEL wanted to concentrate on in developing their skills strategy. The role of the SSAs was to populate the theme of understanding the demand for skills, and it was the role of the SSAs to provide the data for policy creation within theme 1. As has already been stated within this thesis, the purpose of the SSA therefore changed at that point in Northern Ireland to become a supportive document of existing or developing policy, rather than a policy-determining document. Understanding the demand for skills is not the same as determining the demand for skills, and represents to this author's mind a relegation of importance of the SSA in Northern Ireland to that which was intended by central Government.

In SSDA (2006k, p2) the explicit positioning of the SSA within the general policy context of skills in Northern Ireland is stated. The SSA was already becoming an analysis of demand, supply and gap analysis within the skills mix in the province, to influence policy but not determine it.

> *"All of these themes include activities and projects which are directly relevant to the Sector Skills Councils. However, it is the 'Employers' Skill Needs Analysis Project" within Theme 1 which provides the context for Sector Skills Agreements. To quote from the implementation plan: "The*

> *Project involves a comprehensive skills demand and supply analysis of 25 sectors during the period 2005-2007, which will form the core evidence for Sector Skills Agreements. In this 5-stage process, the initial focus for the project will be on Stages 1 to 3, which cover LMI, supply and demand issues. The initial objective will be to ensure that information from the first three stages of the Sector Skills Agreement informs the formulation of skills policy in Northern Ireland as soon as that information becomes available. The ultimate objective of the project is to put in place a suite of Sector Skills Agreements across all the sectors. The project will be delivered by the Sector Skills Development Agency with management input from the Department (DEL)."* (SSDA, 2006k, p2).

Other themes within the policy-specific document were, improving the skills level of the workforce, improving the quality and relevance of education and training and finally, tackling the skills barriers to employment and employability (SSDA, 2006k, p1-2). Through this policy, DEL was 'channelling' the SSA process into providing Labour Market Information (LMI) for DEL to utilise in their policy development. SSAs effectively informed one of the four themes, and provided only supportive evidence for DEL policy development.

Next it is now proposed to consider Scotland. In Chapter 1 of this thesis, the author of this study describes the FE system in Scotland to be the pre-2001 Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) model as contained in the *Further and Higher Education Act (1992)* for England, which was enacted in Scotland by the *Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act (1992).*

It is vital when understanding the SSA within a Scottish context to understand the way that legislation within that nation effectively prevented a development of an employer demand-led model of curriculum development. This was because the legislation (as shown below) effectively placed demand for curriculum in the hands of providers.

The *Further and Higher Education Act (Scotland) (1992)* was designed by the Major

Conservative government of 1992-1997 to create a quasi market within the services

for Further Education, where consumer demand would raise standards and control

demand for courses. The role of the Secretary of State for Scotland through the

Scottish Funding Agency was therefore as a funder, not a planner of Further

Education. Control of planning and providing Further Education was placed at the

behest of the Further Education colleges (which being divorced from local authority

control through incorporation were managed by their corporations), which were free

to develop their own business plans based on perceived (learner) demand.

 As stated in Chapter 1, within England, this legislation was repealed by the *Learning

and Skills Act (2001)*, which created the Learning and Skills Council in England,

which was a funding and planning body, not just a funding body. In Scotland, upon

devolution, skills were devolved to the Scottish Executive, who throughout the Sector

Skills Agreement process effectively kept the original post-1992 structures[80]. The

biggest problem facing SSCs then seeking to get an SSA through Scotland was

Section 6 (1) of the Act. This provides as follows:

> *"A programme of learning falls within this section if it*
> *(a) prepares a person for a vocational qualification*
> *(b) prepares a person for*
> > *i) a qualification awarded the Scottish Qualification*
> > *Authority; or*
> > *ii) a General Certificate of Education Qualification of*
> > *England and Wales or Northern Ireland*
> *(c) Provides instruction for persons who are participating in a*
> *programme of learning which falls within this section and who have*
> *a learning difficulty.*
> *(d) Prepares a person for access to higher education;*
> *(e) Is designed to assist persons whose first language is not English to*
> *achieve any level of competence in English language.*

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[80] Since the completion of the Sector Skills Agreement, the Scottish equivalent of the TECs in England, called LECs (Learning Enterprise Councils) in Scotland have been reduced in number. Also the two overriding bodies responsible for LECs in Scotland (a structure not replicated in England) called the Highlands and Islands Enterprise Council and the Scottish Enterprise Council have been merged into one organisation.

*(f) Is designed predominantly to prepare a person for participation in any programme of learning which falls within this section.(*Further and Higher Education Act Scotland ,1992, p3)

The freedom within Scotland for providers to deliver a course that they argue there is a public demand for can at one stroke undermine a central plank of the justification for the SSA, viz that employers will determine curriculum. Due to the diverse nature of learners per se, it is suggested that ultimately the legitimate voice of the learner is in actuality the provider. The Further and Higher Education Act (Scotland) (1992) was, however, armed with some powers to amend programmes of learning, which were placed in the hands of the Secretary of State for Scotland if they wished. This was enshrined in Section 6 (2) of the statute, which provided as follows:

(2) The Secretary of State may order, from time to time, amend subsection (1) above by taking or removing any entry relating to a programme of learning or by varying any such entry.

But:

(3) An order shall not be made under subsection (2) above unless the Secretary of State has consulted
(a) such persons or organizations appearing to him to be the representative of boards of management and education authorities; and
(b) such other persons as appear to him to be appropriate as to the amendments proposed to be made by the order.

The requirement of the Secretary of State to consult with the provider network by name (and possibly in section 3 (b) with SSCs if it was felt that they were appropriate bodies) would, it is suggested, mean that a proposal that removed power over the curriculum from the supply side would be rigorously opposed by the providers. There is no evidence that the study is aware of that the Secretary of State in Scotland was ever asked to exercise his powers under section 6 (2)/6(3) on behalf of the SSA process. It is suggested that this is because a potency to challenge the existing status quo within Scotland was effectively resisted by the project board, using the argument that the legislation enshrined the Scottish commitment to social justice through learner choice.

This concept of social justice is a clear and fundamental part of a Scottish growth strategy. In the policy document *The Way Forward: Framework for Economic Development in Scotland (2000),* the development of a skilled workforce was identified as a key to economic growth within Scotland (WFFEDS, 2000, pxiii). The document states:

> *"In particular the Framework is concerned to include all individuals in society who can contribute to the economic development of the country and to overcome the barriers to their participation, whether related to physical location or to social deprivation. The Executive is committed to an economy-led social justice agenda, and economic success and opportunity for all are therefore of fundamental importance to tackling poverty and exclusion."* (WFFEDS, 2000, p4).

A major report on the social justice agenda for Scotland is *Social Justice: a Scotland where everyone matters (2002)*, which looks at social justice issues within the various societal sub-sections of Children, Young People, Families, Older People and Communities, and builds on a previous report of the same name and restates the goals identified by the Scottish Executive in that report in relation to the achievement of social justice within Scotland[81].

A long-term strategy of the *Social Justice policy for Scotland* was the need to make sure that every nineteen year-old is engaged in education, training (leading to employment) or work (SJ, 2002, p31). Similar issues are raised within the report under the concept of: Every Family Matters, where poor literacy and numeracy, and the inability for people in families with low skills and education to break out of low-

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[81] The five aims of the policy are as follows:

1. The elimination of child poverty in a generation.
2. Enabling all our young people to contribute and develop life-skills.
3. Full employment by providing opportunities for all those who can work.
4. Securing dignity in old age.
5. Building strong, inclusive communities (SJ, 2002, p5).

paid employment because of an inability to gain new skills is identified. The long-

term targets are to achieve full employment in Scotland in the sense of achieving

'opportunity for all'. There is also a desire to ensure that everyone has the

opportunity to undertake some form of learning to widen their knowledge and skills

(SJ, 2002, p43).

Furthermore, in 2003 the Scottish Executive produced *Life through Learning through*

Life: the Lifelong Learning Strategy for Scotland. The lifelong learning strategy has

five goals embedded in the social justice agenda[82]. Within a description of goal 3, the

report appears to put some responsibility for productivity failings at the door of the

some of the employers in Scotland. The report concludes:

> *"We know that Scotland has a higher level of skills in its workforce than*
> *England but lower productivity than the UK average. In this light, it is*
> *interesting to note that organisations reporting skill problems in the recent*
> *FutureSkills Scotland skills survey were more likely than the average to*
> *have been growing and to provide training for their staff. That raises the*
> *possibility of extensive latent skill deficiencies, where employers do not*
> *see that more investment in, or better use of the skills of their workforce*
> *could yield improvements in performance. For example of the 800,000,*
> *adults in Scotland who are estimated to have low levels of literacy and*
> *numeracy, 650,000 are of working age with 520,000 of those in*
> *employment. This is a major barrier for the individual and the employer."*
> (LTLT, 2003, p48).

A third possibility that is not considered in the report, but it is suggested might be just

as valid, could be that the skills that the employees have obtained in the Scottish

Education System do not match as effectively as they should the actual skills that

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4:These are:
1. A Scotland where people have the confidence, enterprise knowledge, creativity and skills they need to participate in economic, social and civic life.
2. A Scotland where people demand and providers deliver a high-quality learning experience.
3. A Scotland where people's knowledge and skills are recognized, used and developed to best effect in their workplace.
4. A Scotland where people are given the information, guidance and support they need to make effective learning decisions and transitions.
5. A Scotland where people have the chance to learn, irrespective of their background or current personal circumstances. (LTLT, 2003, p33).

employers need, to be able (through skills along with the other factors of production) to maximise productivity[83]. If this were a feasible alternative then the current system of curriculum funding and procurement might act to continue this phenomenon by not providing employers with an adequate voice to influence and direct curriculum content, although this point is not considered within the report.

It is now proposed to consider the policy context within Wales. Partners and Stakeholders within Wales were identical in their expectations that the SSAs would conform to existing policy on skills. As already stated within Chapter 1, Wales has a Learning and Skills Sector that is more similar to England than the other two devolved nations, as traditionally Wales and England are legislated for together. For example, both The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) and the Learning and Skills Act (2001) related to both England and Wales, and therefore generally the development of skills policy in Wales tends to mirror that of England. That said, there were a number of challenges that an SSC promoting an SSA needed to be aware of in Wales.

Wales like Scotland has a developed sense of social justice that as in Scotland ran throughout the legislation emanating from the Welsh Assembly Government at the time of the SSA process[84]. In the context of Social Justice, skills and learning are seen as a means of obtaining social justice and fairness in a society with low aspirations. In preparing an SSA, there were eighteen identified policy documents

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[83] This is a complaint made by employers within the Assessment of Current Provision Reports for the Scottish Executive and Highlands and Islands Executive; SSA research produced by the author (Hammond, 2006) where employers across the UK as well as Scotland, complain that in many instances curriculum does not meet their needs effectively enough.

