A Seismic Shift?

Policy perspectives on the changing learning and skills landscape

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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive summary</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What are policies on learning and skills trying to achieve?</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Skills and social justice: the twin ‘policy drivers’</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How has the organisation of the LSS changed as a result of recent policy?</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Roles and relationships – national, regional and local</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Yet more quangos – rationalisation but continuing turbulence and complexity</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What are the main messages for change?</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 ‘Prioritisation’</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 A ‘demand-led’ system and the role of ‘contestability’</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Relations between policy-makers and providers in the ‘drive for excellence’</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 ‘Simplification’ – more than just a new word for ‘bureaucracy busting’?</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What are the burning issues for policy actors in the LSS?</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 The policy process – too much, too fast and no time for reflection</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Who pays for learning?</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 The role of employers</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Qualifications</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 Capacity to deliver?</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Conclusion: policymaking and policy shifts in the LSS</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 The emerging top-down market model</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.2 Areas of uncertainty and contestation
   6.2.1 The policy process and policy implementation 26
   6.2.2 The meaning and consequences of ‘demand-led’ 27
   6.2.3 Is the LSC more responsive or more directive? 28
   6.2.4 More local and more stable? 28

6.3 Challenges to government policy assumptions 29

Appendix 1. A note on the Project 31

References 33
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Learning and Skills Sector (LSS) has had a short and turbulent history. In the six years since the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) was established and given responsibility for all forms of publicly funded post-16 learning opportunities outside higher education, new money, buildings, policy initiatives and organisations have appeared. The LSC itself has been through two major rounds of restructuring and changes to its governance arrangements; new bodies, such as the Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning (QIA) and Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) have been established; the shape of the provider base has been changed by mergers, partnerships between schools and colleges and rationalisation of independent work-based training organisations. The pace of the policy agenda has been frenetic, with the Further Education and Training Act (2007), White Papers and influential reviews, guidance documents and national initiatives, such as Skills for Life and Train to Gain. Just prior to the publication of this paper, a further major change was announced when the incoming Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, split the work of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) between two new ministries – Department for Children, Schools and Families and Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, allied to a third Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform.

This report seeks to update the picture of the sector given in our early papers (Hodgson et al. 2005; Coffield et al. 2005), which were based on the first year of our Economic and Research Council (ESRC) research project, The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the new learning and skills sector. Drawing both on policy documents and on 131 interviews conducted with a range of European, national, regional and local policy actors working in the sector since 2004, it considers four questions:

- What are policies on learning and skills trying to achieve?
- How has the organisation of the LSS changed as a result of recent policy?
- What are the main messages for change?
- What are the burning issues for policy actors?

The final section considers the impact of policy hyperactivity on policy actors in the sector, explores tensions in the government’s reform model and suggests possible ways forward.

What are policies on learning and skills trying to achieve?

The sheer volume of policy documentation, and frequent ministerial changes, with six in post since 2001, complicates the task of determining what is driving education reforms in the sector. Two policy drivers have been identified: skills and social justice. These are sometimes linked in policy documents, but from close reading of 15 key policy texts, it appears that the second aim of social justice is not only dependent upon, but also subordinate to the aim of developing skills for economic competitiveness. Both policy drivers have been present throughout the period 2001-2007, although some interviewees identified tension between the two.
How has the organisation of the LSS changed as a result of recent policy?

Following reorganisation and the effective decommissioning of the 47 local councils, the current LSC structure comprises nine regional offices responsible for 153 local partnership teams, usually co-terminous with local authority areas. At national level, the criticisms of micro-management of the LSC by the DfES are now being addressed, although some officials outside those institutions believed there was still some confusion around the respective roles of the LSC and the DfES. In comparison with our snapshot of the sector in 2004, far more of the non-LSC policy actors interviewed in 2006/7 were positive about the structure of the LSC and the way it had delivered on performance targets; but uncertainty and some anxiety remained about the arrangements for planning at local level. Respondents were also ambivalent about the structural changes: the merger of the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and Ofsted, the establishment of the QIA and the formation of the SSCs, which were not seen to be attracting significant employer commitment. On the whole, the move towards more regional and local levels of governance was welcomed, although debate continued about whether this constitutes genuine devolution of power, or simply clearer ‘lines of sight’ between national, regional and local delivery. The continuing turbulence in the LSS and, despite efforts at rationalisation, the introduction of yet more agencies in an already complex sector were seen less positively – and this was before the most recent organisational changes at Ministerial level were known.

What are the main messages for change?

Four major policy themes were identified:

• ‘Prioritisation’. This translates into targets for providers, and officials noted that confusion could arise because the distinction between ‘priority learners’ and ‘priority provision’ was not always understood.

• A ‘demand-led’ system (including ‘market-making’ and ‘contestability’). While there was broad agreement about the need for ‘a system shaped by the demands of learners and employers’, tensions between the needs of these two groups were highlighted, and considerable anxiety expressed about the way that demand-led funding and contestability are likely to play out in practice.

• The drive for quality and excellence (including ‘specialisation’, ‘personalisation’, ‘clarity of mission’, the ‘trust agenda’ and ‘self-regulation’). Self regulation was broadly recognised as a step in the right direction, although the top-down model of quality improvement was not welcomed by providers.

• Simplification. Attempts to simplify and decrease bureaucracy were frequently mentioned, but so too were complaints that progress was slow, and that Train to Gain involved more bureaucracy than the pilot which preceded it.

1 Technically the 47 Local Learning and Skills Councils (LLSCs) cannot be dissolved until the Further Education Act 2007 is passed.
What are the burning issues for policy actors in the LSS?

Concerns raised by the policy interviewees were interestingly similar to those highlighted by practitioners in the sector, who were interviewed in learning sites (see *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* Vol. 59 no. 2, June 2007 for more detail on this aspect of the research). They include the perception that there has been too much policy intervention, happening too fast and with too little time for consolidation and reflection; concerns over who pays for learning, especially the expectation that employers will pay more, and that disadvantaged learners will no longer be able to afford the courses they need. There is a broad debate about the willingness and capacity of employers to engage with training, and about whether a social partnership approach, common in Europe, would be more appropriate. Concerns also emerged about the powerful role of qualifications in lifelong learning, which may lead to informal and non-formal learning being undervalued, and about the slow development of the new Qualifications and Credit Framework for England. Some also queried whether staffing issues - large numbers of temporary, agency and part-time staff, succession problems as college principals and managers retired and the relatively poor conditions of service in the sector - would affect its capacity to perform in a demand-led system.

Conclusion: policy and policy shift in the LSS

The current policy direction has turned the learning and skills landscape into a more uncertain and contested terrain. The new model of governance combines the continuing importance of target-setting with a determination to shift the power of purchasing provision to employers, a greater distinction between learning for 14-19 year olds and for adults, a reshaped LSC which can be more responsive locally, attempts to reduce bureaucracy and to move towards ‘self-regulation’ for providers, and a new set of learner entitlements at Level 2 and Level 3.

All the interviewees were pleased about the high profile accorded to the LSS by politicians and noted the achievements of the sector, increased learner numbers, higher achievement rates, strong learner satisfaction ratings and rises in quality of provision. Some of the energy in the system, however, was being drained by offsetting negative effects of policy, ‘translating’ it into something which could be implemented coherently in the LSS or taking steps to ensure, for example, that policy was less damaging to inclusion. Many were exasperated by the pace of change, which did not allow time for effective implementation, reflection, experimentation or evaluation. Anxieties about the destabilising impact of the implementation of the Leitch recommendations were widespread, as were fears that instability would bring more state interference, rather than more freedom for providers.

Our findings point to the need for a new set of arrangements that might combine slower and less hyperactive national policy-making; broader and less centrally prescriptive targets with greater room for local discretion; and more area-based and collaborative decision-making could be exercised in a more devolved system of governance.
1. INTRODUCTION

The ‘Learning and Skills Sector’ (LSS) in England has had a short but turbulent history. In the six years since 2001 when the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) was established and given responsibility for all forms of publicly funded post-16 learning opportunities outside higher education, the sector has been in a constant process of organisational change. Considerable sums of money have been invested, new buildings erected, high-profile national initiatives launched, new organisations founded and for the first time a full Parliamentary Act, the Further Education and Training Act (2007), has been dedicated to the sector.

The LSC has been through two major rounds of restructuring with substantial changes to its governance arrangements, even before the recent changes to national government departments (Cabinet Office 2007). The incoming Prime Minister, Gordon Brown’s division of the work of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) between two new ministries – Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCFS) and Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), allied to a third Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (DBERR) – will have a further major impact on the size, scope, role and budget of the LSC. Meanwhile, during the period from 2001-2007, new national agencies, such as the Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning (QIA) and sectoral bodies – e.g. the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) - have been established; at regional level, Regional Quality Improvement Partnerships have been set up, while other agencies, such as the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI), have been subsumed within sister organisations. The shape of the provider base has also been transformed as a result of mergers between further education (FE) colleges, the construction of 14-19 partnerships between schools and colleges, alongside considerable rationalisation of independent work-based learning organisations. Moreover, the policy agenda for those working within the LSS has been frenetic with major White Papers on, and influential reviews of, adult skills (HMG 2005; Leitch 2006), 14-19 education and training (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2004; DfES 2005a), and further education (DfES 2005b; DfES 2006). Significant changes in annual remit and grant letters from the DfES (see Finlay et al. 2007a) and numerous new guidance documents from non-departmental government agencies, such as the LSC (e.g. Agenda for Change, 2005a, Priorities for Success, 2005b, Framework for Excellence, 2006a) and the QIA (e.g. Pursuing Excellence, 2007) have served to further swamp the sector. Add to this the plethora of initiatives (e.g. the Skills for Life adult literacy, numeracy and language strategy, Employer Training Pilots, now ‘rolled out’ as Train to Gain), that the six Secretaries of State for Education have introduced into the sector and it is perhaps no surprise that it has been criticised for being both complex and difficult to understand, even by the thousands of staff who work within it (see Hodgson et al. 2005, Keep 2006).

The task of this research report is to provide an up-to-date ‘picture’ of the LSS in 2007 – a difficult task with such a complex and changing picture. We use primary and secondary data collected during our three-year project, The Impact of Policy on Learning and Inclusion in the LSS, which is part of the Economic and Social Research Council’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme2, to examine how the organisation of post-compulsory education and training has changed as a result of recent policy (see Appendix 1 for more details of our methodological approach).

