Managing the Sector Skills Agreement: an analysis of the control of research outcomes through guidance and standards

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Introduction

This work in progress paper defines the control and standards utilised by the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA), which was an organ of the civil service (now re-branded the UK Skills Commission). In previous work, I have argued that the SSDA as it then was, was using a form of management that was very contractual, controlling and ‘principal and agent’ in its methodology. In previous work I have discussed Newman (2001) and her assessment of this phenomenon, in subsequent work I intend to develop the theoretical base of this notion of principal and agent further, but am content here simply to look at the mechanisms of control and power, and to theorise them in subsequent work.

This paper will analyse predominantly the Process Guidance and standards documentation that emanated from the SSDA in a number of versions during the Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) process and some of the ‘support’ provided by consultants on behalf of SSDA to Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). This paper continues the theme from previous work on the control and manage role that the SSDA adopted.

Process Guidance and Standards

The full title of the rather ponderous tonne that is considered within this paper is ‘Managing the Sector Skills Agreement Process Guidance and Standards Final Version 3.0’, and was published in January 2007 (SSDA, 2007). Although there were versions that preceded this final version, it is not proposed to consider these, only this last and final version. It is interesting to note, that the final version was produced at a time when all the SSCs in the pathfinder tranche and tranche 2 had completed their agreements, tranche 3 were involved in stages 3 -5, and tranche 4 (the last tranche) was approaching completion of stages 1 and 2.

The first point to make therefore is that it is interesting that this document was ever produced at all, as in many respects it came as a closure to the work that had been done previously by the majority of SSCs, over whom it could realistically have little influence. The management process intention of the document if not explicit from the title is clear in the preface:

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

The report continues, by stressing that the SSA defines what drives productivity and competitiveness within the sector, and what leading –edge practice looks like across the world (SSDA, 2007, p3). This ambition would appear at best optimistic, as it is suggested that
to carry out meaningful comparative analysis (assuming such an exercise could be carried out) is both a costly and timely business, and given that the SSCs had eighteen months in which to produce a full five stage SSA, would have been time prohibited. It does however show the thrust and ambition of the original architects of the policy, even if as has been shown in my other work, this process has been watered down significantly in operation. Undaunted however the introduction concludes, by suggesting that a successful SSA is forward looking, driven by the employer voice (an issue as already shown that has been difficult to maintain, when the need to secure an agreement has watered this concept down), built around a detailed and robust evidence base, action focussed, in that the agreement defines what needs to happen to make a difference and finally, it needs to be comprehensive, defining priorities and key levers for change (SSDA, 2007, p3-4).

The SSA, therefore is aimed at action and not words, and thus can be seen as a process (to be managed) rather than as a series of documents. If properly managed then SSDA (2007) conclude, the SSA can change the relationship between employers, planners and funders of training, providers and Government (SSDA, 2007, p4). Although as I have argued many times within this series of documents, the reality is that very little change was actually effected by the process, and certainly not as can be seen from SSDA (2007) in the way originally intended.

One manner in which SSAs were to some extent ‘de-powered’ in the early days of the process, particularly with the first tranche of SSCs to attempt them, the pathfinder SSCs, was the behaviour of the devolved nations of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, who argued that the UK wide context was insufficient to take account of the different training systems within the devolved nations. What was good for the devolved nations also proved to be good for the English regions, with each geographical area of the UK effectively demanding that its differences be addressed in the agreement, an almost impossible task for small organisations such as Sector Skills Councils. The guidance notes therefore take account of this change by stressing the UK nature of the agreement but demanding localised solutions within that:

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

It might be argued that although the guidance is justifying a national agreement, it is effectively conceding that the SSA has transformed into a series of local agreements within the devolved nations and the English regions. Having therefore of a kind defined the nature of the SSA, SSDA (2007) goes on to talk about ‘Minimum requirements for the Sector Skills Agreements.’ The next sub-heading argues for what might be seen as a contradiction in terms in terms of ‘Comprehensive but focussed coverage’. SSDA (2007, p7) explains the concept of comprehensive but focussed in the following terms:

“The SSA as a whole must be comprehensive, covering the whole sector, at all occupational levels, across the whole of the UK. It also needs to be focussed on priorities for action. This is achieved through a fully comprehensive Skills Needs Assessment at stage 1, with stages 2 and 3 increasingly identifying and
focusing in on priorities for action- and building a rigorous justification for those priorities. This means some sub-sectors or occupational groups may not be covered in the same depth at stages 2 to 5, but a robust case, based on the stage 1 analysis, must be made for the particular choice of priorities.” (SSDA, 2007, p7).