[84] The English regions are considered later within this chapter. The legislative powers within the devolved nations were not present in the English regions to the same extent however. Social Justice therefore, while playing a part in the SSA deliberation process in England, was not subject to the same legislative processes as in the devolved nations and are thus not enshrined in a policy framework in the same way. It is for this reason that the thesis may be seen by the reader to put more emphasis on social justice in the devolved nations than in the English regions.

relating to social justice, where a consideration might have to be made for skills

policy emanating from the SSA (Hammond, 2007b, p30)[85]. The amount of input that

these reports and papers had directly on skills is limited, although the Eradicating

Child Poverty in Wales: Measuring Success (2006) contained/included a discussion

about what are known as the NEET group (Not in Employment, Education or

Training) and targets are set for reduction of this group, such that by 2010, 93% of

16-18 year olds within the principality are to be in employment, education or training,

rising to 95% by 2020. Wales within the same document has also set itself a target of

95% of young people to be ready for high skilled employment and/or further or higher

education by the age of 25, rising to 97% by 2020 (ECPW, 2006, p13). As in

Scotland there was an expectation on the part of the WAG, that SSCs would

consider the social justice as well as the employer context in relation to the

development of SSAs, and that a failure to do so was considered grounds for

rejecting potential solutions within the respective SSAs. As with the other devolved

nations, however, there were a number of specific policy documents emanating from

the WAG that bore a direct relevance to skills, which SSCs seeking to produce a

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[85] These are:

- The Social Justice Report (2006)
- Social Justice and Regeneration: Research Report (2005)
- Preparing Local Housing Strategies (2007)
- Eradicating Child Poverty in Wales (2006)
- Tackling Substance Misuse in Wales (2005)
- The Home Energy Efficiency Scheme: Making a Difference in Wales
- Communities First: Race Equality Guidelines (2006)
- Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Services: A guide to our services (2006)
- National Homelessness Strategy for Wales 2006-2008 (2005)
- All Wales DANOS Training Needs Analysis: All Wales Report (2005)
- Social Enterprise Strategy for Wales (2005)
- Tackling Domestic Abuse: The All Wales National Strategy (2005)
- WLGA Management Sub-Committee: Child Poverty Implementation Group
- United Kingdom National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2003-05 (2003)
- Supporting People in Wales: Sizing the pot and other financial arrangements (2002)
- Black Minority Ethnic (BME) Housing: A Good Practice Guide for Local Authorities and Housing Associations (2004)
- Better Homes for People in Wales: A National Housing Strategy for Wales (2001)
- Opportunities for All: Seventh Annual Report (2005)

Welsh SSA were obliged to consider. These were Wales: A Better Country: The Strategic Agenda of the Welsh Assembly Government (WABC, 2003), which seeks to develop a high-skill economy in Wales; 'The Learning Country 2: Delivering the Promise' (SEAPW 2005), which concerns improving the quality of Further education and careers advice within the province. 'Wales: A Vibrant Economy' (WAG, 2005), also commits to developing skills to make Wales more entrepreneurial; 'People, Places, Futures'.

An example of this insistence by SSDA that SSCs make their SSAs fit into the existing policy context of the devolved nations can be seen in SSDA (2006l). SSDA (2006l, p4) was produced by SSDA as a guide for SSCs in conducting negotiations in Scotland with partners and stakeholders, and contains an implicit assumption that an SSA will be developed that maps into existing policy initiatives within the various stakeholder groups. Nowhere within the document does SSDA appear to understand or even suspect that 'weaving' into SSAs the policy directives of the stakeholders, might nullify the message of employers that the SSA was supposed to represent. It is this very thing that this thesis argues contributed to its failure, as is shown below:

> *"This meeting will allow you to identify matters on which you will need information from the stakeholder organization and any timescale issues arising from these. It will also allow you to update the stakeholder on your progress towards developing your SSA. The stakeholder will be able to brief you on initiatives, priorities and policies in his or her organization and this will be helpful to you in the general process of information gathering. At the end of the meeting both you and the stakeholder are likely to have a number of things to follow up on, arising out of your joint discussions. If this is the first meeting you will probably spend a bit of time clarifying what the organization can do for you and what your own expectations are. Being clear on this now will help to avoid confusion or disappointment later. The agenda will be of assistance to you here."* (SSDA, 2006l, p4)

Subtly the emphasis of the SSA had shifted from what the supply side can do to meet the needs of employers to what the employers can do to support the policies and targets of Government.

The amount of existing legislation within the devolved nations and the insistence by SSDA that existing policy documentation be incorporated into the SSA meant that the direction of the SSA was subtly altered. It shifted from the specific (neo-liberal) employer-driven thrust proposed by central Government to one that mirrored the existing supply-side policies, including social justice. This therefore specifically contributed to the failure of the SSA to create the employer demand-led concept of curriculum development.

Having restructured the surrounding background to the SSA, the philosophical concept underpinning the SSA was undermined by the project boards. These are considered within the next section.

Impact of the project boards on the SSA process within the devolved nations

In considering the project boards, and how they contributed to the failure of the SSA process, it should be remembered that the SSDA constituted the project boards to 'theoretically' aid the SSCs in reaching agreements on their SSAs. The nub of the argument within this section is that the eventual composition of the project boards impacted adversely on the ability of the employer demand model to establish itself in the competing philosophical mix within the skills arena.

Within Northern Ireland, the influence of the DEL on the development of the SSA appeared to this study to be almost total, through its control of the project board. The constitution of the project board was as follows: an assessment manager from the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), a member of the Research and Evaluation branch in DEL, a representative from the Further Education

Policy branch of DEL, and a representative from the Higher Education Policy Branch of DEL, a member of the NI Careers Service from DEL, a representative from the Training Programmes from DEL, a representative from the strategic planning branch from DETINI, the main Government department in Northern Ireland concerned with economic development.

There was also a representative from the Northern Ireland trade unions, but this is the only 'employer' type organisation on the project board. Other members of the project board included a member of the Business Improvement Services from Invest Northern Ireland, a manager for QCA[86] Northern Ireland, a member of the 'sectoral development' branch from DEL and a member of the data contacts from DEL, and finally, a member of the 'analytical services department' from DEL (SSDA, 2005a, p1-4). The DEL and other public sector bodies within the province effectively completely dominated the project board, and therefore there was little chance that a SSA contradictory to DEL policy would be signed off by such a DEL-centric project board.

The project board in Northern Ireland had authority for the overall development and delivery of the Sector Skills Agreements Project in Northern Ireland. This included responsibility for developing a policy specification and guidance for Northern Ireland, while taking account of the UK context. The project board was also responsible for steering pathfinder and tranche 2 SSCs and those which followed in the development of their SSAs, as well as providing support for the development and implementation of SSAs and "wider roll-out" (SSDA, 2006b, p2).

The power of the Project Board in Northern Ireland to control the process in the way claimed by this thesis can be seen in the definition of its role. This was to first, be the

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[86] Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, a public sector body with obvious links within the province to DEL

key decision making mechanism for the overall SSA project in Northern Ireland; secondly, agree the mechanisms for managing the SSA development processes; thirdly, ensure that key stakeholders in Northern Ireland buy into SSAs and fully understand the SSA development process[87], fourthly, the project board approved and monitored the implementation of a project plan for the project; fifthly, the NI project board reported to the Northern Ireland administration on the progress and key issues; sixthly the Northern Ireland project board agreed appropriate milestones to meet the deadlines for SSAs, and finally agreed the mechanisms for dealing with the next stages of SSA engagement (SSDA, 2006b, p3).

Accountability for the project board was through the SSDA, to the DEL and the Northern Ireland Administration in the personage of the Permanent Secretary for the Northern Ireland Assembly. Given the DEL-centric nature of the project board and the suggested lack of power of the SSDA within the process then the DEL were quintessentially accountable only to themselves. Junior civil servants in the DEL who were members of the project board were therefore accountable to the Permanent Secretary at the DEL and ultimately to the Permanent Secretary for the Assembly. Ultimately, therefore, the project board was accountable to the architects of skills policy within the province, so it is perhaps not surprising that SSAs were moulded and controlled to meet existing policy, rather than vice versa.

Another way that the DEL appeared to the author of this study to control the process within Northern Ireland was through the development of a Project Team[88]. This 'Project Team' effectively controlled the 'project board': it met at least three weeks

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[87] This is an interesting concept given that effectively the only signatories to the SSA were the public sector organisations, and thus effectively the members of the project board were responsible for engagement with their own organisations, or effectively within Northern Ireland, the sub-divisions of the national government.
[88] Given the statements discussed later, the Project Team may not actually have functioned as was intended; however, the intent was clearly there, and it is this which is of interest to this study.

before each board meeting to agree the agenda, key action points and the forward work programme, and if that were not enough control of the process, the work of the project team was fed into a further creation of the DEL, namely the NI Skills Expert Group (SSDA, 2006b,p3).

> *"The Northern Ireland Skills Expert Group has been established to facilitate the development of a regional employment and skills action plan that will recognise and articulate skills needs at local and regional levels and determines Northern Ireland's priority skills areas. Research from the SSA development process will play a significant role in informing the Expert Group's discussions. Effective communications between the Expert Group and the Project Board will be facilitated by DEL's Research and Analytical Services Team."* (SSDA, 2006b, p3).

This creation of the Northern Ireland Skills Expert Group further subsumed the skills agenda into the DEL policy mix. This created the ability for the DEL to further dilute and manipulates the thrust of the SSA, while retaining the LMI emanating from the SSAs to justify policy making decisions. In PAC (2005) the DEL research team had been identified as not having robust LMI on the province, through the policy developments around the SSA process. The re-structured SSA allowed the DEL to potentially ignore the employer messages, while the LMI provided by SSCs could be utilised to underpin policy decisions. It might thus be concluded that the DEL was able to avoid criticisms such as that in PAC (2005) that Northern Ireland was creating policy on an inadequate evidence base. It is interesting to note the placing of the LMI by the NI Skills Expert Group, to inform their decisions could support such a conclusion.

As has already been stated in this section, the key way that the DEL was able to control the output of the SSCs in the SSA process was to control the sign-off of the SSA. This sign-off was linked to a contractual payment for SSCs through SSDA, for producing an SSA that was' fit for purpose'. In this way SSAs that did not meet the

DEL criteria could be refused sign-off, and the SSC denied contractual payment until they did meet the needs of the DEL.

The SSDA (2006b) formal sign-up process for the SSA in Northern Ireland was prescribed in the following way: When an SSC completes SSA Stages 1-3 and this is validated by the project board members, then the project board chair writes to the Chief Executive of the SSC to confirm the project board's support of the Stages 1-3 of the report. When an SSC subsequently completes the SSA stages 4-5 and this is validated by the project board members, the project board chair will write to the Chief Executive of the SSC to confirm the project board's support of the Stage 5 action plan. At that point, the DEL Permanent Secretary was to confirm that the project board has signed up to the Sector Skills Agreement. The DEL Permanent Secretary was then asked to circulate this letter to the Permanent Secretaries in the other relevant Northern Ireland Departments (SSDA, 2006b, p4-5).

Through an analysis of the composition of the project board, this thesis suggests that the DEL controlled the SSA process in Northern Ireland, and that SSDA effectively acquiesced in this behaviour. A good example of the way that DEL civil servants appeared to control the SSA process can be seen in this email exchange on the SSA process. The first email is from SSDA, with a proposal for a minor semantic change in wording in the SSA process.

> *Colleagues, X who is Head of Sector Skills Agreements in SSDA, attended our June Project Board meeting, at that meeting she recommended that we modify the "language" used to confirm the key stages of the SSA process, in future the language used will be "sign up" and "support" rather than "sign off" and "approval". Please see attached updated Terms of Reference for the NI SSA Project Board which sets out these changes for you consideration.*
> *(SSDA 1)*

This email received the following rejoinder from a senior DEL civil servant effectively quashing the idea, but also interestingly highlighting that the project team had not effectively been working at that time. The first issue that the senior civil servant considered before considering the SSDA proposal was the project team.