This report follows on from our earlier ‘snapshot’ of the LSS published in 2005 (Hodgson et al. 2005; Coffield et al. 2005) by describing and analysing policy changes that have occurred between mid-2005 and July 2007. Our definition of and stance towards policy has been underpinned by the theoretical work of policy analysts such as Ball (1993, 1994), Newman

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2 The researchers wish to acknowledge the funding of ‘The Impact of Policy on Learning and Inclusion in the New LSS’ by the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme – reference number RES 139-25-0105.
Ball's concept of the ‘policy trajectory’ has informed our approach to policy-making and policy levers. This goes beyond the ‘stages’ model of public policy (John, 1998) to a more encompassing view of interactions over time and at different system levels. We have not, therefore, narrowly confined our discussion of policy to policy texts, but have sought to describe the dynamic, contested and interactive nature of the policy process and the role of key players within it. Similarly, when we have been trying to understand the practice of policy-making and the diversity and complexity within governance, we turn to the writings of Jan Kooiman (2003) and of Janet Newman (Newman, 2000, 2001, 2005). In addition to these external sources, we have also used our own earlier conceptual work (e.g. Steer et al. 2007, Spours et al. 2007), to make sense of 131 in-depth interviews with 123 European, national, regional and local policy actors3 carried out during the period January 2006 to March 2007 and nine major policy documents mentioned by these policy actors. We also make reference to a national questionnaire we administered in early 2007 and to five more recent policy texts which have been published since the majority of interviews took place, but which are highly relevant to this report because they consider issues related to the Leitch Review of Skills (Leitch 2007; DIUS 2007), local government (Lyons 2007a), the ‘raising of the participation age’ to 18 (DfES 2007), public sector reform (PMSU 2007) and the new Departmental structures (Cabinet Office 2007) - see Box 1. We examine these three years from the perspective of the policy actors we interviewed who, like the teachers, trainers, lecturers and managers in further, adult and work-based learning we report on elsewhere, have had to make sense of (or ‘translate’) rapid successions of politicians’ pronouncements, respond to several major restructuring exercises, take up new roles and responsibilities or even face redundancy during this period.

We use the policy actors’ accounts to identify what policy is seeking to achieve, what structural changes have taken place, how the new arrangements operate, what all the new terminology used in policy documents signifies and what debates and issues are seen as important to the future of post-16 education and training in this country. Some of the interviewees argued, in effect, that a seismic shift is underway in the learning and skills landscape; others thought that the radical rhetoric of a ‘demand-led system’ was not being matched by real transformation on the ground; and there were those who saw more continuities than change. We conclude by attempting to make our own assessment of the significance of the newly emerging arrangements in the LSS and their major strengths and weaknesses.

2. WHAT ARE POLICIES ON LEARNING AND SKILLS TRYING TO ACHIEVE?

During the period 2001 to 2007, hundreds of policy documents relating directly to the LSS have been published by the DfES, the Treasury and the LSC. These have been supplemented by policy texts written by other national organisations (e.g. ALI, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA), the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and national government departments (e.g. The Cabinet Office, the Department of Communities and Local Government), as well as by regional and local government departments. We are very grateful to all of the participants – both for the time they have given to the research (in many cases agreeing to be interviewed twice, attending project seminars and providing feedback on our work) and for the quality of their insights and reflections.

3 The term ‘policy actors’ is used in this paper to denote a wide range of individuals working at different levels of the LSS who are involved in policy-making and/or the implementation of policy at international, national, regional and local levels. These include: policy-makers working in the European Commission; national DfES officials; a cross-section of LSC staff, from the national level down to local partnership team level; key individuals working within the other major agencies in the sector; representative bodies for learning providers, employers and unions; those working in regional and local government; local learning partnerships; and institutional leaders. We are very grateful to all of the participants – both for the time they have given to the research (in many cases agreeing to be interviewed twice, attending project seminars and providing feedback on our work) and for the quality of their insights and reflections.
Box 1. Recent policy texts on the learning and skills sector


4) *Learning and Skills: the Agenda for Change* (LSC 2005a) – published by the LSC and setting out its ‘programme of work’ around six key themes.


7) *The UK Government’s Approach to Public Service Reform* (PMSU 2006)

8) *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy - World Class Skills – Final report of the Leitch Review of Skills* (Leitch 2006)

9) *Pursuing Excellence: The National Improvement Strategy for the Further Education System* (QIA 2007) – published and led by the Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning, but written ‘in partnership with colleges and providers, partner and stakeholder bodies’.

10) *Delivering World-class Skills in a Demand-led System* (DfES/LSC 2007) - policy document setting out the joint DfES/LSC response to the Leitch Review of Skills.


local bodies, all of which have some bearing on how the sector is regulated and behaves. In
addition, several influential government-commissioned independent enquiries (e.g.
Tomlinson on 14-19 education and training, Foster on further education, Leitch on skills)
have reported on issues impacting on the sector and added to the policy mix. We have
logged some 331 policy documents that have been produced by or for organisations in the
LSS – and this has been done selectively not exhaustively.

The fact that there are so many policy texts should perhaps not surprise us – the LSS covers
everything from the education of 14-19 year olds in schools, colleges and workplaces to the
basic skills needs of adults in community settings or even, since 2006, in prisons. Learners’
and providers’ needs vary considerably, very large sums of taxpayers’ money are being spent
and policy has to take account of this complexity. However, as Raffe and Spours (2007)
point out in their recent volume on policy for 14-19 education and training, this is also an
area of ‘policy busyness’, with each successive Secretary of State (and there have been six
since 2001) anxious to make her/his mark. The sheer volume of policy can be overwhelming
for anyone seeking to uncover the key ‘policy drivers’ in the sector.

How can we make sense of this plethora of policy and the impact it has had (or is having) on
the shape and behaviour of the LSS? How can we tell which texts drive policy and policy-
makers and which are merely elaboration or mood music? One way, and this is the approach
we take in this report, is to focus on those key texts that policy actors themselves cite as
important, the ones they use to explain or legitimate their views or actions. Using this
approach, and bearing in mind that we want to provide an up-to-date picture of the sector, in
this report we draw on 15 recent policy texts, nine of which were directly referred to by the
majority of our interviewees, and six more recently published texts that relate to or elaborate
on issues raised in our policy interviews (see Box 1).

2.1 Skills and social justice: the twin ‘policy drivers’

Taken together, these 15 documents broadly cover both the age range of the sector and the
scope of learning opportunities within it provided through public funding. The texts contain
a large number of important inter-related messages and themes that set the tone for policy
and practice in the LSS, and some of these will be discussed in section 4 of this report. Our
first focus, however, is on the two underpinning ‘policy drivers’, a term we use in the project
to describe the main aims of policy that are evident in all of these documents.

The central message concerns the importance of raising skills levels in the UK to ensure we
remain economically prosperous. This assertion is stated in the 14-19 White Paper, ‘If we
are to continue to attract many of the high value-added industries to this country and to
compete effectively on the global stage, then we need far more of our population to have high
levels of education.’ (DfES 2005b:16). It is endorsed in the Foreword of the FE White Paper
by the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Ruth
Kelly and Chancellor, Gordon Brown: ‘Our economic future depends on our productivity as a
nation. That requires a labour force with skills to match the best in the world.’ (DfES 2006:
1). It continues to echo throughout Lord Leitch’s report, beginning in the Foreword: ‘In the
21st Century, our natural resource is our people – and their potential is both untapped and
vast. Skills will unlock that potential. The prize for our country will be enormous – higher
productivity, the creation of wealth and social justice.’ (Leitch 2006:6). This theme is taken
up by Bill Rammell, at that time Minister of State for Higher Education and Lifelong
Learning, and also by Mark Haysom, Chief Executive of the LSC, in the Foreword to the
government response to Lord Leitch’s report: ‘despite significant advances in the skills and
qualifications of individuals…we have to raise our game if we are to continue to compete –
as individuals and businesses – in an increasingly competitive global context.’ (DFES/LSC 2007:2).

The final two words of Lord Leitch’s quotation – ‘social justice’ – point to the heart of the second and, in the Government’s view, related key policy aim of increased social inclusion and social mobility⁴. The Skills White Paper, for example, talks of the need for ‘a step change in productivity and social mobility’ (HMG 2005: 4). The FE White Paper states that, ‘a transformation of the life chances of young people and of the skills of the workforce are the drivers for the reform set out in this White Paper’ (DfES 2006:17). Delivering World-class Skills in a Demand-led System makes the relationship between the twin policy drivers even more plain:

These are sobering economic statistics, but there are also powerful social reasons for concentrating on reform. Young people and adults should have every opportunity to increase their value in the job market, and to seek self-improvement and to build self-esteem. (DfES/LSC 2007:2).

Interestingly, these twin drivers resonate closely with European policy-makers’ views (European Commission 2006), as one of our European interviewees pointed out:

‘there is also a political recognition (within the European Council) that education and training has something to contribute to Europe’s competitiveness and employment and social inclusion.’ (Y4⁵)

Although, as this same person remarked:

‘for the UK it is always very important that the labour market is stressed, whereas other countries will say, “OK, that is extremely important, the labour market component, but education and training is also something which is for personal development, which is for cultural values and so on”.’ (Y4)

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 dependent 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 quite rightly so. And I do see the social inclusion agenda as being one that the state should support.’ (ZA17)

The focus on these twin drivers and the connection between them has, in fact, remained remarkably constant as the rationale for policy within the LSS in England throughout its whole lifespan 2001-2007: it is the policy language, structures, initiatives and mechanisms

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⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the distinctions between social inclusion and social justice see Coffield et al. (forthcoming) particularly Chapter 6.
⁵ The codes used throughout this report to attribute quotations from interviews while protecting the identity of individuals begin with letters U-Z (the letters A-T having been used for the learning site interviewees). U indicates LSC staff, at national, regional or local level; V is used for staff in the inspectorate and other arms-length agencies; W for national government officials, mostly those employed in the DfES at the time of interview; X for staff in learning partnerships and Regional Development Agencies; Y for European officials; and Z for officials of other national, regional and local organisations.
that have been used to realise the policy drivers that have changed, and it is to these that we now turn.