From this, nine minimum requirements can be identified from an SSA, the first of which is that it should secure a balance of employer and individual views and be able to demonstrate appropriate trade union involvement. Secondly, it should be able to deliver an assessment and action plan (at stage 5 although this is not stated here) that reflects the various segments of the sector e.g. by size and business type. Thirdly, the SSC through the SSA should ensure that there is employer and wider sector ownership of the issues that are taken forward in the (stage 5) action plan. Fourthly, the SSA must be able to demonstrate that either a very wide cross section of the sector buys into the solutions, or that the solutions will not have a detrimental effect on those that are not signed up (SSDA, 2007, p7). This fourth requirement is a strange one, in that if the wider sector includes providers then there might very well be a detriment to those who do not sign up, if for example lucrative curriculum delivered in FE colleges is removed because it is not ‘fit for purpose’ and the providers, or a provider representative such as the Association of Colleges (AoC) refuses to sign up. To get provider sign up therefore my require the ‘watering down’ of key curriculum changes, a point I propose to return to in subsequent work.

Fifthly, the point made above under the fourth minimum requirement is also true for the fifth requirement in that the SSA is required to ensure that a jointly owned action plan is achieved and there is agreement to workable solutions between the industry, the SSC and the relevant delivery partners (SSDA, 2007, p7). The implicit need to compromise to achieve this aim potentially from a robust SNA is imperative, if the SSA was realistically to progress. The oxymoron inherent within the SSA of representing employers but needing to achieve the support of providers is never really addressed it is suggested either here or in any documentation produced by the SSDA related to the SSA, nor for that matter apart from exhortations to do deals with the devolved nations is there any discussions about how employer needs may be sacrificed on the altar of provider or devolved nation/English regional policy.

Sixthly, the SSA is required to demonstrate that all the skill requirements at all levels have been considered, even though not all of them will necessarily feature as priorities in the final plan. Seventhly the SSA must demonstrate that issues of sector demographics have been examined and that suitable action is being taken to address issues of workforce diversity and equality. The eighth minimum requirement puts the emphasis on the SSC and their SSA, to justify any changes to the curriculum that they are asking for from the provider network, although this is a good idea, because as intimated above, changes that affect funding with a college are likely to be challenged by the colleges or through the Regional Skills Partnership, or the AoC. Ninthly and finally, the SSA is supposed to ensure a balanced final agreement, with recognizable input from the sector and identifiable employer collaboration to complement action from the public agencies (SSDA, 2007). The inference from this last statement is that although the SSA is an employer driven document, it may in previous SSAs have been more biased by official Government documentation, rather than quality information from employers. While getting employers to engage is difficult, it seems axiomatic to the author that an SSA dominated by supply side and policy input and lacking employer engagement will not be value for money.

In case there was any doubting that the SSDA were running the process, SSCs are enjoined to work with their SSDA development manager on the drafts of their reports, as the SSDA has an overview and quality assurance role, ‘and will be able to offer helpful advice.’ The SSC Board will submit the final Action Plans to the SSDA for approval, however SSCs are
required to liaise separately with England partners and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland project boards over sign-up procedures (SSDA, 2007, p8).

By 2007 when the final standards document was written, there was a belief that the SSA would continue and be refreshed on a regular basis. Interestingly, the concept of the SSA moving from an agreement per se to more of a ‘direction of travel’ discussed in my earlier papers is here effectively incorporated into the orthodoxy of the SSDA with the SSDA (2007) recommending that SSCs identify in their action plans which areas of work are agreed and which areas of work are the result of on-going negotiation. The next part of the report is interesting as it pre-dates the Letich (2007) report on skills and therefore does not anticipate the demise of the SSDA, as it concludes that SSA progress will be monitored via the SSDA performance review process, which it is thought probably died with the SSDA and the project boards in the devolved nations, which also now, without the steer of the SSDA, may be moving to a state of hibernation (SSDA, 2007, p8).

SSDA (2007) then moves towards a very prescriptive description of the things an SSC needs to do in planning the development of their SSA, and these are placed under seven headings. First the SSC is tasked to set up a project team with support groups that has clear roles and responsibilities. The lead is recommended to be the CEO of the SSC, and it is recommended by SSDA (2007) that each of the devolved nations has its own representative/lead. This group then is required secondly to draw up a project plan, and thirdly to produce a stakeholder analysis and mapping and communication plan, with key messages/core script. Fourthly, the group needs to identify the staff resources needed within the project plan. Fifthly SSCs are required to make sure that all staff within the SSC are clear on their role and sixthly identify key milestones, which can be internal to the SSC or external as in the milestones that had a ‘contractual’ basis with SSDA. These contractual milestones are: showcasing events, SSA project meetings across the UK, designing a programme of consultation with employers and stakeholders, process for consultation and review of action plans with employers and stakeholders and the launch of the SSA. Seventhly, identify budget and resources at each stage (SSDA, 2007, p11). This final point is an interesting one, as at the beginning of the process, SSCs had been required to cost an application to undertake an SSA, where they had allocated the spreading of the SSDA funding, this advice therefore appears to be somewhat belated.