Thank you for your email and attached policy specification. In relation to the reference on page 3 to the project board being supported by a project team, I would point out that when this was agreed in the summer of 2006 there had been an expectation on the part of DEL that the project team would commence meetings and this does not seem to have occurred. There have been ad hoc meetings between partners I know, but my understanding is that the project team has not yet met as a group? You may be able to clarify…

The failure of the project team to meet is interesting, as it shows the often evolutionary and ad hoc way that SSDA went about managing the SSA. In Chapter 4 of this thesis, the evolutionary nature of the SSA process has been described. Given the membership of the Project Team described above, it is perhaps not surprising that the DEL would be interested in the outcome of its meetings. This is because according to the guidance discussed above, it is from them that the DEL would have been able to regulate the project boards more easily. The senior civil servant concluded by rejecting the SSDA proposal. The manner in which the proposal is rejected suggests to this study that the DEL saw the department itself as being in charge.

I have a reservation also about altering the language in the Terms of Reference for NI SSA project board from "approval" to read "support". I consider that the "support" has a number of connotations and it may not always be appropriate. Furthermore the DEL Permanent Secretary has a special role in relation to her approval that the proper procedures have been followed on each of the completed SSAs. I would prefer to retain "approval" as the correct wording to be used. Sorry for this intervention, but I am happy for it to be discussed at the project board or indeed separately
(Senior DEL Civil Servant)

The change as suggested by SSDA 1 did not happen, which is perhaps not surprising given the DEL-centric nature of project board already discussed. It is

suggested that this email shows how the DEL responded to the SSDA and the subservient role that the SSDA appeared to take in its relations with the DEL. These DEL decisions were then passed to the SSCs in the dictatorial ways described in Chapter 4 of this thesis. In this author's experience, SSDA would go to some considerable lengths to make sure that the DEL (and the same is true of the other devolved nations) were not 'antagonised' by SSCs in the SSA process.

A justification for this statement may be found below in relation to LMI. The lack of LMI data collected by the DEL (criticised by PAC (2005) as already stated) meant that the quality of data some SSCs received from the DEL was inadequate. SSDA had created a requirement on SSCs to write a monthly report on their progress with the SSA, which was circulated to project team members etc. The author of this study got so fed up with the lack of and poor quality of data received that he complained about this in the monthly report, assuming this would go back to the DEL. The author of this study considered that this would be the correct procedural way to address this issue. SSDA however refused to accept the report until the offending words of criticism about the DEL were removed. SSDA2 explained the SSDA thinking below:

> *When we finished our conversation yesterday evening, I was convinced that you were right in using [the] bi-monthly report to express some of the difficulties you have been experiencing with the DEL. Having just had a fairly lengthy telephone conversation with [SSDA NI Manager] , I am now not so sure. First, any criticism in respect statistical information is likely to be viewed as a personal attack on [X] who is very highly regarded within the DEL. Whilst the changes you have now made to the report render it far less critical, and are most definitely appreciated. [SSDA NI Manager] has expressed concern that you still risk damaging your relationship with the DEL and with other members of the NI Project Board. Statements such as "currently the statistics we require are either not available, or are available but in a form that is not useable within the NSA" are likely to be challenged at the Project Board. You may for example be asked to explain why it is that other SSCs have not had problems in obtaining data or why it is that they have not had problems in using the data for their SSA…*

This is first an appeal/threat by SSDA of the SSC being isolated on the project board. The existence of PAC (2005) and the knowledge by SSDA that LMI data in the province was extremely poor, and the author of this study was aware that numerous other SSCs had complained about the quality of data, made this statement highly contrived in the view of this study.

> *I have made [SSDA NI Manager] aware of your current frustration caused by the failure of the DEL to answer your communications or commit to a timeline for producing the information you have requested. [SSDA NI Manager] has promised to pursue this with the DEL and I am assured that he will get some concrete answers from them. He is extremely eager that you use him to address these types of issues, rather than raising them at project board meeting or putting them in the bi-monthly report. If you don't feel you are getting results from [NI SSDA manager], feel free to go through me and I will pursue him until you get the answers you need…*

Again, there is the desire by SSDA to use informal rather than formal channels to work with the DEL (and the other nations for that matter) to try to obtain the data out of DEL that DEL had contractually agreed at the beginning of the SSA process to make available to SSCs. The next statement is also interesting, as it contains what might be loosely referred to as an inducement to not complain with the promise of extra funding for the SSC to carry out further LMI work within the province.

> *There is an acceptance that the quantity or quality [of] LMI available locally may in some areas be lacking. For this reason, the DEL is offering funding to SSCs who can help to supplement available data. Please let [NI SSDA Manager] or I know if you want to pursue this…*

The email continues by seeking to suggest that an inability to obtain data was a subjective concept, rather than objective fact. The use of the word 'subjective' is interesting here, as it would seem to the author of this study that the lack of data or the inadequacy of data is more objective than subjective. This study believes that the justification for the desire by SSDA to

exclude the offending paragraph was to prevent a public 'airing' of grievances

by SSCs in front of the DEL. It was also done, in the opinion of this study, to

prevent upsetting the DEL publically, as SSDA believed that it would be

damaged by such a confrontation, even though PAC (2005) had identified

LMI as a problem in the province.

> *[NI SSDA Manager] has expressed a preference that the bi-monthly report be used solely to report factual information and should avoid any subjectivity. It is not necessary therefore to state that support from the DEL is enthusiastic, but it is perfectly acceptable to state that you are experiencing some delays in obtaining data although you might add that the problem is being addressed I hope this is clear…*

The final section of the email is also interesting as it takes in this author's

view a mollifying tone, suggesting the SSC has better things to do than to

continue to pursue this line within reports. Notwithstanding what appeared to

be the original purpose for which the SSC monthly reports were intended at

least initially. This being exactly what the author's SSC was doing with them;

namely identifying stumbling blocks to SSA development.

> *I do appreciate the enormous pressure you are under to get the research done on the SNA and ACP and I'm sure the last thing you want to worry about are what seem like petty sensitivities in Northern Ireland. However these things can have a longer-term impact on SSA development and implementation. Would you be good enough to have a rethink about the paragraph in question? There is a little bit of time as [NI SSDA Manager] is willing to wait until closer to the Project Board before distributing this to partners. If you could get back to me though by this time next week I would very much appreciate it.* (SSDA 2)

Because ultimately the SSDA were the paymasters for the project, the paragraph

albeit toned down once was ultimately removed.

Moving from Northern Ireland to Scotland, the composition of the project board in

Scotland was dominated by the supply side and policy stakeholders, with the

exception of trade union engagement as it was in Northern Ireland. No employer

organizations such as the IOD or the CBI were involved. There were, however, three

representatives from SSDA, two from the Scottish Executive, one member from

Scottish Enterprise and one from Highlands and Islands Enterprise.[89] There were

also two members of the SQA[90], and a member of FutureSkills Scotland. The

inclusion of FutureSkills Scotland was in this author's opinion a strange inclusion, as

FutureSkills Scotland were then responsible for producing LMI on Skills for Scotland.

They thus produced the LMI that many SSCs relied on in producing their SSAs.

FutureSkills Scotland when producing their data even cut it by SSC footprint, which

leads to the question of what would happen if primary research carried out by an

SSC had contradicted this data? How would that have affected the reception that it

got at the project board? The inclusion of the national Scottish data provision body on

the project board, also gave the potential for the project board to challenge SSA

research and cite FutureSkills Scotland as the experts on LMI in the country. Due to

their national nature, SSCs were unable to claim this. As there was an expectation by

the project board, and SSDA, that FutureSkills Scotland data would be used as a

centerpiece of the work, it is perhaps not surprising that this study is not aware of

challenges against SSA work being made by the project board utilizing FutureSkills

Scotland data, although the possibility was present.

 Careers Scotland was also on the project board, as well as the Scottish Funding

Council[91], learndirect Scotland, the Scottish Trade Union Congress and Jobcentre

Plus (SSDA, 2004b, p2). These stakeholders had targets of their own to deliver on,

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[89] As stated in footnote 2, these two organisations represented the LECS in Scotland, which
are the Scottish equivalent of the TECs in England at the time of the SSA. They were
subsequently subsumed into one organisation. The TECs in England were subsumed into
the LSC post the Learning and Skills Act (2001). The LECs have currently been retained in
Scotland, although their number has been subsequently reduced.
[90] Scottish Qualifications Authority, similar but not identical in scope to the QCA in England
[91] The Scottish Funding Council is similar in nature to the FEFC post 1992 in England, a
funding but not a planning body.

and a defined policy framework through which to achieve these targets. Again, it is suggested that this would have made it difficult for SSCs to produce an SSA that challenged these positions, notwithstanding the drive by SSDA to make SSCs fit their SSAs to the prevailing policy framework within the devolved nations considered in the previous section.

SSDA (2004b, p2) did, however, conclude that 'other' bodies needed to be involved in a communication strategy emanating from the project board. It is interesting to see that although employers' bodies are in this group, predominantly; this group was still a stakeholder group. It consisted of the following groups: CBI, Universities Scotland, Jobcentre Plus, Association of Scottish Colleges, Awarding Bodies, Training Providers, Federation of Small Businesses (SSDA, 2004b, p2). It is not known whether this communication strategy was ever effective or indeed ever had a meeting, because as has been indicated in relation to the project team in Northern Ireland, only some of the SSDA proposals for the SSA actually came to fruition.

 For Scotland, SSDA (2006m) produced a document entitled 'Sector Skills Agreements Frequently Asked Questions' (a document not dissimilar to the one produced for Wales, see later). In that document, it is stated that the project board in Scotland had responsibility for the overall development and delivery of the Sector Skills Agreements project in Scotland. This included the development of a specification, the steering of SSCs through the SSA process and the supporting of the wider implementation and wider roll-out of the SSAs (SSDA,2006m, p1).

The project board was accountable to the Scottish Executive through the SSDA and also to Ministers via the Scottish Executive (SSDA, 2006m,p1). As in Wales (see later) there was also a project team, although unlike Wales the composition of the team seems to be more fluid. Membership of that team consisted of those who are

close to the activity in Scotland, and include a representative from each of the SSCs, the Scottish Executive and the SSDA (SSDA, 2006m,p2).

SSDA (2005b, p14) contains the statement that the Scottish Executive wanted to consider any significant barriers in education and training systems identified through the Sector Skills Agreements. The Scottish Government also wished to be informed of any proposed changes or flexibilities that were put forward for discussion by SSCs as a result. Given the legislative inhibitions in the *Further and Higher Education Act (Scotland) 1992* that effectively prevents government interference in the curriculum offer in Scotland; the author of this study is suspicious that this statement was mere hyperbolae on behalf of the Scottish Government and/or the SSDA.

The control of the project boards was highly prescriptive by SSDA, and SSCs received emails not only informing them of meetings, but also setting out what was expected of them at these meetings. The email below is typical of the type of email that SSCs received from SSDA, and shows the same command and control issues identified within Chapter 4.

> *This is to confirm that the next meeting of Tranche 4 SSA Project board will take place [in Glasgow, in August] We took some views from people on how best to use this board meeting and the most common response was to have some speed networking which would allow SSCs to spend a bit of time with each stakeholder in both building relationships and sharing emerging issues. In addition, it will provide an opportunity for stakeholders to clarify their roles and responsibilities and outline key current areas of interest. To this end we attach an agenda for the whole project board for that date along with a grid outlining how we group SSCs and stakeholders together to network in your session. We used this approach with Tranche 2 quite effectively before. In order to prepare for this part of the meeting we would ask you to do the following. SSCs. Can you provide X with a list of any specific questions you would like to raise either with all stakeholders or with specific stakeholders by close of play {early August} we will then collate these and issue with the papers for the meeting. Stakeholders- As above any specific or general queries you have for SSCs or any current areas of activity that you are engaged in which you think will have a bearing on the SSA development…A member of SSDA staff will be in each group to help facilitate discussion and keep to time. (SSDA 3)*

As can be seen from SSDA 3's email, the heavy bias towards stakeholders, and the opportunity stakeholders have to 'clarify their roles and responsibilities' presented new SSCs coming into the process with a very structured framework in which to work. The request for questions early may be seen to be an innocuous mechanism to save time and facilitate communication, but given the speed with which criticism of Northern Ireland was 'quashed' by SSDA (see earlier within this chapter) the SSDA may have been trying to anticipate trouble. An SSC who voiced criticism of the process or the project board was quickly silenced by the SSDA representatives in Scotland at project boards that this author observed. The project boards themselves, however, were also not averse to advising SSCs about how they should proceed, and through this mechanism exerted a considerable amount of control over SSCs and the SSA process within the devolved nation.