3. HOW HAS THE ORGANISATION OF THE LSS CHANGED AS A RESULT OF RECENT POLICY?

When the LSC was established as a non-departmental public body in 2001, with a remit for planning and funding all post-16 provision outside higher education, it comprised a National Council, located in Coventry, with 47 local councils across the rest of England. However, this structure only lasted until January 2004, when the newly appointed Chief Executive, Mark Haysom, announced the creation of a regional management team. This organisational change was seen as necessary both to simplify the reporting structure, which had previously involved regular meetings of over 50 local and national LSC directors, and to ensure the LSC had a presence at the regional level because, as one policy-maker stated: ‘Now the truth of course is that if any organisation fails to punch its weight at regional level, particularly within this government, then you’re in trouble.’ (UA13).

However, this was only the first step towards the current structure of the LSC, which now comprises nine regional offices responsible for 153 ‘local partnership teams’ mainly covering the same areas as local authorities. The original 47 local councils were effectively decommissioned (although they cannot be finally wound up until the passage of the 2007 Further Education Act) and regional councils set up in their place. This recent structure, which was highlighted in the FE White Paper (DfES 2006), only came into operation in Autumn 2006 and, at the time of writing in July 2007, is still bedding in, was described in the following metaphorical terms by one LSC official:

‘what we have now is more of an onion, where we’ve got this very much slimmer national office and a fatter region and also quite fat local areas…So the structure was deliberately designed to give more authority and responsibility at regional level and to build up the picture from the local areas.’ (UA14)

3.1 Roles and relationships – national, regional and local

The new streamlined LSC structure raises questions about the relationship between each of the levels within the organisation and about how it will operate on a day-to-day basis in supporting providers to meet the government’s twin goals of improving the nation’s skills for economic competitiveness and promoting social justice. In addition, as we pointed out in our earlier work (Hodgson et al. 2005, Coffield et al. 2005), the way that the LSC works with the DfES and with other partner agencies in the LSS also has a strong bearing on what it can achieve and how it is perceived by the providers who translate policy into practice.

One of the major criticisms in the final report of the Foster Review of FE (DfES 2005b) was of ‘micro-management’ by the DfES with regard to the LSC (p. 51) and by the LSC in relation to colleges (p. 52) leading to potential confusion between the roles of the two national organisations. According to officials we interviewed from the LSC and DfES, these two criticisms are now being addressed. The DfES role was described by one as being ‘to performance manage the national partners who deliver for us’ (WO7), while an LSC official asserted, ‘I would say we have a robust relationship with the DfES, which means we can be frank, but we also work together.’ (UA14).

6 The position in London is somewhat different because the funding of adult skills is overseen by a Skills and Employment Board chaired by the Mayor of London.
Although, those outside these two organisations are less convinced:

‘I think one of the difficulties is that still DfES and LSC are not quite clear about who is doing what, in my view, in terms of policy and strategy.’ (V12)

‘I think it means ensuring that LSC actually has the power to do the job and QCA as well and the inspectorate does...they actually have to have the power to do what they’re supposed to do without interference.’ (V10)

While having Ministers that are ‘big fans of FE’ (WO8) is seen as both unusual and ‘very, very positive’ (V12), it also means that Ministerial pressures on DfES civil servants can be intense and is very evident in policy-making even at local level: ‘It’s just been eye-opening for me on a personal level, how hands on, I suppose, and how direct individual ministerial involvement is with the whole LSS.’ (UB13).

But what about the way the new LSC structure operates at national, regional and local levels? Where does power lie and who makes the decisions that will impact on local provision? In terms of the general principle, one of our interviewees, echoing many others, summarised it as: ‘a national office which determines the overall consistency of what we’re looking for across the country, with significant regional freedom to be able to respond to the regional needs.’ (UA16). The term ‘tight-loose’ was often used to describe the relationship between ‘what must be tight and nationally prescribed and where it is loose in terms of regional and local flexibility’ (UA15). There was particular enthusiasm about the ability of the new structure to facilitate work at the local level: ‘Where we make our big difference as an organisation is by truly working locally and truly understanding the communities we serve.’ (UA13). To support this local role, and to address earlier criticisms of lack of capacity at the local level (see Hodgson et al. 2005), appointments to posts in local partnership teams have been made at higher grades. These staff will work directly with individual providers ‘to lead the negotiations with those providers on their contributions’ to regional targets (UC15). LSC officials themselves realise that there are in-built ‘tensions’ (UA17) in these arrangements, but see them as creative. As one LSC official commented:

‘There’s implicit in all of this, a tension, a deliberate tension. I’ve found it not dissimilar, in many ways, from other very heavily devolved organisations…in the commercial sector, in the sense that you want people who are champions for their local country, or local area, or whatever, but who recognise that there are some things that are pretty non-negotiable….But how you do it and what that means locally is absolutely up for grabs.’ (UA17)

Where there seems to be less agreement, even within the LSC itself, is to what extent this new structure requires planning at the local level. One interviewee stated: ‘one of the things we need to start doing is real planning’ (UC15), but another commented: ‘it is naïve in the extreme to think that the LSC’s job is somehow to come up with perfect plans for provision in local communities and somehow sort of mastermind this’ (UA13). However, what they both appear to have in mind is that there should be some sort of two-way dialogue about and articulation between regional and local objectives, although the mechanisms to achieve this were less clear.

Far more of the non-LSC policy actors we interviewed in 2006/7 were positive about the structure of the LSC and the way it had delivered on its key performance targets (see Box 2 for major achievements of the LSS), than those we interviewed in 2004/5 before the organisational changes had taken place. Nevertheless, there were criticisms about the slow pace of change within the organisation. ‘If they were a private organisation, they’d have been dead by now’ (X12), and the way constant restructuring had detracted from ‘vision and
standards’ (ZA21). There was still concern about the capacity within the LSC: ‘we’ve got these people who are not necessarily experts and some of them, in one or two cases, have absolutely no background’ (X12); its lack of democratic accountability; its bureaucratic way of working: ‘it is still a huge organisation and it is still perceived to be very bureaucratic and a costly overhead on the system.’ (ZA24); and whether it would be able to retain any independence from the DfES: ‘one of the issues for the LSC is that it’s a delivery body and ultimately its policy is dictated by the DfES.’ (ZA20).

Moreover, the new regional structure with 153 partnership teams mainly related to local authority areas was not always perceived as the optimum level of governance for meeting either employer or learner needs. As one interviewee pointed out: ‘I don’t think you can ever mobilise a small or medium-size employer, unless you do it at an absolutely local level.’ (V11). Another made the obvious point: ‘it’s a nonsense in terms of learners, they don’t give a monkey’s whether, they don’t stay in the borough, they just go where they want to go and where their transport links are.’ (UC15). These two comments suggest that at least in large metropolitan areas like London, there may be a role for sub-regional and sub-borough levels of governance, as well as local and regional, although current regional arrangements are crowded, complex and contested (see Fullick et al. 2007 for a more detailed discussion of this point).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Box 2. Major achievements of the learning and skills sector</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Target</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase number of 19 year olds with Level 2 to 69.8% by Autumn 2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>One million employed adults with Level 2 by 2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improve basic skills of 1.5 million adults by 2007 (Skills for Life)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student success rates in FE to reach 78% by 2007-08</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduce proportion of colleges deemed inadequate by inspection</td>
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<td>Increase colleges deemed outstanding by inspection</td>
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<td>75,500 Apprenticeship Completions by 2007-08</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introduce Employer Training Pilots</td>
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Sources: Adult Learning Inspectorate (2006); DfES (2007); LSC (2006b); LSC (2007a & b).
3.2 Yet more quangos – rationalisation, but continuing turbulence and complexity

While the restructuring of the LSC has undoubtedly meant a huge upheaval within the learning and skills landscape and one that has affected all post-16 providers, it is by no means the only important organisational change to have taken place since 2001. Key national agencies have been merged (Ofsted and ALI) and new ones have been born - the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA), SSCs, the QIA.

The policy actors we interviewed for this study differed in their views about the contribution that these new organisations would make to the LSS, although there was a general view that, as one person bluntly put it, ‘The less national quango-type organisations that we’ve got the better really.’ (UC17). There was also recognition of the need for clarification about the specific functions of the various agencies. With regards to the Ofsted/ALI merger, the main concern was the difference in ethos between the two organisations and the dominance of the former in the newly merged structure. As one interviewee commented:

‘Ofsted’s DNA is something totally different, it’s about the regulation of state-funded, state-provided activity. Not right for the adult sector. So I think we will get something which is more cumbersome, less joined up, less geared to the needs of customers.’ (V10)

The establishment of QIA in 2006 was described by one official as part of central government’s desire ‘to devolve the delivery of national programmes as far to the front line as we could and to take them out of the Department, partly as a result of wanting to see greater efficiency and value for money’ (WO7), as well as an attempt to clarify the reciprocal roles of the LSC, Ofsted and QIA in quality assurance and improvement within the sector. However, other interviewees were more critical. QIA was seen by one as ‘totally useless and a load of private contractors. They actually make the landscape more complicated than it was before’ (V10). Others were more charitable, but there was a recognition that: ‘it is a good idea, but I don’t think it’s being communicated very well.’ (ZA26), that it was possibly too small to achieve its stated objectives and that it appeared anomalous as a national organisation responsible for quality improvement in an era when institutional ‘self-regulation’ was being promoted.

The SSDA7 was set up in 2002 and charged by the Government to encourage the formation of SSCs to cover all employment sectors within the UK. This has taken some five years to put into place. While Government money was made available for this task, the SSCs were intended to be independent employer-led organisations which would support the Government’s skills strategy, improve National Occupational Standards and provide a forum for employers to articulate the skills needs of their particular sector though Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs). Latterly, they have been given a much stronger role in the design of all vocational qualifications in their sector as well as the new Diplomas (DfES/LSC 2007).

According to our interviewees, SSCs have more union involvement than their predecessors, the National Training Organisations and, as a result, ‘there’s a potential in the sector agenda to look at building that social partnership road’ (ZA20). The majority of the policy-makers we spoke to, however, and this included employer organisations themselves, were very sceptical about SSCs. The main criticism was that they are not, in fact, employer bodies: ‘they are apparently owned by the sector, but they were set up and paid for by the government and their agenda is the government’s’ (ZA16) and cannot, therefore, represent employers: ‘Employers are in the back seat not in the driving seat’ (ZA19). This view seems to be borne out by the evidence cited in an SSDA-sponsored survey of employers in 2006.

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7 As we are going to press, yet another change has been announced with the UK Commission for Employment and Skills replacing the SSDA and the National Employment Panel in 2008.
which found that only 13 per cent of business establishments are aware of SSCs generally, with 27 per cent having heard about their own SSC under its current brand name. Of these latter employers only 14 per cent had had any dealings with their SSC, and just nine per cent in the past 12 months. There is a particular problem with small and medium enterprises: ‘some of the early evidence on SSAs is that you’re getting the buy in of some big employers who want to be involved, but you’re not really reaching, getting the tangible commitments from the vast number of employers in that sector.’ (ZA20). A finding from another SSDA research report into the implementation of SSAs may in part explain employer reluctance in this area: ‘Concerns reflected by employers about SSAs were that they perceived the SSC and public agencies to be acting together, but with employers not included’ (SSDA 2007:2). And again, our interviewees expressed concerns about bureaucracy and complexity: ‘One or two seem to be all right but I am afraid the majority of them seem to me to have added to the paperwork and systems and I am not at all certain that I notice employers jumping up and down and saying what wonderful bodies they are’ (V11).

Perhaps then there are two main responses to the question, ‘How has the organisation of the LSS changed as a result of recent policy?’ First, there has been a move towards more regional and local levels of governance and there is a continuing rhetoric of institutional autonomy. However, to what extent this constitutes genuine devolution of power from the centre or simply clearer ‘lines of sight’ between national, regional and local delivery is a matter for debate. Second, the turbulence of the first three years of the LSS has continued, even intensified, throughout the last two, with continuous organisational change and, despite efforts at rationalisation, the introduction of yet more agencies to add to what has been constantly criticised as a complex sector. As one inspector commented:

‘It’s a bit like town planning, you know. The plan’s very clear in the mind of the planners as to how everything’s going to work, but in terms of the people actually kind of living on the streets… it’s kind of, at times, anything but clear.’ (V13).

Is this town planning or is it, as Ewart Keep (2006) provocatively described it, a Government playing with ‘the biggest trainset in the world’?

4. WHAT ARE THE MAIN MESSAGES FOR CHANGE?

Having described the new organisational structure for funding, planning and improving the quality of the LSS, it is now time to turn to the language and mechanisms policy-makers use to explain and fulfil their aims and to animate the system. We have discussed elsewhere how managers and teachers respond to these policy messages and levers (see Hodgson et al. 2007a; Finlay et al. 2007b; Spours et al. 2007; Edward et al. 2007); what we focus on here are four key themes or terms which have permeated policy documents and have been regularly referred to in our interviews with policy actors over the last two years (see Box 3). Interestingly, these themes are not the same as those we found in the first round of policy-actor interviews we undertook in 2004: policy language, it appears, has moved on as fast as the structures within which it is conceived.
Box 3. Four major policy themes in the LSS (2005-2007)

1. ‘Prioritisation’
2. A ‘demand-led system’ - ‘market making’ and ‘contestability’
4. ‘Simplification’

4.1 ‘Prioritisation’

The LSS, like all other public services has its own Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets (see Box 4.). Introduced in 1988 under the Conservatives as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review process led by the Treasury, PSAs have also played an important role under New Labour as part of its centralised performance management system (Newman, 2000), by focusing policy-makers, in this case primarily the DfES and the LSC, on the areas they need to address. The LSC translates these targets and the messages from DfES policy documents, ministerial statements and its annual remit letter from the Secretary of State into an annual statement of priorities for the sector, which indicates to providers what will be government funded and, by implication, what will not. One policy-maker described the way prioritisation works, seeing it as part of a ‘system’, which had not existed in the same way during the early stages of the LSC:

‘For me it’s a system now, because we have a delivery chain that very clearly starts in government, with government prioritising its funds. It goes to the LSC, that’s the first part of the delivery arm...When it gets to a College or a private provider, they know what part of the delivery chain they’re in, how they’re meeting government objectives or their own objectives’ (WO6)

In practice, the position is slightly more complex than this because, as one official explained, prioritisation is of two types – there are priority learners (e.g. those with learning difficulties and disabilities) and priority provision (e.g. adult basic skills) – and this, he said was ‘not well understood’ (UA14) – see Coffield et al. (forthcoming) for more detail on this point.

PSA targets for the sector are seen by some policy-makers as positive because they ensure that there will be money from the Treasury for provision (e.g. adult basic skills) for those who might otherwise not have access to it. Several officials saw prioritisation as working very effectively in focusing colleges and work-based training providers more tightly on the type of provision that government wants to fund so that ‘the outcomes are more closely linked to the policy changes.’ (UA17). To illustrate this point, one policy-maker cited the fact that in his local area in 2002/3 less than 10 per cent of the adult provision the LSC funded was contributing to PSA targets, whereas by 2006, it had more than quadrupled to 45 per cent (UC15). Moreover, there was a general recognition by both providers and policy-

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8 As this paper was going to press, Andy Burnham, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, delivered a speech on PSA reform at King’s College London in which he suggested a move ‘from the 600 targets we had in 1998, to a streamlined set of just 30 outcome –focused PSAs – 30 key priorities for what we want to achieve in the Spending Review period.’ (Burnham 2007: 4). While a reduction in the number of targets for the sector might initially be seen as a gain, it does not necessarily mean less central control – indeed it might lead to an even tighter focus on certain types of outcomes to the exclusion of others which may be important for the learners we were concerned with in this Project.
makers we interviewed that, as one put it, where ‘there is a tightening of the budgetary climate’ (ZA23), prioritisation is a necessary and logical step for policy-makers. On the other hand, as our earlier work suggests (e.g. Hodgson et al. 2007a, Finlay et al. 2007b), there are downsides to prioritisation. It was described by one policy-maker as being ‘centrally driven and normative’ and having ‘all kinds of turbulent effects on providers’ (ZA23) and another admitted that there was ‘fallout’ from moving money away from unaccredited adult learning (see also Taubman 2007).

**Box 4. Public Service Agreement targets for the LSS**

**Young people**

90 per cent of 17 year olds to be in learning in 2015 and more than 85 per cent of them achieving at least a Level 2 by age 19.

**Adults**

Reduction by at least 40 per cent of the number of adults in the workforce who lack a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) at Level 2 or equivalent qualifications by 2010;

Improvement in the basic skills of 2.25 million adults between 2001 and 2010, with a milestone of 1.5 million by 2007.

**Source:** *Delivering World-class Skills in a Demand-led System* (DfES/LSC 2007)

**4.2 A ‘demand-led’ system and the role of ‘contestability’**

‘Contestability’, which has been defined by government as giving ‘employers more choice over who provides training without being limited to a particular college or training provider.’ (HMG 2005:24), is a central concept within what is being described as a ‘demand-led’ system. These two terms appear in sector-specific policy documents, such as the FE White Paper and the final report of the Leitch Review of Skills, and in the broader public sector reform agenda laid out in Cabinet Office documents (PMSU 2006 and 2007). The FE White Paper talks about ‘a system shaped by the demands of learners and employers’ (DfES 2006:16), a phrase which is echoed in the Leitch Report’s definition of ‘demand-led skills’ - ‘The skills system must meet the needs of individuals and employers’ (Leitch 2006: 4). Both documents represent a sector response to the government’s policy intention that ‘public services should respond to citizens’ (PMSU 2007:11). Two major changes flow from this new approach – money increasingly follows the ‘customer’ and there is a move to ‘open up the supply side, where appropriate, so that the greatest possible diversity of provision is encouraged.’ (p. 11). Hence, the increasing use of ‘demand-led’ funding of adult skills provision and the application of ‘the principle of “contestability” as an important way of driving up quality’ (HMG 2005:24).

The majority of policy-makers and providers in the LSS would probably agree with the broad thrust of policy, as exemplified in the following comment ‘…we are quite rightly giving increasing attention to the voice of customers and citizens in shaping the future of public

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9 In the recent government response to the Leitch Review of Skills a more stretching set of targets is suggested for 2011, but these will not be confirmed until the new ‘cross-cutting’ PSA targets are announced in the autumn (DIUS 2007: 9).
services.’ (WO7). The way that demand-led funding and contestability are playing out in practice for providers is, however, causing considerable anxiety to many in the sector.

First, there is a difference between the views of colleges and independent learning providers. The former feel that the pace of change is too quick, is distorting their provision and is not allowing them to meet the needs of their local communities or particular groups of learners. The following quotation is typical of the views of senior management in colleges:

‘with contestability comes a different way of funding us, which means that we have got to respond differently, which means that the landscape is not so stable, which means that there are increasing interests being shown by the private sector in what we deem to be our work and, however much of an education business we have become – and we have – we still believe that we are firmly rooted in the public service ethos.’ (ZA27)

Independent learning providers, on the other hand, understandably support the reforms wholeheartedly, but feel that they are not being implemented fast enough, that there is not a level playing field in which to compete (e.g. they are not entitled to the capital grants that FE colleges are) and that bureaucracy gets in the way of a proper market. As one policy actor rather graphically stated: ‘Your policies are great, Prime Minister, but the implementation’s balls-aching slow…They still haven’t broken through their civil servants and their public quango agencies to deliver a market place response.’ (ZA26)

Meanwhile, the LSC sees its role as: ‘being more of a market maker, to enable the sector to organise itself in a market and be responsive’ (UC17), although it is not clear to what extent it has the expertise for this role. Moreover, it appears that this approach was not entirely what the DfES had in mind, as this comment from a DfES official suggests:

‘If the market is working properly and young people are saying what they want and adults are saying what they want and the employers are saying what they want and the provider is empowered to put that on, then all the funding is going to flow behind it. And the only time you need the LSC to ‘market-make’ is where there is a gap.’ (WO6)

There is also a difference of opinion over how much of the learning and skills budget should be demand-led and contestable; whether this approach applies to 14-19 provision as well as to adult learning; the extent to which the state should intervene to protect the needs of those who are not well placed to articulate their own demands; and if there should be more emphasis placed on the demands of learners or those of employers, because these can often be seen as in tension with one another (see Finlay et al. 2007b).