There was an expectation that in Scotland the SSA would be different, and that Scotland was a very different case to the rest of the UK. This point was 'laboured' repeatedly to the author of this study by SSDA, particularly their staff in Scotland, as well as partners and stakeholders. The response to the Leitch (2006) report shows a typical Scottish response to anything that emanates centrally from Westminster, which is enunciated well by an SSC manager in an email to this author.

> *"Speaking today to someone in the Scottish Executive working on the new Skills Strategy, the current thinking is that the Skills Strategy will be finished by [date stated] as this was part of what the administration said it would tackle in its first 100 days, however although there will be an announcement on it, it is unlikely the document will be launched that day, more likely to be around the [date stated two weeks later]. It will be in the form of a High Level Skills Manifesto (some 20 odd pages) setting out how the Executive views skills in the context of Lifelong Learning. It will refer to Leitch but will be outlining how skills should be tackled to deliver a Scottish product for a Scottish market. As I have said before, yes we would expect to see some of the principles in Leitch apply in Scotland, but not the solutions".*
> (SSC 1)

The reference to administration refers to the fact that the Scottish National Party had recently taken office within the devolved government. As envisaged by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown (1997-2007), the Leitch (2006) report was to have UK-wide significance, although as can be seen above it received at best a lukewarm reception in Scotland (and indeed to some degree the other devolved nations followed suit) with no real engagement with recommendations. The attitude to Leitch, was it is suggested, the same attitude shown to SSAs as an English, rather than Scottish 'thing of the centre'. In further correspondence, SSC1 clarified the position of the Scottish Government in relation to using Leitch (2006) in Scotland.

> *I have been speaking this morning to a contact I have in the Scottish Executive to try to get a feel for what the new administration's view may be on Leitch, and so the approach we should take in the wording of our ACP. As I suspected, the advice is __not__ to quote Leitch recommendations in the Scottish Report, as it is considered as being a report prepared for England to address English problems such as the oversupply of poor quality provision and the plethora of Awarding Bodies operating in the qualifications arena etc. Where principles such as NEV provision apply, these should be brought out in the report but not prefaced by any reference to Leitch. Representatives from the Scottish Executive will attend at least one of the ACP events, so we need to get it right…(SSC1)*

It should be remembered that as stated above, in Whitehall the view was that Leitch (2006) was to have UK significance, yet it was ultimately expressly rejected in the three nations in favour of a national policy. If the devolved nations were prepared to reject Leitch, it is not surprising that they felt no compunction to reject SSAs, which did not have the support from the then Chancellor of the Exchequer. SSC1 continues:

> *At present the Civil Servants are working on a new Skills Strategy which will be launched on the 28 August, this will be an outline document which will draw on the views that came out of the consultations on the Review of the Lifelong Learning Strategy, the Review of MA's and the Report on the Effectiveness of SSC's in Scotland, and will set out how the Executive sees skills issues being addressed, and may make it clearer what they expect SSCs in Scotland to deliver as part of a "Core Offer". We should be able to pick up any issues/changes we need to*

> *make as a result of the Skills Strategy before we publish our Stage 3
> document* (SSC1)

In Scotland, therefore, the impact of non Scottish policy was minimal, which includes

the Leitch (2006) report. If such a prestigious report as Leitch could be ignored within

Scotland, it is not surprising that the SSA project failed to have much of an influence.

Wales managed the SSA process through a project board, and the use of smaller

project teams. As with Northern Ireland and Scotland, the dominance of government

policy and supply-side representatives is clear, and the absence of employers is very

evident. The membership of the project board in Wales and the dominance of the

WAG are shown as follows:

> *"The Project Board is chaired by SSDA and has representatives from
> the following organisations; SSDA, Welsh Assembly Government,
> Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), Careers Wales,
> Jobcentre Plus and Wales TUC. Membership from the Welsh Assembly
> Government includes representatives from Education, Lifelong Learning
> and Skills (including Qualifications and Curriculum) and Enterprise,
> Innovation and Networks"* (SSDA, 2006n, p1).

The Welsh Development Agency and ELWA (the Welsh equivalent of the LSC) were

absorbed into the WAG during the SSA process, making the WAG domination of the

project board even stronger.

Again, as in the other devolved nations, the Project Board in Wales had considerable

powers to agree and sign off the SSA, and report progress to the Welsh Assembly

Government.

> *"The SSA Wales Project Board has authority and responsibility for the
> overall development and delivery of the SSA projection in Wales
> including: developing a specification, steering SSCs through the SSA
> development process and supporting the implementation and wider
> rollout of SSAs. The Project Board is accountable through the SSDA to
> the Welsh Assembly Government. The SSDA is ultimately responsible
> for SSAs UK-wide. The Project Board is represented on the UK Sector*

In SSDA (2006o) entitled the 'Stakeholder Map Wales,' the specific role of the project board is described first, as being the key decision-making mechanism for the overall SSA project in Wales. Secondly, its role was to ensure that key stakeholders in Wales buy into SSAs and fully understand the SSA decision-making process and thirdly, to approve and monitor the implementation of a project plan for the project. Fourthly, the project board was required to oversee the evaluation of pathfinder SSAs in Wales. This role is interesting, as in evaluating the pathfinder SSAs a conflict of interest is created as the project board is evaluating a process where their involvement directly impacts on the content of the agreement? In other words the supply- and policy-dominated project board are able to define what constitutes a good SSA in Wales, which gives them the ability to dictate that a good SSA is one that meets their specific needs. This thesis suggests that this is just what happened, not just in Wales, but across the devolved nations, and the SSDA supported this outcome (SSDA, 2006o, p3).

A further task of the project board was to report on progress and key issues to the Welsh Assembly Government and the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning and Skills as appropriate. This again seems to put control in the hands of the supply network, as there was no independent body outside of WAG civil servants to tell the ministers if the SSAs were throwing up challenges to existing policy within the principality. This apparent conflict of interest again seems to have gone un-noticed, and un-challenged by SSDA.

The Project board was also required to agree appropriate milestones to meet timescales for SSAs in Wales. This also involved agreeing the mechanisms for

dealing with the next stages of SSA engagement, and finally to agree the mechanisms for managing the SSA process (SSDA, 2006o, p3). The project board therefore had effectively taken control of the SSA in Wales as in the other devolved nations. The Project Board, which was effectively the Welsh Assembly Government, were responsible for signing off the SSA on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government.

In Wales, as well as a Project Board for the SSA (as already discussed above), there was a project team made up of the SSDA Wales manager[92], and a manager from the WAG. The role of the project team was to provide direction to SSCs, assist SSCs with problem-solving, promote SSAs (presumably within the WAG and the public sector), facilitate appropriate engagement and support implementation and broker dialogue with stakeholders, ensure that reports and communications are brought to the board with appropriate recommendations and finally to monitor and review SSAs as they are developed (SSDA, 2006n, p2).

The role of the project team was stated to be:

> *"The Wales SSA Project Team operates as more of a working group, allowing an informal setting for individual SSCs to raise specific Wales issues with the SSDA and Welsh Assembly Government. They are aimed at SSC Wales Managers, but SSA leads are always welcome to attend if they find it useful. The project team in Wales has emerged as an important mechanism for developing SSAs in Wales, and will have continued use for the remaining tranches of the SSCs."* (SSDA, 2006d, p2).

If SSCs were not aware of the need to treat Wales differently to the other devolved nations and the English regions, notwithstanding the legislative similarities described in Chapter 1, then this was clarified by SSDA (2006d).

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[92] The SSDA manager was based in the offices of ELWA, which latterly in the SSA process became part of the WAG (see Chapter 1).

The policy, education and training system in Wales is different from other parts of the UK and this must be reflected within the SSA. Welsh stakeholders will expect to see Welsh solutions to Welsh problems or, at the very least, proposed UK-wide solutions must be tested and proven to be required and applicable to Wales specifically. Collaborative solutions are the SSC's proposed actions needed to meet the priorities of their sector in Wales. These specific solutions have to be discussed in detail with providers and funders of education and training in Wales, including the level of support required from key partners and the timescales for delivery. The Welsh Assembly Government is fully committed to SSCs and the work they are doing to deliver SSAs in Wales. It announced its commitment to SSAs in Wales in January 2004. This commitment is set out in the Assembly Government's Skills and Employment Action Plan (SEAP) launched in January 2005. It says that SSCs:"…will be the basis for developing Sector Skills Agreements with partners in Wales to deliver learning provision more effectively geared to the needs of employers" (SSDA, 2006d, p2-3).

SSDA (2006o) based on the Skills and Employment Action Plan (2005) (p16, paragraph 27) describes the areas that SSCs were required to cover within their SSAs. There appears to be an expectation that the employers will be interested in and engaged with existing WAG priorities, rather than an expectation that the SSA would enable the WAG to address issues of concern to employers. SSDA (2006o) effectively supported the inversion of the original policy underpinning the SSA. The SSA became a method of attempting to engage employers in existing government objectives, rather than expecting government policy to be driven by employer needs described in the SSAs.

The control exercised on SSCs in Wales by SSDA was typical of that exercised throughout of the SSA process. SSCs were tightly controlled by SSDA, particularly in relation to their engagement with partners and stakeholders within the process. The email from SSDA 4, was typical of this response.

I can now confirm further details of the Wales SSA Project Board and Project Team meetings for the rest of the year. The Project Board meetings on the 19th October and 8th December will allow Tranche 4

> *SSCs the opportunity to have focussed dialogue with partners on their emerging priorities using smaller interactive groups. They will also be used to prepare for future showcasing events in the New Year. Wales SSA Project Team Meetings: Project teams will continue to be used to underpin the Board's activity in Wales, allowing time for more focussed discussions on progress to date, with each SSC. These meetings proved invaluable for Tranche 2 SSCs and are aimed at Wales Managers but SSA leads are invited to attend. (SSDA 4)*

SSDA in Wales was based within the Welsh Assembly Government buildings (formally ELWA), and it was not unusual for SSCs in Wales to receive instructions from WAG officials acting for SSDA, such as the rather innocuous missive below.

> *Please find attached the agenda for the next meeting of the Wales SSA Project Board … The agenda has been based around allowing 20 minute interactive discussions with partners on your SSA progress and is aimed at building on those bilateral meetings which may have taken place to date. I have circulated your bi-monthly reports where available to partners, and these will help to further guide discussions on the day. (WAG 1)*

The material point from the email from WAG1 above is that the lines between the WAG, and the SSDA had become increasingly blurred, and objectivity in relation to employer needs had disappeared. This study believes the intervention by WAG1 is evidence of this lack of objectivity by SSDA in the devolved nations generally. It was this kind of behaviour that contributed significantly to the failure of the SSA.

The next section within this chapter considers England and the English regions. Although there are some similarities between the English regions and the devolved nations, particularly in relation to the outcomes and the attitude of the SSDA; the overall implementation process was sufficiently different within the mind of this author to justify it being given separate treatment within this chapter.