Moreover, it is not only providers who wonder whether ministers and civil servants really understand the implications of a fully demand-led system with demand-led funding. One official commented on his concerns about this approach:

‘there are some real purists here who would like a very pure demand-led system that would, from a bureaucracy point of view, be an absolute nightmare and from a management point of view really difficult for providers to manage’ (UA17).

He also went on to argue that: ‘even companies and organisations that are totally demand-led get involved in planning. Otherwise you have chaos’ (UA17).
4.3 Relations between policy-makers and providers in the ‘drive for excellence’

In this section we examine what policy-makers want from providers in the LSS and the ways in which they convey this though key phrases such as ‘excellence’, ‘specialisation’ and ‘personalisation’. We also consider how they describe the type of relationship they wish to have with providers in the LSS.

It is common knowledge that the LSS has traditionally been seen (and has seen itself) as a ‘Cinderella’ sector. However, this view had changed considerably by the end of our Project, both as a result of the huge injection of resources into the sector and its rise up the political agenda. As one of our interviewees commented: ‘I think politically it’s now recognised as being much higher profile than it was five, six years ago and increasingly recognised as being an important component of national economic and social success’ (ZA24).10

For example, in the Foreword to *Agenda for Change* (LSC 2005), Bill Rammell, at that time Minister for Further and Higher Education, referred to further education as ‘the engine room for skills and social justice in this country’ (p. i). Indeed, from Sir Andrew Foster’s final report onwards, national policy documents have been trying to talk up the sector, as have the policy-makers who translate those texts, ‘we are actually very committed to the notion of enhancing the prestige and self-esteem of people working in FE’ (WO7). However, as another interviewee pointed out: ‘the biggest challenge for the system now is that we are centre stage, and if you are centre stage, then with an FE Bill going through parliament over the next year, you have to live up to it now’ (WO6).

Hence one major reason for what Sir Andrew Foster called ‘the quality imperative’ (DfES 2005b: 7). Or, as one official put it rather more starkly and directly: ‘the push is on at the moment and we are going to get rid of the rubbish by 2008’ (WO8). It is interesting how the FE White Paper, in responding to the Foster Report, links together the ideas of excellence, a clear mission and specialisation and suggests that together they will deliver what the economy requires without really explaining how:

A clear mission for FE, focused on the employability and progression of learners, is central to delivering the skills and qualifications which individuals, employers and the economy need. The delivery of this new mission will involve the creation of a new specialist system. We will expect every FE provider to develop one or more areas of specialist excellence, which will become central to the mission and ethos of the institution and will drive improvement throughout it. (DfES 2006: 22)

Improving the quality of post-compulsory education and training is also part of wider national and international agendas. One of our European policy-makers asserted that: ‘the drive towards quality has been taken on board by most countries’ (Y3) and the two recent public sector reform documents published by the Cabinet Office (PMSU 2006, 2007) contain frequent references to the importance of both ‘high quality’ and ‘continuous improvement’. In the case of the latter document this is linked to increased ‘personalisation’ of services through ‘diversity of provision’ and ‘contestability and incentives to drive innovation and improvement’ (p. 7).

However, there are differences of opinion about who is doing the improvement and how it should be done. Policy-makers stress ‘self-regulation’ and ‘autonomy’ both in recent policy

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10 While this comment represented the views of many of the policy actors we interviews in Autumn 2006 and Spring 2007, at our final Project seminar in early July 2007, participants were less convinced of the high profile of further education colleges because they, unlike schools and universities, do not appear in the titles of any of the three new Ministries and their oversight is split between two of them.
documents, such as the FE White Paper (DfES 2005b) and the Quality Improvement Strategy (QIA 2007), and when interviewed:

‘I would like to see these really empowered, self-autonomous institutions, whether they are private or public, self-empowered, working on behalf of their communities, be it business or locality, in a self-regulated manner, and with a very light touch market-maker infrastructure.’ (WO6)

Other policy-actors we interviewed, however, saw it rather differently:

‘Government have largely seen the quality improvement agenda as a top-down model and have imposed its own solutions, rightly or wrongly, on the system, without ever allowing it to become a bottom-up model and embedding quality improvement philosophy within institutions which then deliver the changes.’ (ZA24)

The reliance on external benchmarks and outside evaluators, such as inspectors, has become so much part of the culture that it has taken its toll in terms of the professional knowledge and confidence of teachers within the LSS. As one interviewee remarked:

‘there’s actually quite a sea-change needed in terms of helping people to get back the confidence that they used to have before they started being slapped on the wrist the whole time.’ (ZA22)

Nevertheless, ‘self-regulation’ is broadly recognised by both policy-makers and practitioners as a step in the right direction and part of a broader ‘trust’ agenda which is very welcome, although ‘there is probably still a little way to go with that’ (V12).

While the idea of actively involving teachers and other professionals as partners in the transformation of public services was, for example, conspicuously absent from the first public sector reform discussion document (PMSU 2006), it has made an appearance in the latest version (PMSU 2007). One of the next steps towards more ‘tailored’ public service is ‘to engage with the public service workforce as partners’ (p. 30) in reform. The idea of a partnership and dialogue with professionals also makes an appearance in the letter sent to the sector by John Denham, the new Secretary of State at DIUS: ‘This short letter is only the opening of a dialogue in which my ministerial colleagues and I here in DIUS plan to hold with you. We want very much to hear your views and to learn about your front-line experiences’ (Denham 2007: 2). It will be interesting to witness this rhetoric being put into practice over the next few months and to assess to what extent it leads to more trust between government and professionals, what impact ‘front-line experiences’ have on policy and how difficult, as well as more positive, messages are received by the new ministerial team.

4.4 ‘Simplification’ – more than just a new word for ‘bureaucracy busting’?

During our first set of policy interviews in 2004, there was much discussion of ‘bureaucracy-busting’, resulting from the reports of the Bureaucracy Task Force, chaired by George Sweeney (see LSC 2004). In our recent set of interviews the term ‘simplification’ was commonly used and reverberates through recent policy documents. What this policy term means is summed up nicely by one official: ‘It is now a simplification agenda...a simplification of structures, a simplification of processes, a simplification of the delivery chain right down to the front end’ (WO6). This term, then, does appear to go beyond the notion of ‘bureaucracy busting’. The way that the LSC structure has been set up is seen as an example of ‘simplification’ in action. Great play was made of ‘single documents of guidance’, ‘two big conversations’ per year related to the LSC’s ‘Business Planning Cycle’ and ‘lighter touch’ contract management (UC14). However, the Train to Gain Programme,
which was intended to embody all of these features, has, according to one interviewee, ‘created a lot of bureaucracy, it’s slowed down decision-making’ (UC17) and compared unfavourably with its predecessor Employer Training Pilots. The Adult Learning Providers’ (ALP) weekly briefing publication, Countdown (e.g. Issue 318, 18th February 2007), has also been full of the bureaucratic problems associated with Train to Gain. Moreover, in terms of simplification of structures, in the words of one of our LSC interviewees:

‘What we don’t see across the system overall is a systematic approach to simplifying the landscape and I don’t know anyone who’s chair or chief-executive of an agency or NDPB, or anyone else in that world, who doesn’t think that some simplification would be a good idea.’ (UA17)

5. WHAT ARE THE BURNING ISSUES FOR POLICY ACTORS IN THE LSS?

This consultation paper is about the views and perspectives of policy actors, so in this section we summarise the five main issues that they raised about recent policy in the LSS. Interestingly, however, these issues are ones that practitioners in the sector also share, as our future book on the Project will testify (see Coffield et al. forthcoming).

5.1 The policy process – too much, too fast and no time for reflection

The first really major issue for policy actors, and this was true of people we interviewed from all the different organisations involved in our study, is the way that policy-making is conducted. While there was support for the government’s general policy aims, there were many complaints about the speed of policy: ‘nothing is really given enough time to bed in before the next thing comes along and I think we are really struggling to know what works and what doesn’t.’ (UC16). Constant change and restructuring were seen as counterproductive in terms of professional commitment: ‘it is so destroying of any momentum, it is so demoralizing, it is so anxiety-creating, that actually performance suffers.’ (V11). While one official argued that the transactional costs of change could be seen as ‘an investment because of a better return that’s coming later’ (UA17), another disagreed, ‘transactional costs are written off too easily.’ (UC13). There was criticism too of the lack of a joined-up approach to policy with too many initiatives: ‘I still think we end up with lots of policy strategies, rather than having one clear driver.’ (UB12). This ‘policy busyness’ (Hayward et al. 2005), which was recognised as a feature of the English system by our European interviewees, has undoubtedly been exacerbated by having so many different ministers since 2000. What policy actors complain about is the lack of ‘policy memory’ (Higham and Yeomans 2007) that is brought to bear on new initiatives: ‘Skills for Life started as though it was year zero, as though nothing existed and nothing had ever been done before.’ (ZA21); and the lack of recognition that proper implementation takes time. As one interviewee explained:

‘one of the underlying weaknesses of the last three years – and I fear of any government – is the belief on the part of ministers, of politicians, that when they have announced something it has happened…and people have not caught up with the thing that they had done last time at the dispatch box’ (V11).

According to one of the officials we interviewed, who has considerable experience of education and training systems across Europe, what we need in England is ‘creeping not jumping’ reform (ZA25). This was echoed by another willing, but weary interviewee who
argued for ‘a period of consolidation, not rest, but actually, well we’ve had all these reforms pushed through, give us time and a bit of reflection to implement them properly before you do anything else.’ (UC17).

Perhaps the sharpest criticisms were reserved for what we have referred to elsewhere as ‘policy tensions’ (Hodgson and Spours 2003), a term used to describe the way that one government policy works against another. One of the most cited examples in the LSS is the tension between the drive for collaboration between providers and the equally strong drive for competition. As one interviewee summed it up:

‘So there seem to be two competing forces here. And one is saying it’s a free market economy and the market will configure itself to deliver the best provision…and then there’s another one saying but you must plan it.’ (UC15)

The three other main policy tensions identified by our interviewees were those between the government’s drive towards a high-skills economy and the demands of social inclusion; satisfying the needs of individuals and the needs of employers; and the difficulties of maintaining a balance between regional and sectoral priorities.

5.2. Who pays for learning?

A second important issue for policy-makers, and one which is played out in all the recent policy documents (e.g. DfES 2007; DfES/LSC 2007), is who pays for lifelong learning? Or, perhaps more precisely, who pays for which type of learning and how are the costs to be shared between the state, the individual and employers? This is not a new debate, of course, (e.g Williams 1999; Piatt and Robinson 2001) nor is it one that is confined to England (e.g. Green et al. 2000). Among our interviewees there was a recognition that Government had been increasingly generous in funding the LSS, but that resources were finite, prioritisation of government funding was necessary and that individuals and employers would both have to pay more. This was not seen as an easy policy to implement, however. When learning had been free or very cheap in the past, the introduction of fees was highly controversial, particularly in more disadvantaged communities with fewer resources. There was a recognition that, as a result of prioritisation, ‘adult learning has got squeezed.’ (ZA24) and that this was having an impact right across the country (see Hodgson et al. 2007a; Taubman 2007). Asking employers to pay more was also seen as problematic, even though policy documents in England are increasingly upfront about the need for this to happen. As one interviewee commented: ‘I think one of the big challenges is how you can actually incentivise employers to spend more money.’ (ZA20). Others were worried about the amount of money being spent on Train to Gain, £440m in 2007/8 rising to more than £900m in 2010/11 (DIUS 2007), and whether precious resources might be wasted on what is known as ‘dead-weight’ (i.e. government funding paying for training that employers would have funded themselves). There is, too, a lively debate among both policy-makers and practitioners about how the overall education budget is divided between schools, higher education and the LSS and whether the latter is getting its fair share (e.g. Stanton and Fletcher 2006; Styles and Fletcher 2006). Given the relatively disadvantaged position of many of the learners within the LSS, this is seen as a matter of equity.

5.3 The role of employers

A related and equally hotly debated issue for policy actors is the role of employers in the LSS. Many were sceptical about employers’ commitment to training their workforce. One official, encapsulated the anxieties of many others: ‘So we’ve got quite a big strategic job to
do in terms of making employers understand that they need to invest in their staff” (ZA22).

In addition, there is a broader debate about whether the notion of employer-led is the right concept at all and whether a social partnership approach, such as that employed in other European countries, might be a more effective way of operating.

‘When we talk about employer-led qualifications other countries talk about social partnership as the driving mechanism. There are two sides to the shop floor and you need both of them represented in discussions about skills and training and qualification needs if you’re to understand what’s really happening.’ (ZA25)

One of our European interviewees cited the way that in the Nordic countries there are collective agreements between the social partners to promote a more shared approach to training, changes in the workplace and government policy decisions.

Several interviewees also argued for more sectors to introduce ‘licences to practise’, as well as greater financial rewards for employees gaining qualifications. A few suggested that sector levies might be an effective way of increasing the role of employers in training. These are all issues that the Leitch Report (Leitch 2007) touched on, but ultimately shied away from, preferring to continue with the ‘voluntarist’ approach that has traditionally been the hallmark of the English post-compulsory education and training system. What Leitch proposed instead was the introduction of a new ‘Pledge’ for employers ‘to voluntarily commit to train all eligible employees up to Level 2 in the workplace’ (Leitch 2006:4) and for this to be reviewed in 2010, with statutory arrangements to be brought into play if progress was not considered sufficient. This idea has been adopted wholesale by the Government: the ‘Skills Pledge’ was launched in June 2007 with a review of its effectiveness in 2010 (DIUS 2007).

5.4 Qualifications

Almost all of the policy actors we interviewed, including the European ones, commented on the powerful role of qualifications in lifelong learning, although the latter also stressed the importance of non-formal and informal learning, which does not necessarily need to be certificated (see Colley et al. 2003 for a discussion of informality and formality in learning). Current qualifications were seen as too inflexible to meet the needs of adults or employers. As a result, several countries in Europe are actively involved in developing a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and England, somewhat behind Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, is in the process of developing the new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), previously referred to as the Framework for Achievement (QCA 2004). In the latter case, our policy actor interviewees claimed that progress was too slow, they had concerns about costs and about the way that the four countries of the UK still do not seem to be going in the same direction (see also Stevens 2007). Particular anxieties were also expressed about the greater role being given to SSCs for qualifications development and the design and purposes of the new Diplomas (see HOC 2007 and Hodgson and Spours forthcoming, for more detail on the latter).

5.5 Capacity to deliver?

While ‘fostering workforce innovation and development’ is one of the key tenets of public sector reform (PMSU 2007: 56), a number of the policy actors we spoke to were concerned about the future capacity of the workforce within the LSS. One inspector spoke of the ‘crisis

11 Currently 150 employers, mainly large companies and government departments, have signed the Pledge. This covers 1.7m employees (DIUS 2007).
of succession’ (V11) in terms of governance and leadership of further education colleges, with many principals reaching the age of retirement and difficulties in recruiting new leaders and governors. Others mentioned the number of part-time, agency and temporary staff in the sector, their lack of status and the fact that they felt they had no voice in the policy process. From the other end of the telescope, so to speak, policy-actors from practitioner representative organisations commented on the continuing lack of capacity in the LSC to undertake the new tasks they were expected to perform in a demand-led system. As earlier discussions in this paper have indicated, the challenge of transforming the LSS to meet government objectives will not only require improved conditions of service for teachers and education managers in the sector, but also a period of calm in which to carry out a more effective and sensitive approach to human resource development than has been the case to date (see Edward et al. 2007 for a fuller discussion of this issue).

6. CONCLUSION: POLICY-MAKING AND POLICY SHIFTS IN THE LSS

In conclusion, during the last couple of years we have witnessed an acceleration in the pace of policy change and continued turbulence in the LSS. There have been further changes in the learning and skills landscape, resulting in some rationalisation and re-organisation of the existing agencies, but also bringing new quangos (and now government departments) into being. The more fundamental shift, however, has come from the government signalling its intention to create a transformed LSS, based upon the extensive use of market mechanisms to make it more responsive to the needs of business and of individuals. This is consistent with the government’s wider public service reform agenda that, as it has been applied in the LSS through the LSC, we characterise as a ‘top-down market model’. We use this term because the government’s vision – the practical implications of which are far from fully worked out at present – is one of a quasi-market in which central government and its agencies retain the right to steer the system through the continuing use of national targets and priorities, performance measurement and intervention to make the market work. Whether this marks a seismic shift for the sector depends on whether the vision is seen as realisable in practice and what effect it has on institutions within the sector. One thing that is clear from our interviews with key policy actors, however, is that the current policy direction has turned the learning and skills landscape into a more uncertain, unstable and contested terrain, particularly for further education colleges and small independent training providers of adult and community education and work-based learning. There are important debates around: how best to deliver the twin policy drivers of economic competitiveness and social inclusion; what a demand-led system will mean in practice; whether the LSC, as a major ‘implementer’ of policy in the LSS, has become more responsive or more strongly directed from the centre; and what the optimum form of governance is for creating an LSS that operates within national frameworks yet can be responsive to the needs of learners, communities, employers and economic regions. These issues lead us to end with a consideration of the assumptions underpinning the prevailing policy direction in the LSS.

6.1 The emerging ‘top-down market model’

When we last wrote about the LSS in 2005 (Hodgson et al. 2005; Coffield et al. 2005) we were reflecting on the formation of the LSC and its first four years of operation. At that time Mark Haysom had just been appointed as Chief Executive of the LSC and the ‘reshaping’ of its organisation was underway. Towards the end of this first research report we argued that the ‘Early LSC’ had achieved a great deal by establishing a more unified LSS and delivering more resources to learning but that it also faced major challenges in reducing bureaucracy and micro-management, improving its own capacity to deliver on the ground and in
balancing policy tensions between area planning and a ‘demand-led system’. These challenges remain. However, what we have witnessed over the last two years, and we only had a glimpse of this in late 2004, has been a significant shift in both thinking and strategy towards more political intervention from the centre to promote a more active market in learning and skills which claims to be employer-led.

It is important to view the shifts in LSC strategy in the wider political context and, in particular, to recognise the driving force of the Cabinet Office’s public service reform agenda (PMSU 2006, 2007), which emphasises top-down performance management and the promotion of competition between a diverse range of providers as the means of fulfilling targets and improving skills. This approach to policy has achieved greater momentum through the recommendations of the recent Leitch Review of Skills and through the narratives provided by Ministers within the DfES and in other departments of government. Over the last three years, the LSC has constructed its own particular ‘take’ on the emerging public service reform model. The main elements of its top-down market model are:

- the continued driving role of targets, but fewer of them, primarily focusing on Level 2 achievements, and with funding streams closely tied to them;
- a determination to shift the power of purchasing provision, where possible, to employers (e.g. through Train to Gain);
- a reshaped and more regionalised LSC which can more easily communicate priorities through the ‘delivery chain’ of the various agencies and provider institutions within the LSS and can be more responsive locally;
- attempts to reduce bureaucracy in the transactions between the LSC and providing institutions – the so-called ‘light touch’ and ‘self-regulatory’ approach;
- a new set of learner entitlements at Level 2 and 3 backed by grants and allowances.

In addition, the Government has handed employer-based organisations, such as the SSCs, powers to determine the content of qualifications such as the proposed new Diplomas.

The components of the emerging strategy are a reflection of a seemingly coherent narrative (we say seemingly because this narrative contains some serious contradictions and tensions which we explore in the final section). The argument runs as follows - the country needs to raise its game dramatically to compete globally; Level 2 achievements and above are required in greater numbers; these achievements lead to employability which, in turn, supports social inclusion; ministers have to drive change from the centre and are spurred on by evidence that their interventions thus far have delivered improvements in performance; employers and learners need to be put in the driving seat to compel providers to respond and those who do respond will find new freedoms in which to operate, while those who do not will find their government funding reduced or even withdrawn. And finally, the Government has listened to criticisms about bureaucracy and complexity by slimming down paperwork and rationalising national agencies.