England

Although taking place after devolution within Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, New Labour developed the concept of English regionalism within DTLGR (2004), which created nine definable regions within England. These nine English regions were supported by Regional Development Agencies, part of whose remit was to improve business performance within those regions. The devolution/transfer of skills policy to support business performance from DfES (as was) and the LSC more specifically to the RDAs was implemented to develop Regional Skills Strategies. These were achieved through the auspices of Regional Skills Partnerships (RSP)[93] managed by the RDAs. As has been intimated throughout this thesis, the eventual behaviour of the English regions in relation to the SSA was not dissimilar to that of the devolved nations. The English regions used the RSP as a means of circumventing the employer messages coming out of the SSA, and subverting the SSA to a mere 'direction of travel' document, and not the radical change document that was intended.

The demise of the English project board has already been discussed in Chapter 4, as an example of the 'evolutionary' and ad hoc nature of the SSA management process by SSDA. The demise of the English project board, however, can also be seen as an end to a national context for the SSA within England and, it is argued, a

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[93] It is important to note, that the RSP is not only a collection of the 'great and good', but is composed of very complex structure with multiple priorities and work strands. Within the West Midlands the RSP key priorities were to: use a data driven approach, align the supply of training and related business support to the demands of employers and individuals and finally ensure employers understand future needs and employers and individuals invest in skills (RSPWM, 2007b, p1).

surrender of the SSA to the regionalist agenda. SSAs were then required to take cognisance at regional level of the needs of the RSP, in a similar way that SSAs were required to absorb devolved nation legislation. Effectively, the RSP and the devolved nation legislation determined the parameters of the SSA. Instead of one SSA, the SSCs were required to develop nine individual reports.

The RSP effectively therefore became like a project board, operating in the same way, although not receiving 'project board' status from SSDA. It is interesting to note the similarities between the constitutions of the project boards in the devolved nations, and the constitution of the RSPs in England. Although the RSPs were not quite so supply-side dominated, the majority of members were from the supply side, although employer groups were represented, unlike in the devolved nations. So for example, the West Midlands RSP had a representative from SSDA along with five other employer groups. These being the Confederation of West Midland Chambers, Birmingham International Airport, Institute of Directors (IOD), West Midlands Business Council and Women in Rural enterprise (RSPWM, 2007a, p1). It should be pointed out that these groups are employer groups, not employers, and therefore they do not represent an authentic employer voice, but the voices of their members, which as in shown within this thesis in relation to trade associations, may not always be favourable to the SSC for perceived political reasons.

On the supply side in the RSP, there was the Learning and Skills Council, which was responsible for funding and planning of LSS curriculum within the region, the Association of Colleges (AoC), which represented FE colleges within the region, and a very powerful lobbying voice nationally on behalf of college principals. There were also two Higher Education Bodies, and NIACE, a curriculum/policy research organisation that has strong links both to FE and HE and is therefore likely to support a provider perspective on the RSP. There was also a political grouping within the

West Midlands RSP, which comprised the: Government Office for the West Midlands, the West Midlands Regional Assembly and the Local Authority Representative.

A final sub-group among the members of the RSP in the West Midlands includes Jobcentre Plus and Community first. Both these organisations are not primarily engaged in skills, but in sustainable employment and in the case of Community first sustainable communities. Both of these organisations are publicly funded, and both have targets that an employer-driven SSA might make more difficult to achieve if regional policy fully embraced them[94].

Although quite broad in description, the key priorities of the RSP are underpinned by key themes/work streams related to the priorities from which the regional policy is developed. Regional LMI is a key issue for the West Midlands, with responsibility for collection of this data being given to the West Midlands Regional Observatory. Herein lies the first potential problem with the SSA process getting support from the RSP. As the SSA is a national document, then LMI data was invariably collected nationally (usually at all England level) and on a UK-wide basis. There is some scope for collecting regional data in LMI surveys commissioned by the LSC such as NESS and the Working Futures model commissioned by LSC and the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA). The material point in relation to SSAs therefore was that SSCs had to compete against regionally collected LMI data, which RDAs tended to prefer to rely upon (for political if not for practical reasons), and which ipso facto became a method through which the SSA data could be challenged and ignored. The regionalisation of the SSA process, and the conflict between SSA LMI and that

[94] An example of this phenomenon might be where an SSC recommended that a full-time course for entry to employment within a sector is not fit for purpose, as it may be keeping a lot of young people off the NEET statistics who otherwise would be potentially in this category. The LSC might decide to continue this course, notwithstanding the fact that this particular programme may be over-training young people for jobs that do not exist within the sector.

produced by the RDAs regionally, effectively guaranteed the failure of the SSA process within the English regions.

Ultimately, because of the devolved nature of skills in the English regions and devolved nations, there was no mechanism to compel the RSP, or other regional body to engage seriously, or implement the sectoral measures promoted by the SSA. The ability of the RSP to 'cherry-pick' what it wanted from national documents and apply them to a regional context can be seen in relation to the West Midlands RSP response to the Leitch (2006) report. For example in Leitch (2006) it is recommended that SSCs be given more responsibility in relation to developing the skills needs of their various sectors making up the economy of the United Kingdom. The RSPWM (2007c) appears not to recognise the developing role of SSCs, or the need to engage with them in the Leitch (2006) report, preferring to interpret Leitch (2006) in the context of their own regional initiatives, they state:

> *"Leitch's ambitions for a more holistic, demand-led approach,*
> *focussed on wealth creation for all, and linking skills to the other*
> *drivers of the economy are achievable but they will only be achieved if*
> *we all play a full role in implementing Leitch and if the skills agenda at*
> *regional level is set within the wider context of the Regional Economic*
> *and Regional Spatial Strategies."* (RSPWM, 2007c, p2).

A further example of where the regional agenda carried on heedless of the SSA initiative, can be seen within a sub-regional body within the North West, which set its own sub-regional skills priorities, seemingly regardless of the regional work that was taking place. They even sent the following email to SSCs.

> Greater Manchester Skills Priorities: Analysing Skills Supply and
> Demand…Please find attached a file which sets out our initial work on
> matching qualifications to occupations for you to review. This work
> represents the first stage in analysing LSC-funded skills supply against
> employer skills demand, and the more input and feedback that we
> receive at this stage, the more robust the later findings will be. This
> exercise will generate the framework within which we shall compare the
> skills demand (as reflected in the forecast growth or contraction of

occupations with the skills supply as reflected in the latest LSC data
(Manchester Enterprises1)

While it is true that the SSA did not 'drill down' to sub-regional level, the author of

this study would have thought that the regional SSA would be the starting point for

work of this kind. It appears, however, that the SSA project was ignored by

Manchester Enterprises. A similar missal came from the South East region to SSCs

from the South East regional LSC. It can be seen again that there is little thinking

about the potential implication of the SSA process on regional/sub-regional policy,

although the SSA process was well progressed by this time.

> *Dear RSPA members and Local Alliance Chairs*
>
> *You may recall that in 2004, the RSPA commissioned a task and finish
> group to develop a common approach to identifying a limited number of
> priority sectors, and to make recommendations on Level 2 and Level 3
> priorities for the region. The resulting analysis and priority scorecard
> have been widely used to influence policy for example the LSCs in the
> South East have developed the Provision Mix Matrix to steer the
> allocation of FE 19+ funds (and train to gain provision funds) and to
> ensure the prioritisation of public funding for national and regional
> priorities and targets, and the Sector Skills Councils have begun to
> cluster their regional activity in line with identified priority sectors...*
> (MKOB Learning and Skills Council)

The development of the scorecard and the identification of regional priorities

were through the LSC, and not through the SSAs, and no mention of the

SSAs is made. The last sentence is very interesting as it suggests that far

from SSCs driving the agenda on skills through their regions, the SSCs are

perceived to be responding to the steer in the region by the RSP! This is the

complete opposite of what the SSA was supposed to achieve from an

employer perspective, as the supply side is driving policy and the demand

side is accommodating it, rather than the other way round.

In case the message from the paragraph above had not made things clear,

the second paragraph effectively shows that the RSP has carried out some

regional SSA type research through which to determine the skills policy for

the South East region. This work effectively duplicated, albeit probably in

more detail from a regional perspective, the research carried out by the SSCs

as part of the SSA process. The material point again, though, is that this

policy creation at regional level ignores the impact of the SSA data,

notwithstanding that this work was contemporary with the SSA reports being

produced.

> *We do hope that you find this new set of scorecards helpful in informing business planning, prioritisation and workforce development programmes. As was the case with the previous set of scorecards, please remember that because of data limitations and modelling constraints, findings and recommendations from this research should be considered in conjunction with other intelligence, e.g. in-depth intelligence on employer skill requirements from the Sector Skills Councils and skills surveys, demand expressed by employers through brokerage enquiries and qualitative knowledge from employer representatives on the Alliances and other regional networks*
> (MKOB Learning and Skills Council)

Finally, at the end of the email, there is an indication that the SSCs have some data

that may be of use in the formulation of this policy; although again, this information,

which is not referred to as being from the SSA is only placed within the email on a

par with other employer data obtained through the brokerage service etc. Given the

relegation of the SSA to being only a supporting document, it is not surprising that

the creation of the 'employer demand-led system' that was behind it failed to

emerge, and was substituted by the mundane 'direction of travel' document that the

SSA became.

The inability of the SSA LMI to be sufficiently focussed on the regional and sub-

regional data meant that SSCs were not able to engage effectively at a regional level

(which was never originally intended anyway). This allowed policy directives to flow under the SSA process both at the regional and sub-regional level, which undermined the ability of the SSA to engage with them. This process of ignoring SSA data was significant in adding to the failure of the SSA process to control the policy agenda in favour of employer demand.

The importance of trying to work through the issues posed by the RSP issue was not lost on SSDA however. Although the SSA process was nearing its completion, and tranche 4 was well into the research stages, with the pathfinder tranches and tranche 2 SSCs having achieved sign-off, there was still felt to be some merit in trying to resolve the issues at a meeting (see SSDA5 later). Although in actuality, this study is not sure that this meeting ever took place. If it did, however, then the study is of the opinion that little was achieved by it. It does however illuminate for the purpose of this thesis the acknowledgement by SSDA of an issue that SSCs were facing when their SSA work was compared with established regional policy and data collection sources within the English regions. The format of the proposed meetings was similar to the ones that SSDA organised within the devolved nations, and is seeking to present SSAs to RSPs and RDAs at the different stages of where the SSCs were at that time.

In one respect, it seems incredible that at this late stage in the SSA process, SSDA would be arranging a fairly exploratory meeting with the RSP and RDAs, about the SSA process. The evolutionary and ad hoc way that the SSA policy developed, however, and the demise of the concept of an English nation (with its own project board) to English regions, which happened during the actual process, probably justified the SSDA in its approach. This also probably explains why the SSA failed to have an impact on creating an 'employer demand-led system for the Learning and Skills Sector in England.

Dear Colleague. Following on from X's email outlining her suggestions for meetings with the RDAs and RSPs to support the SSA process in the English regions I would like to propose the following arrangements:

- *Meeting to be held at a Central London Venue (This replaces the proposal of a separate North and South Meeting; there doesn't seem to be much call for this and it would require partners to attend a repeat event which they are unlikely to do).*
- *Event to combine the RSP Directors and RDA representatives, although separate representation will be requested.*
- *Splitting the day into three separate sessions so that SSCs only need attend the session(s) that are most relevant to them:*

SSCs at Stage 1 (Tranche 4/5): SSCs to introduce themselves, explain the coverage of their SSC and the process they are planning to take forward in developing their SSA. There will be an opportunity for RDA and RSP staff to outline any regional processes and key contacts for each of the SSCs to work with.
SSCs at stage 3 (Tranche 3): SSCs will give a brief overview of findings to date and details of proposed consultation with RDAs and RSPs. Again, RDAs and RSPs will be able to outline the process and key contacts for taking negotiations forward.
SSCs beyond stage 3 (Tranches 1 and 2) an opportunity for a progress check on proposed details and implementation… (SSDA5)

However, it does not appear that SSDA 5 is confident that much will be achieved, as

they continue:

The purpose of this meeting is not to agree specific regional solutions, but to agree ways of moving forwards and to manage expectations on both sides. SSCs may wish to attend more than one session depending on what is most valuable to them at their stage in the process. The meeting is optional, although we will be looking for a good level of attendance to make sure that it's a worthwhile event. (SSDA5)

Some regions were more progressive than others in trying to engage SSCs in the

development of their SSAs. The South West (see below) held market place events,

but again the focus was on mapping SSAs to existing regional policy. The author of

the email was a member of the RSP in the South West as well as being an employee

of SSDA. The support referred to was to help SSCs get their SSAs to fit the South

West RSP priorities. Again, the process mirrored that which went on in the devolved

nations, and was managed by the SSDA in that region. It is possible that much of the

development of the process in the South West was actually driven by SSDA6, as the author of this study is not aware of another region adopting a similar process. The mapping of the SSA to the RSP effectively rendered the SSA subservient to the RSP, in the same way as occurred in the devolved nations with the legislation. This further weakened the messages that challenged existing policy at regional level.

> *[In the South West] the next Market Place event will be on [date in October] for Tranches 3's and 4's together. Can I please ask that you check carefully the date /month that you are timetabled in on the attached document (as you know it is based on the published SSDA SSA timeline) and notify me as soon as possible if you are likely to have any problems with your attendance so that I can adjust the timetable well in advance. Of course I appreciate unforeseen delays may come up as we go along and we need to remain flexible, but please keep me posted with as much notice as possible if they do. I will be checking the SSDA timeline monthly as well as adjusting the timeline accordingly. Please also note, if you are not able to keep to your allocated spot, this is likely to start to create a backlog of those pending and which will possibly mean a delay in getting a future slot when you are ready to go ahead. By way of additional support to you with the whole process (a representative of the SW RSP) and I would be happy to meet with you (and/or your SSA manager) about a month before your SSC is due to present at the SOG, so that we can talk you through the process, discuss any concerns or issues that you have and provide additional reassurance and support. I trust this will be useful to you and hope most of you will take up the offer. I also see it as a good opportunity for you to develop an individual relationship with [the representative of the SW RSP] as I know she has not met many of you on a one-to-one basis (SSDA 6)*

The author of this study throughout this process felt that the SSDA managers in the devolved nations and English regions did began to exhibit a 'feral' attitude towards SSCs and the SSA. He felt that they appeared to be working more for the supply side in the regions and nations than the SSCs in facilitating the policy intention of the government that SSDA was allegedly championing. Where SSCs did publish regional documents, and within the regional documents there were issues that challenged current policy, then RDAs/RSPs were not slow to comment and criticise. An example of this can be seen in the following email that was received by the author's SSC, from an RDA representing the RSP within the North East region.

> *Thank you for giving us the opportunity to comment on the progress to date. In the attached document I have aggregated comments from the partnership. Most of the concerns seem to be around the underpinning information and assumptions. It is also fair to say that the size of the document makes it hard to make general statements so apologies if we have concentrated overly on the bits that we don't agree with.(One North East 1)*

There was some surprise in the SSC about this email, and so one of the directors sought to discover who had invited One North East to critique the document and respond with feedback. This is the reply from the director.

> *Just to briefly explain the context of this email, I did not invite [Northeast RDA Individual] to comment on the North East regional report… nor did I have any correspondence with [X] previous to this email. It is perhaps interesting that she has made such an effort to critique the report, and [has] clearly been through the report thoroughly. Perhaps there are several suggestions as to why [x] has emailed [the] response… at first I thought [x] might be commenting because [x] had attended the North East regional Event, but I have confirmed with [Y] that she was not a delegate although a representative was there [from One North East]…*
> (SSC2)

The point of this little narrative is that unsolicited; the RDA had taken the SSA report to the RSP, who had critiqued it against the RSP and the skills policies of the North East. This shows a clear intention to challenge the research, where it disagreed with the existing RSP. There is no suggestion in the One North East email or critique that they were thinking of changing their policies as a result of this SSA document. Rather if there is an intention of that kind, it is that the SSC change its policy to meet RSP requirements. It is this behaviour by the RSP that the study would argue shows an intention on the part of the RSPs generally within England not to allow the SSA documents to impinge upon the work and policies of the RSP, change its priorities or alter its direction.

Conclusions

The development by SSDA of the SSAs within the devolved nations and English regions follows a pattern of management and control that ultimately led to the failure of the SSA policy to deliver what was originally intended for it in DfES (2003).

The chapter commences by identifying the traditional definitions of pluralism. It concludes that while pluralistic in nature, the SSA differs from traditional definitions of pluralism in that policy is refined pluralistically by groups at the policy implementation stage, rather the formulation stage as in traditional pluralism. This study has defined this as neo-pluralism, by building on the 'loose' definition of neo-pluralism utilised by Ball (1993). The rest of the chapter quintessentially seeks to support this contention with vignettes and examples. The chapter also seeks to show how this neo-pluralism led to the failure of the SSA, which is the key question of this thesis.

This chapter has argued that the creation of the project boards in the devolved nations by the SSDA, with their sole concentration of membership of policy/supply-side groupings, and their responsibility for sign-off, effectively transferred power away from employers and SSCs. The SSDA then effectively placed this power into the hands of the policy-makers and supply-side within the devolved nations and the RSPs in England. It is perhaps not surprising that this led to a shift in the emphasis on SSCs, requiring them to produce SSAs that fitted into existing skills policy, rather than challenging it. Neither the project boards nor the SSDA appeared to identify the merit of using SSAs to evaluate and challenge existing policy, and even to change it to meet employer needs, in the way intended in DfES (2003).

There is evidence in this chapter from this author's experience in Northern Ireland that the SSDA adopted a subservient posture to the devolved nations in relation to the SSA process, such that it was the DEL, for example, rather than the SSDA, that were dominant forces in the implementation of the SSA process in Northern Ireland. The refusal of the SSDA to use formal mechanisms, preferring informal mechanisms to resolve issues (by suppressing criticism of the DEL, for example) is, it is suggested, further evidence of that phenomenon.

The legislative issues in Scotland effectively prevented the development of an SSA that was anything more than a guidance document for government of what employers thought were important issues for the government to take notice of. In the devolved nations as a whole, the employer voice of the SSA had also to be cognisant of the messages of 'social justice' that was enshrined in legislation. The devolved nation governments and the RSPs in England were able to utilise social justice concepts to justify the rejection of the employer voice as the primary motivator for skills policy in contradiction to DfES (2003).

Another factor relevant to the failure of the SSA to make an impact in the devolved nations was that the devolved nation governments, perceived the SSA as being an 'Anglo-centric' project that had been conceived in Westminster and not in their respective countries. This chapter also identifies a 'nationalistic' desire on the part of the devolved nations to require their own independent and national solutions to their skills issues, which they claimed UK-wide solutions would not achieve. The belief enunciated by SSC1 of there being a 'Scottish way' is in many ways reflected throughout the whole of the devolved nations, and this also contributed to the difficulties SSCs encountered with their SSAs.

Following the demise of the English project board, English national policy was re-created into an English regional policy, where the RDAs and their RSPs rather than national bodies such as the DTI or DfES (as they then were) drove the process. This evolutionary change took place during the SSA process, such that the majority of RDAs and RSPs were not aware of the policy. Either that, or if they were aware of the policy, they already had procedures in place through the RSPs, which they were unwilling to allow to be altered by the SSA process, as was amply demonstrated within this chapter.

The national nature of the data collection for the SSA meant that often SSCs did not have the resource to compete with the Regional Observatory data. This meant that the RDAs and the RSPs were able to reject the SSAs as not being regionally specific enough for their needs, preferring to rely upon their own data. Where data was produced by SSCs as part of the SSA process, where it conflicted with the RSP policy/priorities then it was challenged/rejected by RSPs. SSDA's stance on the SSA at English regional level was that it was (as in the devolved nations) to fit in with existing RSP priorities within the English regions. This effectively relegated the SSA to being a supporting document within the English regions. In this chapter, this was shown for example in the South East region, where SSCs and SSA data was perceived to provide some supporting data to the regional skills strategy, but nothing more important than that.

There does not appear to have been an attempt to use the SSA within England to challenge the supply-side nature of the RSP, or to create an 'employer demand-led system' for the LSS. This position existed, notwithstanding the fact that while the RSP was still heavily supply side orientated, it did have some employer representation. This chapter suggests that there is a degree of homogeneity between how the SSA was progressed both with England/English regions and the devolved

nations, such that the procedures were similar and the outcome was identical: that the SSA had no effective influence over LSS policy or priorities anywhere in the UK.

The factors identified within this chapter contributed in the opinion of this study to the failure of the SSA to deliver the employer demand-led system of curriculum development identified for it in DfES (2003).

Chapter 6: Conclusions: Why did the Sector Skills Agreement fail to deliver the Employer demand-led system of curriculum development for the learning and skills sector?

Introduction

This chapter draws together the conclusions relating to the main question within this thesis. It looks at the question of why the Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) failed to deliver an employer demand-led system of curriculum development. The SSA, and the delivery of the 'employer demand-led system' was identified by the then 'New Labour' UK Government as being a catalyst for reforming the Learning and Skills Sector.

Reasons for Failure of the Sector Skills Agreement Identified by this Thesis

The Politics and Philosophies of 'New Labour' in relation to Skills

This thesis argues that the policy underpinning the SSA is a neo-liberal one. It is based on a concept of 'globalisation'. In this model, labour is seen as a factor of production in economic success. A highly skilled workforce is required by the 'developed' nations of the world to attract significant amounts of this free-floating capital. New Labour saw skills improvement among the workforce as being a key to attract inward investment (Blair, 2007). A flexible, highly skilled workforce able to adapt to the changing needs of capital is fundamental to the skills element of this neo-liberal definition of globalisation (Bevir, 2003; Watson, 2001).

The response of New Labour to this has been the employer driven demand-led system. This thesis defined the development of an employer-driven system as being

the measure of the success of the SSA policy (DfES, 2003). The employer demand-led system remains an aspiration, and therefore this thesis concludes that the SSA policy failed to deliver its fundamental objective (Bacon and MacManus, 2008).

This thesis has not sought to critique the neo-liberal philosophy underpinning the SSA. This does not, however, mean acquiescence in the philosophy by the author of this study. This thesis has sought to view the SSA through a number of potential political and philosophical models from which it has sought to derive meaning. Where for example this thesis has used Marxism as a critique, it has been in relation to studying the SSA from a class-driven policy perspective. In this thesis, this has been related to a development of the proletariat to meet the needs of capital, and to the development of a concept of a polytechnic-skilled proletariat worker (Gorz, 1982; Leitch, 2006).

When looking at how the politics and philosophies of the 'New Labour' government have (unintentionally) contributed to the failure of the SSA, it is important to look at the built-in opt-outs designed by 'New Labour' within their policies in relation to skills and education. Evans (2007) talks of the obsession that 'New Labour' had with the concept of 'class'. She concludes that this led to the protection of the middle class from a government-sponsored policy that would attack their vested privilege (Bauman, 1998; McCraig, 2001). The exclusion of 'A' levels from the remit of the SSA left employers with no voice on the 'fitness for purpose' of the main qualification for university entrance. In addition, although SSAs were supposed to look at the university sector, there were no mechanisms at the disposal of the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) to enforce curriculum change within the university sector to meet the needs of employers. This leads this study to argue that ultimately the SSA was relegated to concentrating on the sub-degree level craft skills to level 3. These

particular qualifications and the jobs they cover traditionally are the preserve of the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled working class. This raises the argument in the mind of the author of this study that the SSA became essentially a 'class-based document'.