In an effort to put a seal on this strategic shift and to signal that a new system is being created, some senior policy-makers have attempted to rename the LSS the ‘FE system’ (e.g. DfES 2006, QIA 2007). Currently this remains an ‘attempt’ because, apart from signalling what they see as a paradigm shift, the new name has not stirred much response on the ground. This could be because ‘FE’ is associated with FE colleges and does not reflect the actual diversity of the sector that contains FE colleges, sixth form colleges, work-based learning and community learning providers and recently prison education. The problem of an appropriate name may turn out to be a symptom of wider problems with the strategy and the narrative. The LSS, following the organisational divisions of the 1990s, conveyed a strong message of bringing different providers onto a level playing field with the aim of forging connections between them within a local area. The vision was of the LSC as both a planning
and funding organisation and it was this vision that derived much initial support from a range of agencies and the education profession reported in our earlier work (Hodgson et al. 2005). Our research conducted over the last three years, however, suggests that the ‘top-down market model’ has eroded this planning vision\textsuperscript{12} and is somewhat less coherent and much more contested.

6.2 Areas of uncertainty and contestation

6.2.1 The policy process and policy implementation

Perhaps the first thing to note is that the policy actors working at different points in the system do not speak with one voice. While there are certain issues where there is a common view, there are others where, as we have seen, there are considerable differences of opinion. All the policy actors we spoke to were strongly committed to the Government’s twin policy drivers – economic competitiveness and social justice. Where they tended to disagree was around the policy mechanisms employed to achieve these ends. All were pleased about the higher profile being accorded to the LSS by politicians and noted the significant achievements that had been made since the inception of the LSC in 2001, in terms of increased numbers of learners, higher qualification achievement rates, strong learner satisfaction ratings and rises in the quality of provision, particularly in work-based learning. The feeling one gets, as an outsider, is of continued energy, drive and enthusiasm. Some of this energy, however, is devoted to off-setting the negative effects of politically driven central policy when policy actors in the LSS receive policy from the DfES and have to ‘translate’ it into something which can be coherently implemented lower down the LSS (see Spours \textit{et al.} 2007). We found evidence to suggest that LSC officials have, for example, undertaken ‘damage-limitation’ exercises around English for Speakers of a Second Language (ESOL) provision and around the Foundation Learning Tier\textsuperscript{13} in order to render government policy less damaging to inclusion. Such findings support the argument by Wallace and Hoyle (2005) that practitioner interventions (and we would include here some middle to senior policy-makers) are often necessary to make policy workable. However, we should not equate this type of pragmatism, normally carried out at speed, with the creation of optimum solutions for either policy or practice.

While there was a strong consensus around the broad aims of government reflected in the twin policy drivers, discord began to creep in around the conduct of the policy process itself, the way in which the general public service reform model was being applied to the LSS, the potential marginalisation of certain learners, the balance of power between local, regional and national governance and how major deep-seated issues, such as the reform of the qualifications system and the relationship between the education and training system and the labour market were being tackled or not. Summing up potential disagreement over means rather than aims, one respondent remarked:

‘If the government goes down the path which they have chosen to do, of putting in a lot of structures to get things done, that is just one way of looking at the world.

\textsuperscript{12} Recent oral evidence given to the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills by two representatives from SSCs suggests, however, that the SSCs may see their role as ‘matching’ education and training courses to skills shortages through seeking to align supply and demand more closely (http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cm067.htm, accessed 16 July 2007).

\textsuperscript{13} This term is used by the QCA and the LSC to describe ‘a high-quality, coherent and personalised curriculum offer at Entry and Level 1 for learners aged 14 and above. This provision - the Foundation Learning Tier (FLT) - will encompass a broad spectrum of learners’ needs, and will include learning programmes that are personalised according to individual needs, interests and aspirations.’ (www.qca.org.uk/144466.html, accessed 28 May 2007).
There is another way of looking at the world which is how you get things done.’ (ZA30)

While those in central government, either through policy documents or the words of ministers and DfES officials, are constantly pushing for faster reform, the majority of those below this level appeared to feel that the pace of change was too swift and did not allow adequate time for effective implementation or reflection on progress and future action. There was exasperation about the sheer number of initiatives and the inherent tensions between some of them.

6.2.2 The meaning and consequences of ‘demand-led’

Reflecting the new policy narrative, the rhetoric of ‘demand-led’ provision and funding, ‘self-regulation’, ‘prioritisation’, ‘excellence’ and ‘simplification’ pervaded the language of our interviews. The majority of those we talked with saw some merit in these terms and what they stood for. However, there was a significant degree of scepticism and anxiety, or even, in some cases, hostility, towards the possible ramifications of turning this rhetoric into reality.

The concept of demand-led, a driving force in the Leitch report, increasingly holds centre stage in the policy narrative and is only just beginning to receive criticism in published commentaries (Unwin 2007; Mackney 2007). However, we found leading policy-makers disagreeing about what it would mean in practice and even questioning the term itself. Does it mean the LSC actively creating markets or managing market failure? Does this concern stem from the fact that they had received policy from their political masters rather than having been involved in its construction? Lower down the LSS chain, the response was both more severe and divided. We found considerable fear by those representing further education colleges, because of the way the new demand-led approach is likely to destabilise the provider base in the LSS. This fear, though, is not universal and independent training providers see an opportunity for them in a more open market-place, although their enthusiasm is tempered by a realisation that there will need to be interventions to protect disadvantaged learners (Hoyle 2007). Moreover, since completing our interviews, there have been press reports of colleges collaborating with large private training providers, such as Carter and Carter, to compete for Train to Gain contracts (Kingston 2007).

Presently, demand-led is focused on Train to Gain with the emphasis on meeting ‘employer needs’, and this has been strengthened in the recent Government response to the Leitch Report (DIUS 2007). Neither we, nor anyone we interviewed, were convinced about how this approach would mean individual learner needs being better addressed than at present. The newly announced Skills Accounts, an idea taken from the Leitch Review, are narrowly focused on providing access to advice and guidance to motivate individuals to ‘gain skills and achieve qualifications, enter work and progress in employment’ (DIUS 2007:10). This does not encompass the very wide range of adult learning opportunities envisaged in New Labour’s original lifelong learning vision outlined in The Learning Age (DfEE 1998), nor would it help many of the learners we interviewed as part of this research (Hodgson et al. 2007b). Several of our policy and institutional interviews were marked by anxieties about how certain learner needs (particularly those of the most marginal and disadvantaged) would be met within the LSS due to shifts in government priorities. One interviewee put it this way:

‘I think there is a real tension between the need as a country to be competitive. I can see why the current agendas are there and understand the need for massive centralised planning to try and get us there, but I am just concerned about the individual in all that.’ (ZA31)

All of this suggests the problem of an abstract policy concept from the Government’s public sector reform agenda being applied to the LSS. The only point on which many commentators (as well as our interviewees) appeared to agree was that the imposition of a fully demand-led system will cause considerable turbulence and rapid change or even destruction of parts of...
FE (Klein 2007). This flies in the face of most of the evidence we have collected over the last three years in which almost all of those interviewed have, in one way or another, called for more stability and a slower pace of change rather than acceleration. Moreover, it appears likely that instability will bring more state interference rather than more freedom for providers. Our evidence suggests that the LSC, in its reactive and mediating role (Spours et al. 2007) will be forced to respond to any market failure or perverse outcome by repeated intervention. We drew attention earlier to how Ewart Keep (2006) talked of government interventions in the world of education and training as ‘playing with the biggest train set in the world’. Despite government protestations that they do not play this game, the train set looks like getting a lot bigger, the trains are being expected to go even faster and some predict they will start running into the buffers.14

6.2.3 Is the LSC more responsive or more directive?

Another related area of disagreement is the extent to which the structural changes to the LSC have made it more locally and regionally responsive or simply more effective at carrying out national government priorities. Officials consistently argued that the reshaped LSC was more versatile, with a slimmed down centre, a ‘fatter’ region and a local tier more aligned with local authorities. The centre is now more focused on forming strategy; the regions constitute a more manageable and cost-effective link with the local area and the 153 partnerships are meant to be the eyes and ears of the LSC. Our research, however, suggests that it is the national/regional relationship that forms the equilibrium of the ‘new’ LSC and this nexus is very much focused on driving change from above while operating with a rather selective definition of ‘trust’ in relation to those below.

‘Mark [Haysom] introduced four key values one of which is trust. So it’s about our provider base trusting the LSC, but also the LSC trusting those providers, and where that trust is seen to be abused that’s where the LSC gets more focused, so it puts more of its effort where it needs to. So those providers which are seen to be delivering against government objectives and LSC criteria are left alone a lot more and where they’re delivering to performance targets’. (UA14)

There is no doubt that the Government’s declared intention, as part of its public sector reform agenda, is to devolve more power to the local level (see DCLG 2006; PMSU 2007; Burnham 2007). This, nevertheless, remains a relatively subordinate policy discourse and currently has little presence within the LSS. Even the relatively planned area of 14-19 education and training is based on ‘weakly collaborative’ partnership arrangements (Hodgson and Spours 2006) due to policy tensions between institutional collaboration and competition. Elsewhere in the LSS, power still emanates from the centre – not a system of central planning but a policy centralism taking a massive leap of faith in a market-led approach, with the vague hope that improved performance will somehow emerge from greater volatility, competition and uncertainty.