The thesis has identified that from 1998, devolution created devolved nation governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. 'New Labour' created a scenario of skills devolution in the devolved nations, which was completed in DTLGR (2004) through the transfer of skills policies to the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) in England. In Chapter 1 of this thesis, the devolution of skills to the English regions post-dated the development of the policies of the SSA defined in DfES (2003). The policy purported in DfES (2003) was for the development of a UK-wide agreement between government, employers and the supply side, whereas DTLGR (2004) gave effective control in England to the RDAs. This study has not found evidence anywhere of anyone in government resolving the fundamental dichotomy of these two positions.

This was not the only dichotomy identified within this thesis. In addition to the neo-liberal concept of 'globalisation' that was the philosophy underpinning the SSA, 'New Labour' policy generally also had a 'social justice' context within it. Hodgson et al (2007) point to social justice being a main component in skills policy, leading to a better skilled and 'happier' populace. Hodgson et al (2007, p10) does, however, conclude that there could be some tension between the 'social justice' and the neo-liberal drivers of skills policy. This thesis has illustrated these tensions within the policies of the devolved nations in Chapter 5 specifically. Hall (2005) concludes that as far as New Labour was concerned, the neo-liberal arguments were the predominant ones of the government. While the author of this study believes this to be a correct analysis in relation to New Labour in Westminster and documents such as DfES (2003), this thesis has essentially challenged this view in relation to

devolved government. In the utilisation of concepts of social justice as a counter-argument through the Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs), SSA project boards and devolved nation legislation, the centralised neo-liberalism of the SSA was thwarted. This thesis has concluded that the concept of social justice was used as a justification to reject and control the direction of the SSA.

This thesis has not sought to define or explain a concept of 'social justice' and what it might mean in relation to policy. This is because this thesis's interest in social justice is limited to an analysis of how it was used as a counterweight to the SSA procedure within this context. The author of this study never received or saw a justification for the use of 'social justice' as an argument for rejecting SSA proposals. In this author's experience, it was merely cited as the justification for such a decision by partners and stakeholders on the supply side in the devolved nations and English regions.

The concept of regionalism and its embrace by New Labour adds a further dichotomy to policy analysis within a skills context. Goodwin et al (2003) writing before the devolution of skills policies to the RDAs points out that regionalism generally acts as challenge to the neo-liberal policies. The 'New Labour Government', albeit through another Whitehall department, created the regional mechanisms through which their own national UK neo-liberal policies could be undermined at devolved nation and English regional level. An in-depth analysis of how this undermining took place within the devolved nations and English regions is contained in Chapter 5. The conclusion of that analysis being that the regionalisation context that the SSA was pushed into was one of the fundamental reasons for its failure.

Taylor and Wren (1997) also point to the cyclical nature of regional/local to national policy solutions that have occurred since the 1980's and the Thatcher Government. They point to Governments moving from regional/local solutions to national solutions

and back again. The New Labour commitment to regionalisation might have been part of this process. The SSA, it might be argued, arrived at the wrong time within the policy cycle, coming at the end of a centralising policy swing, as the pendulum was moving back towards decentralisation.

Ball (1993) speaks of education and skills policy being subject to a 'messiness' and 'adhockery' within its development. This thesis seeks to show how the SSA was itself also subject to this messiness and adhockery, particularly as the policy developed and evolved. Lowndes (2002) talks of policy as being schizophrenic in nature, with trade-offs taking place to satisfy the civil service et al. Ball (1993) argues that the policies as they are actually worked out are subject to a considerable amount of compromise and negotiation. He concludes that these often lead to policies which contradict the original intentions of ministers and the government. This is exactly what this thesis argues happened to the SSA and therefore contributed to its failure. The actual neo-plural way in which this happened is also described within this thesis.

'New Labour', has re-introduced the concept of pluralism in policy-making despite its rejection by Thatcher (Ball, 1993). Nichols (1975) argues that the concepts around pluralism are confused, as it is used to define a number of concepts. Ball (1993) refers to 'neo pluralism', which he then does not define accurately. Having described traditional pluralism, this thesis has sought to critique these concepts against what the author of this study perceived happened in the implementation of the SSA. This has led the study to seek to underpin Ball's concept of neo-pluralism. This thesis therefore defines this as a number of groups/policy actors working together to re-define a policy at its implementation stage, rather than its inception stage. The groups in the traditional pluralism model sought to influence policy creation. The groups in this neo-pluralistic model seek to influence policy during implementation. This thesis points to the use of project boards developed by the Sector Skills

Development Agency (SSDA) and the Regional Skills Partnerships created by the RDAs as being the types of mechanisms of control that the public sector bodies used to transform the SSA.

The contribution of 'New Labour' to the failure of the SSA policy was therefore to create a political and policy environment where powers were devolved from the centre to the nations and regions. This created a system that was not able to be controlled from the centre, particularly by SSCs and the SSDA, who were both too small. The lack of power and the refusal of government shown in Chapter 1 to give SSCs power by controlling curriculum funding to the provider network emphasises this problem. SSCs were also suffering from 'shifting sands' in relation to what 'demand-led actually means. O'Leary and Oakley (2008, p17) when talking about 'demand-led' talk about a concept that includes the learner as well as the employer within its definition. The same writers (p65) are also critical of the role that SSCs have had in determining the 'fitness for purpose' of qualifications within their sectors. They in essence challenge the SSCs definition of 'demand-led'.

The powerlessness of the SSDA and the SSCs discussed above when arraigned against larger and more powerful organisations such as the LSC and the devolved national governments contributed to the failure of the SSA policy. The focus seemed to change for SSCs by SSDA towards placating these organisations, such that an 'agreement' was achieved almost at any cost. This is revisited in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

Another issue that is highlighted within this thesis, but not developed, is the fact that in conceiving the concept of an agreement, the government failed to understand the employer network within the UK. The SSA process appears to have been postulated in part on an assumption that employers are a homogeneous body that can be

negotiated with and through whom 'deals' or 'agreements' can be reached. These agreements then can be actioned by government, providers and employers. This is a preposterous notion, as employers within a given sector are not all members of a trade association or even a professional body. In the author's sector, 85% of companies are micro-companies of between one and five employees (Hammond, 2006).

Only in sectors such as the utilities are there sufficiently small numbers of companies working in a virtual monopoly/oligopoly. In sectors of this type, a semblance of employer identity can be established. Had this been understood, then a different concept of an agreement could have been devised to create the desired employer demand led system. The concept of the agreement though was classical New Labour speak for the something for something policies described in Newman (2001) etc. This failure to understand the nature of employers, however, also contributed to the failure of the SSA in the view of the author of this study.

The role of the Sector Skills Development Agency within the SSA process

Newman (2001, p84-85) talks about the conflicting philosophies in 'New Labour' thinking, which, it is suggested is epitomised perfectly by the SSA. The first of these is partnership. The SSDA championed partnership through the concept of the project boards and the desire to create agreement with 'public sector' partners and stakeholders. Partnership can be cross-referenced within this thesis to the neo-pluralism discussed in the previous section. The New Labour promotion of partnership created the neo-pluralistic groups, which were then able to transform the implementation of the SSA policy.

The second concept described by Newman (2001) is the concept of command and control and the creation of 'principal-agent' connections. This is also evident in the stance taken by SSDA throughout the SSA process. These two processes worked conjointly within the SSA process, as shown in Chapters 4 & 5, to change the whole context of the SSA. Newman (2001), however, in her work does not identify how the pluralistic notions embedded in the concept of partnership acted as a controlling mechanism in its own right (in relation to the SSA, and possibly other polices too).

In relation to the principal-agent relationship, Chapter 4 describes how from the very beginning of the process SSDA had a 'firm grip' on the processes of the agreement. This can be seen in their engagement with SSCs right from the start of the process. This was highlighted in Chapter 4 in relation to their attitude over the completion of the pre-stage 1 document (SSDA, 2005). The amount of control through internal SSDA SSA project groups can be seen through the email correspondence of SSDA6. Here, SSCS were repeatedly asked for further information to clarify what the SSC was proposing to achieve before SSDA was prepared to move to contract with the SSC to produce the SSA. The study found this strange, as it was difficult to know at the start what the issues would be, particularly at the latter stages of the agreement. Nevertheless, SSDA seemed intent on knowing the answers before the questions had been set. This to the mind of the author of this study is evidence of an intention by SSDA to command and control the SSA from its very inception. The inference by SSDA 6 in his communications with an SSC, with the suggestion being that SSDA would withhold contracting with the SSC until the concerns had been addressed, is strange. This is because the SSDA (as conceded by Bacon and MacManus (2008) was obliged by a ministerial promise to produce SSAs for the whole of the sectors covered by the twenty-five SSCs. It seems to this study that there was little actual scope on the part of the SSDA to actually prevent an SSC's SSA going forward, without SSDA suffering political damage. To the mind of this author, therefore, the

process around Form 1a was stamping SSDA authority on what SSCs produced. The message from SSDA was that they were in charge.

The thesis makes a similar point in essence about the creation of 'kick-start' events. These were organised by SSDA to facilitate relationship development by SSCs with stakeholders within the devolved nations. These events effectively were opportunities for stakeholders to impress their requirements upon SSCs. It was not to allow SSCs to be able to set out their stalls on behalf of their employers. Whenever SSDA organised meetings in relation to the SSA, it was to instruct SSCs on how to produce an SSA to meet the requirements of SSDA.

A further way that SSDA controlled the production of SSA documents was through the provision of guidance through a 'good practice' guide. This guide provided guidance for SSCs in how to produce their SSA documents. The level of detail in these documents was considerable, and very prescriptive in nature, as shown in Chapter 4. It required SSCs to follow the details of the guidance to the letter. In return for which the SSCs received a pseudo-academic assessment of quality on the work that they produced. Ostensibly this pseudo academic assessment was linked to contractual performance and payments for work that SSCs received. Through these mechanisms, the SSDA was able to control in the manner of a 'principal-agent', the production by the SSCs of the SSAs they required.

This 'principal- agent' model adopted by SSDA in relation to the SSA documents, coupled with the pseudo-academic assessment criteria helped to transform the policy. It achieved this by subtly shifting the emphasis of the SSA away from being one related to the needs and demands of the employers that the SSC represented. It also negated the creation of an 'employer demand-led system of curriculum development in the LSS'; by focussing the SSA back on to the supply and public

policy side, the SSDA effectively changed the SSA from the proposed usher of a employer demand-led system into the insipid 'direction of travel' documents that these documents actually became.

The messiness and adhockery described by Ball (1993) was also present in the management of the SSA process by SSDA. In this author's opinion, this messiness also facilitated the partners and stakeholders in changing the direction of the SSA considerably too. SSDA constantly allowed the SSA process to change and evolve. The two examples of this described in Chapter 4 of this thesis are the 'termination' of the English project board, and the creation, and subsequent manipulation of the Stage 6 process of implementation. The demise of the English project board effectively lost the SSAs the England national focus. This had the effect of divorcing them directly from the sponsoring department of DfES, as it then was. It also cut them off from supportive departments such as DTI, as it then was. This re-cast the SSA as a regional set of skills documents, rather than a national one in England. This was because the void created by the demise of the English project board was filled by the RDAs and the RSPs. As in the devolved nations, the solutions were therefore diluted to fit the needs of the RSP, rather than those identified by employers.

The second evolutionary issue considered in Chapter 4, was the creation and subsequent manipulation of a proposed implementation stage within the SSA. This was supposed to be called the Stage 6, within the SSA process. In the beginning of this policy initiative, Gavan (2006) was talking about the development of an implementation stage. This was to have included ministers, and was supposed to enable SSA blockages that had been identified by the pathfinder SSCs in relation to their SSAs to be removed. SSDA (2006h) claimed that the process of agreement-making had necessitated the creation of this Stage 6. This was because having reached an agreement, there was no mechanism by which the signatories to the

agreement could be made to carry out what they had promised. By SSDA (2006i), however, the process after consultation with partners and stakeholders had moved from one of 'blockage removal' to one of an 'up-lift on the original SSA'. There was more money for research, and staff to promote the SSA etc., but accountability appeared to be moving from the partners and stakeholders under the policy back to the SSCs.

By the time SSDA (2006j) was published, the transformation was complete, and the process (no longer called a Stage 6 implementation process) to remove blockages by bringing obdurate stakeholders to account had degenerated into a document that would facilitate the general 'direction of travel' of the SSA. It had become not a mechanism for the stakeholders to be held accountable to the SSA, but for the SSCs to report on the direction of travel to the stakeholders (SSDA, 2006j, p1-2). The SSDA had effectively therefore presided over the complete transformation in a matter of weeks of a proposal to support a policy. It had become the exact opposite of what it was intended to be. This thesis therefore supports the contention in Ball (1993) about policies changing through passage to represent the opposite of what was intended.

Much of this change in direction, although 'engineered' by SSDA through the 'principal-agency' model, was facilitated by the nature of the relationship that SSDA had developed with the partners and stakeholders during the SSA process. SSDA, while effectively controlling the direction of SSAs, was quintessentially undermining the employer contribution. This was because (as shown in Chapter 5) it was accepting the dictates of the stakeholder groups, and instructing SSCs to follow these dictates, the primary one being to integrate SSAs into existing policies; the thesis gives examples of where SSCs were encouraged by SSDA to make sure that their SSAs conformed to the existing policy. Originally, this was particularly true of

the devolved nations, where SSAs were expected by SSDA to complement the policy legislation defined by the devolved nations. Latterly, the same came to be true within the English regions as well. SSDA appeared to have no concept of the SSA being a potential effective challenge to the existing devolved policy makers, such that it caused them to examine their policies in the light of employer needs.

The conclusion of this thesis is that the role that SSDA played in the development of the implementation of the SSA fundamentally undermined its performance. The command and control mechanisms adopted prevented an authentic employer voice from being heard. In addition SSDA created procedures that enabled pluralistic groups of stakeholders to take over the process. This study believes that SSDA's approach to the SSA contributed significantly to its failure.

The role of the devolved nations and English regions in the development of the Sector Skills Agreement.

This section has a considerable degree of overlap with the previous ones. SSDA was involved or acquiescent in the creation of the scenario in which the SSA agreements were concluded within the devolved nations and the English regions. Within this thesis, the involvement of the partners and stakeholders to the SSA process within the devolved nations and English regions is discussed in Chapter 5. The thesis has identified the theoretical notion of pluralism, as being re-created by 'New Labour' in the first section of this chapter. This thesis has argued that the role of pluralism appears to be different from the traditional notions of pluralism. It does at the same time exhibit some of the outward facets of traditional pluralism as already stated. This thesis has described the pluralism related to the SSA as being neo-pluralism. The neo-pluralism described within this thesis is localised to a devolved nation or English

region. Within this SSA context these are either members of a devolved nation project board or of the pre-existing Regional Skills Partnership (RSP).

The thesis suggests that in formulating regional and devolved nation policy, these localised policy makers within the skills arena have assimilated other drivers, not restricted to the central neo-liberalism of New Labour (Hall, 2005). These include concepts such as social justice (discussed early in this chapter in relation to New Labour) in formulating policy. In relation to New Labour, this policy was pre-existing when SSAs were created. This thesis has argued that one of the main reasons for the SSA failing was that it did not, as intended, re-create the skills paradigm to one of being an 'employer demand-led system of curriculum development'. The SSA rather integrated itself in line with the pre-existing skills policy within the devolved nations and English regions. This effectively changed the whole nature of the SSA, through making it subservient to existing policy rather than a challenge to it. The SSA therefore became a 'direction of travel' document, rather than a document that fundamentally challenged existing policy and created an employer demand-led system of curriculum development. In this way the SSA failed to deliver the policy intended for it in DfES (2003).

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The partners and stakeholders within the regions facilitated the failure of the SSA by working together to isolate or ignore the findings of the SSAs. They did this by dismissing or challenging them as not being in line with regional policy. The example in the thesis was taken from the RDA One North East 1 as shown in Chapter 4, where unsolicited critique was made on a document as it did not meet their perceived regional policy. The thesis also provides further examples of where regional LSCs carried on developing and managing their 'skill card schemes' to describe regional skills and sub-regional needs without a reference to the SSA process. The rejection and relegation of the SSA to a mere 'direction of travel' document by partners such

as the LSC in England can be seen in their demand that SSAs were produced to meet LSC planning cycles. The LSC claimed (and SSDA implicitly supported them see Chapter 4) that otherwise they would be ignored until the next planning cycle.

In England, the Regional Skills Partnership (RSP) was also used as a tool through which SSA messages were filtered to reduce any potential potency for change. It is accepted that there were existing policies for skills in place at the time that the SSA policy was launched. But as stated repeatedly within this thesis, based on DfES (2003), the author of this study believes that the SSAs were supposed to focus on changing policy to align it more closely to employer demand. The UK Government in DfES may not have realised that this localised legislation would impact so adversely on the SSA process. The decision by SSDA (as shown in Chapter 4) to insist that SSAs complemented the regional legislation effectively subjugated the SSA to this legislation. This contributed significantly to the failure of the SSA in the opinion of this study.

As has already been stated, the creation of the project boards in the devolved nations by the SSDA was also a contributor to the failure of the SSA policy. In the devolved nations, the project boards were dominated by the Government agencies. These were the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) in Northern Ireland, the Welsh Assembly Government and the Scottish Executive. Chapter 5 gives an indication of the power structures that existed on the project boards through the exchange between the SSDA and senior DEL civil servant. Another example cited in Chapter 5 is the refusal by the SSDA to use monthly reports in a way that might appear to be critical of a partner and stakeholder. Both of these examples suggest to this study that the partners and stakeholders on the project boards had achieved a significant amount of control over the process. The same is also true for both Wales and Scotland, although both of the salient examples in the thesis came from Northern

Ireland. The control of the project boards by the devolved nation governments considerably reduced the ability of the SSA to make the requisite radical changes prescribed in DfES. In part, this was because the devolved nation governments (particularly Scotland) did not accept the neo-liberal agenda of the UK national Government. Further evidence for this is provided in Chapter 5 in the rejection by a Scottish civil servant (this was also followed by Northern Ireland and Wales) of the findings of the Leitch (2006) report, as described by SSC1. This attitude made it almost impossible for SSCs to create radical policies for the LSS in the devolved nations.

The position of the SSA in Scotland was even more difficult, due to the presence not just of concepts of social justice within Scotland, but the presence of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act (1993). This piece of legislation created by the 1992-1997 Conservative Government had never been repealed in Scotland throughout the whole of the New Labour years. Section 6 (1) of this Act effectively gives the power of curriculum development to the providers, such that if they can get students to enrol on a course that leads to a qualification, then the Scottish Funding Council was required to fund it. As is pointed out in Chapter 5, there is currently in Scotland no mechanism through which the SSC could influence or change the system while that section of the Act remains in place.

 In relation to Scotland there was no desire in Government for the employer demand-led system of curriculum development within the Learning and Skills Sector proposed in DfES (2003). This was exacerbated by the change in Government in Scotland from Labour to the SNP. The SSA policy was therefore effectively a non-starter in Scotland. Although it was never explicitly stated in the other devolved nations, the SSA probably struggled against similar core philosophical objections in Northern Ireland and Wales.

Conclusions

The SSA failed to deliver what it was intended to deliver because of a number of factors. First, there was the failure of the policy-makers centrally to understand the nature of the LSS that existed in the UK. Secondly, the 'New Labour' government allowed a middle-class opt-out of the SSA concept, thus reducing it to a policy for vocational qualifications and by implication predominantly the working class before the policy even started. Thirdly, there was no real understanding of the of Higher Education nuances by the policy creators. The failure to address the issues of academic freedom in Higher Education for example and how universities might be encouraged /'coerced' into creating curriculum to meet SSA needs was to this author's knowledge never discussed.

Fourthly, there was the failure of the government to understand the nature of employers within sectors. This also contributed to the failure of the policy, because the emphasis was on 'something for something'. This was the mantra of Blair's first term, and was endemic in the concept of agreement. There was a belief in the need for employers, government and providers to work together to create an employer demand-led system. The diffuse nature of employers and the inability to define employers as a homogeneous group (with the exception of monopoly or oligopoly sectors, an example of which is given) means that expecting employers to be able to contribute 'something' was, in the opinion of this study, unreasonable.

Fifthly, while giving responsibility for implementing the SSA policy to the SSDA and the SSCs; there was a subsequent failure of the Government to then empower either SSDA or the SSCs to drive through the 'radical' agenda proposed within DfES

(2003). The government failed to give control of funding to SSCs to enable them to exert control over the provider network.

Sixthly, the 'principal-agent command and control' and 'new managerialism' of 'New Labour' showed the extreme measures that SSDA used to manage and control the SSA process. This thesis has showed how SSDA used their power to subjugate the SSA policy to the demands of the supply-side partners and stakeholders. The thesis has speculated that the process of getting an agreement was more important than the actual agreement.

Seventhly, this thesis has argued that within the policy-making process the partners and stakeholders within the devolved nations and English regions engaged in a degree of what this thesis has defined as neo-pluralistic behaviour. Through this control supported by the SSDA, these groups at devolved nation and English region level reduced the policy at implementation level from an employer demand-driven policy to a general direction of travel document. They achieved this by demanding that SSAs were subjugated to existing policy. They claimed that the employer voice was only one voice among others. They also argued that social justice was also an important criterion for consideration alongside neo-liberal concepts of social capital and globalisation. They stated that SSA solutions should be contextualised as national/regional solutions, which made them and geographical and not sectoral.

This thesis has majored on these issues more than any others, as the author of this study believes that ultimately the SSDA through extreme command and control steered SSCs away from producing 'radical' employer demand-led solutions. It was through the SSDA and their management of the process that the process moved towards a more generic 'direction of travel'. It was encouraged in this through SSDA

capitulating to the neo-pluralistic pressure of the partners and stakeholders in the devolved nations and English regions.

Eighthly, the whole concept of what 'demand-led' meant was never really settled, despite the statements in DfES. By the end of the New Labour Government, the concept of demand-led had been extended so that it included both the needs of employers and individuals. This effectively moved the concept away from the employer demand-led system that was supposed to underpin the SSAs provided by DfES (2003).

It is the considered view of the author of this study that the SSA shows that a national UK skills policy currently has little or no chance of being adopted throughout the UK. The proposed removal by the Coalition Government of the RDAs by April 2012 may mean that England will have a national skills policy. Although it remains to be seen what impact the Learning Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) may have on this. If they begin to behave like local RDAs, then the problem could become even more difficult for those promoting a sectoral employer solution. The continued presence of the devolved nation governments makes a UK national solution unlikely within those nations. The conclusion of this thesis is that the SSA failed, and it is argued that any similar type of policy in relation to skills would also fail for many of the same reasons, given the current governmental structure in the UK.

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