6.2.4 More local and more stable?

A subtext of many of the interviews with policy actors is the search for a new set of arrangements that might combine the following - slower and less hyperactive national policy-making; broader and less prescriptive targets with greater room for local discretion; and more area-based and collaborative decision-making within the context of a more devolved governance system. Even some leaders of competitively minded colleges saw the value of local agreements that allowed providers in a locality to focus collectively on the needs of all

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14 In a recent email exchange, Ewart Keep, commenting on an earlier draft of this paper, suggested taking the train set analogy further to cover the latest changes introduced by the new Prime Minister, Gordon Brown: ‘If one holds to my train set analogy, civil servants are the small kids, tinkering with the rolling stock and the trucks, the politicians are the big kids, who come round, kick the layout to pieces and then remake it in the fashion they desire (without any consultation with anyone else).’ This analogy could run and run!
learners, and not just on those regarded as a priority by government, in a more stable financial environment. These messages resonated with the recent review of local government that called for a new settlement (Lyons 2007a), as this quotation from Sir Michael Lyons, the chair of the review committee, testifies:

‘In my final report, I call for a new partnership between central and local government. This needs to be based on changes in behaviours from all tiers of government to achieve a stronger relationship - creating a shared ambition for the future. Central government needs to leave more room for local discretion and recognise the value of local choice; while local government needs to strengthen its own confidence and capability, engage more effectively with local people, make best use of existing powers, and stop asking for central direction.’ (Lyons 2007b)

How much this policy intention will play out on the ground in the LSS is still unclear and, as both our interviewees and recent research in the area (Fullick et al. 2007; Steer and Lakey 2007) point out, the local authority level is probably not the right layer of governance for all aspects of the post-compulsory education and training system, particularly given the small size of some unitary authorities and the complex journey-to-learn patterns in large metropolitan areas. What appears to be needed in the future is a more careful balance of regional and local governance within a supportive national policy framework as part of a drive for greater democratisation (Lawson 2005). The research team will be elaborating these governance themes in its final outputs, including a discussion of the potential of the role of ‘local ecologies’ as a way of conceptualising geographical spaces that support collaboration between providers to meet the needs of all learners (see Coffield et al. forthcoming for further detail on this).

6.3 Challenges to government policy assumptions

While many of our interviewees accepted broad policy aims, they also raised issues that appear to challenge prevailing policy assumptions in the top-down market model. We report here three issues that vex practitioners and policy-makers alike and have done for some time. First, where does education and training end and leisure or social service begin? This is a major problem for the LSS that has finite resources and needs to prioritise which type of learning it can fund and which should properly be funded by other government departments, such as the Department of Health or the Department of Work and Pensions. It is not an academic question, it has real practical implications for what type of learning opportunities post-16 providers can offer learners, especially when it is a case of slow progress, as measured by qualification levels, and learning which is not deemed to lead to ‘economically valuable skills’ (Leitch 2006:2) or that is difficult to measure using current qualifications. Ministers and the DfES were seen as making hard and fast judgements on whether or not certain types of learning (and by implication certain types of learners) can be funded through education budgets, leaving the LSC to sort out some sort of ‘protection’ for disadvantaged learners. Many we interviewed, however, supported a wider concept of learning, were concerned about the loss of a broad adult curriculum and felt that funding should be directed towards it. In this they are supported by research into the wider benefits of adult learning that does not simply lead to the ‘economically valuable skills’ that appear to be the only type of learning opportunities that will be publicly funded in the future (e.g. Gorard 2007; Schuller et al. 2004). They also saw the potential for a more devolved governance model in making decisions about the balance between the provision of different forms of learning at a local level, where there is a greater understanding of the local population and its needs.

A second, related issue is how the qualifications system can be reformed to meet the needs of the 21st century. The development of the QCF is seen by many as a step in the right direction (see Hodgson et al. 2006) because it invites local flexibility within a national framework that
could be used creatively by different ‘social partners’ – learners, employers, trade unions and education and training providers. However, the continuing insistence on a divided 14-19 qualifications system with GCSEs and A Levels on one side and Diplomas, other vocational qualifications and apprenticeships on the other, seems to disrupt these possibilities and is viewed as fundamentally unhelpful by many policy-makers and the vast majority of practitioners and researchers (HOC 2007; Hodgson and Spours forthcoming). Moreover, it is interesting that while some high-profile qualifications developments, such as the diplomas, are carried through at such a pace that risks the quality of the final product (HOC 2007), the less prestigious qualifications changes – the Foundation Learning Tier and the QCF – which promise to make a considerable difference to the quality of learning for adult learners and all those below Level 2, proceed at snailpace.

The third, and possibly the most intractable, issue which affects both the supply and the demand for learning in England is the lack of the type of social partnership arrangements that exist in other European countries to underpin the relationship between employers, learners, trade unions, the education and training system and the government. The various initiatives designed to involve unions and employers (e.g. Union Learning Fund and National Skills Academies) were seen as valuable. However, as several of our policy actor interviewees argued, without a fully functioning social partnership framework with policy mechanisms such as ‘licences to practise’, sector levies, and tax concessions for employers, there is a limit to how much the reform of policy structures and initiatives can do to meet the challenging targets set by government itself.

In this final section of the report we have gone further than our interviewees by suggesting the concept of a ‘devolved social partnership system’, which is not only nationally based but also includes opportunities for real deliberation and decision-making at regional and local levels. This concept of a ‘devolved social partnership system’ could take the LSS away from the realm of central planning or central imposition towards a system based on social agreements at different levels – national, regional, sub-regional and local - within which there is space for deliberation and reflection that respects professional knowledge, experience and expertise in meeting the needs of learners and employers. Unlike the current concept of ‘demand-led’, this would not be ideologically imposed from above, but pragmatically explored from below within a system of governance that emphasises deliberation, reflection, subsidiarity, inter-dependence and collaborative learning relationships.

\[15\] See Coffield et al. (forthcoming), particularly Chapter 8, for a more detailed discussion of this concept.
APPENDIX 1. A NOTE ON THE PROJECT

The overarching aim of our project, which ran from January 2004 until July 2007, was to explore the impact of national policy on teaching, learning and inclusion in the learning and skills sector (LSS), with a particular focus on three groups of learners who have been poorly served by their previous education: unemployed people in adult and community learning centres (ACL), low skilled adult employees in work-based learning (WBL) and younger learners on Level 1 and Level 2 vocational courses in further education colleges (FE).

Data were collected from all levels in the sector, from Government Minister to Level 1 learner, as Table 5 shows.

Table 5: Sources of data

1: From policy

- Analysis of over 300 policy documents
- 131 interviews with 123 policy actors at many levels, in 2004-2007, including:
  - 52 interviews with LSC staff, national, regional and local;
  - 27 with officials in national Ministries and agencies;
  - 5 with staff based in and around the European Commission;
  - 47 with other national, regional or local bodies.

2: From learning sites

- 12 sites in London and 12 in North East England
- 8 ACL, 8 FE (4 Level 1 courses, 4 Level 2 courses) and 8 WBL sites
- Each site visited 4 times (5 for FE), to interview a tutor, a manager and up to 6 learners
- 333 interviews with students (individual or group), involving 349 learners

3: Bringing policy-makers and practitioners together

- Additional seminar on Skills for Life targets (2006)
- Online survey on key findings (2007)

We collected, in semi-structured interviews, the perspectives of policy-makers and officials forming and enacting policy about the aims and objectives of policy, and the mechanisms by which these are to be achieved. In the learning sites, we interviewed managers, teachers and learners about what was happening in practice and their perceptions of the impact both of policy and of other factors on learning and inclusion. The third, important source of data was from project events which allowed us to compare policy, research and practice perspectives. In our annual seminars, for example, we brought together practitioners, managers and tutors, from the learning sites together with officials and other players in the policy scene, to hear about our findings to date and to have an opportunity to discuss, confirm or challenge them in a forum of those who all work in different areas of the LSS, but who have no official opportunity to meet. The online survey also brought those groups together, by posing identical questions to participants from all parts of the sector.

Since this paper is concerned with policy actors’ views, we give more detail on this area. The project began in 2004 with an analysis of key policy documents and an intensive series of confidential interviews with officials, identifying the policies they believed were having impact and exploring how they believed policy ‘levers’ were working. This first round of policy interviews was analysed and reported (Coffield et al. 2005; Hodgson et al. 2005). Although some further policy interviews were conducted in 2005 and early 2006 with officials and representatives of Sector Skills Councils, employer and union organisations,
provider organisations, awarding bodies and other players in the sector, the second intensive period of policy interviews did not begin until late 2006, when we returned to many of the organisations visited in 2004, to update their perspectives and to discuss our emerging findings. These interviews were completed several months later than originally planned, to include perspectives on the much anticipated Leitch Review of Skills (Leitch 2006) which did not appear until December 2006. In Spring 2007 we also extended data collection to Brussels, talking to five officials working in and around the European Commission.

In total, 123 different officials were interviewed in the 131 policy interviews. At the regional and local level, we sought to include officials who worked with our learning sites in London and the North East, for example, in the local LSC, although other regions were included in the online survey at the end of the project. We had chosen these two regions for the fieldwork because they are very different, in their local economy, their labour markets, their skill profiles and demography; but in the online survey we aimed to test our findings by canvassing the views of a broader geographical range of policy makers, officials and practitioners.

The survey was constructed around 21 of our provisional key findings, agreed within the team when our analysis was almost complete; and a further eight more tentative statements about what local learning systems might look like in future. The findings related to the impact of policy on teaching, learning and assessment; on inclusion; on staff and institutional behaviour; and on governance in the LSS. Respondents were invited to indicate their level of agreement with each statement and to comment further to indicate their reasons for agreement or disagreement. Responses were received from 102 participants, of whom 37% worked in regions other than the North East and London. While the sample was small, we note that for 20 out of the 21 findings analysed using SPSS, we found no statistically significant differences between respondents from our two research regions and those in other regions. This suggests that our findings may have some wider applicability beyond London and the North East.

The survey fulfilled multiple functions within our methodology, stimulating analysis and debate within the team in the long process of agreeing its contents; feeding back to respondents, both policymakers and practitioners, some of our most important emergent findings; confirming those findings for the respondents and testing them, on a small scale, with a wider sample of their colleagues in other regions; and allowing us to collect further data in the comments stimulated by the questionnaire statements. Of the 21 findings, 17 were agreed with by 70 per cent or more of the respondents, 90 per cent or more agreeing with three of the statements. Moreover, the explanatory comments have enriched our qualitative data, the responses to the questions about possibilities for future learning systems proving particularly useful in constructing a model of an effective and inclusive learning system.

The codes used throughout this report to attribute quotations from interviews while protecting the identity of individuals begin with letters U-Z (the letters A-T having been used for the learning site interviewees). U indicates LSC staff, at national, regional or local level; V is used for staff in the inspectorate and other arms-length agencies; W for national government officials, mostly those employed in the DfES at the time of interview; X for staff in learning partnerships and Regional Development Agencies; Y for European officials; and Z for officials of other national, regional and local organisations.

32
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