Communications is also a key part of the advice, marketing and promotion play a key role in the development of SSAs, with SSCs being required to consider the position of the SSC and the SSA process with employers and with key partners, and how the various five stages of the SSA process can be used to achieve that. Secondly, what are the key partners hoping to achieve, and how can win-win agreements be created. Given the arguments in my previous work, that SSAs had not lived up to their original promise, there is a reminder to SSC communications teams to consider how to manage expectation. There is also a recommendation that SSCs establish the level of detail that is required at local/sub-sectional/home nation level, and reign in the aspirations of employers who think that the SSA will lead to additional funding for the sector, when really the SSA is about better targeting of existing resources (SSDA, 2007, p11-12).

SSDA (2007) advises SSCs to appoint a senior project manager project team to drive the process, and where work is to be contracted out, to speak to other SSCs and the SSDA for advice of appropriate consultants with proven knowledge and experience and ensure that any work being tendered is effectively scoped, using SSDA to advise on invitations to tender. This advice therefore is advising an SSC to be very reliant on the SSDA, which is also interesting. Further advice from SSDA (2007, p14) refers to the sensitivities that many ‘other ‘bodies responsible for PCET have both it is suggested with SSCs and the SSA. The statement about the direction of travel, is perhaps over stated, given that SSCs should through
representing employers, be presenting employer driven solutions, which should at least in theory it is suggested be different to those that supply bodies are working on:

“The majority of the partners are aware of the issues associated with skills supply in their area and are already working on solutions and improvements. Be sensitive in the way you present perceived weakness. You are more likely to be moving in the same direction of travel than contradicting each other. Ensure that you show awareness of existing sector specific work that partners are supporting.” (SSDA, 2007, p14)

An interesting ‘New Labour’ spin that might have been missing had the SSAs been developed under a Conservative administration is the requirement that the Trades Union Congress and appropriate unions be involved in the process. As SSDA (2007, p16) states, it is a requirement that trade unions are involved in the process, with the Union Learning Reps providing a potentially powerful mechanism for joint working within the SSA (SSDA, 2007, p16).

Here again the guidance and ipso facto the SSDA see nothing incongruous with this approach. If the SSA and SSCs are there to represent employers, who are employers? Are they not the company owners? Is there a possibility that the employers and the trade unions might see things significantly differently as to training. An example may suffice, from the construction and building services area, multi-skilling. For an employer to have a craft operative who is competent to make good in a number of trades is an asset, but from a ‘Marxist’ perspective, it might be argued that such a worker is making other workers redundant, as he is carrying out work from another trade done by others. For employers this is increased productivity, for the trade union, it might be seen as an attack on their workers. Many employers in the construction industry may want their workers multi-skilled, it is less certain that the unions would see it in the same way. The only way to get agreement on this issue would be to avoid it.

SSDA (2007) continues by giving advice to SSCs on how to develop an agreement within the English regions. It is argued that SSCs as national bodies would struggle to influence a regional body particularly regions that have already developed their own regional LMI. The first of the nine key learning points makes the same point by stating that SSC researchers need to be in touch with the regional research centres at stages 1 and two of the SSA (the Sector Needs Analysis Stage1 (SNA) and the Assessment of Current Provision (ACP) stage 2) to make sure that the regional LMI that ‘they’ have produced, is being used. The second key learning point, is to work with LSC national and regional offices to broker the LSC deal. The point being here, that dealing with the LSC national office does not mean that the LSC regional and local offices are necessarily on board (SSDA, 2007, p19).

There is also a statement that the English regions Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) operate differently in each region and have different structures and processes for addressing sector needs, which can make life more difficult for a national SSC, trying to negotiate a national agreement, as has already been discussed in previous work. A rather quirky piece of advice in SSDA (2007, p19) is that it is not wise to assume that regional partners know each sector, so early communication is very important. SSDA (2007) states that where SSCs have regional staff, that they make sure that these staff are involved from early on. There is also a recommendation that SSCs look for employer champions in the region, particularly those that can be cited within the stage 3 documents. Also, once you move beyond research SSDA (2007) recommends that SSCs make sure that their field staff can negotiate deals at regional meetings of partners and stakeholders, using the SSDA regional teams to help build a case. Finally SSCs are advised to be aware of but not necessarily driven by regional targets (SSDA, 2007, p19).
Stage 1: The Skills Needs Assessment/ Sector Needs Analysis

SSDA (2007) refers to the detailed guidance and standards that SSDA produced for the conduct of a methodologically robust assessment, and SSCs are instructed by SSDA (2007, p21) that they must (original emphasis) use this approach. From previous work, on the evaluation of SSAs, this is probably due in part to the criticism that was made of early attempts at this by partners and stakeholders evaluating the process. There was a restatement of the point made previously, that SSCs found that they needed to have more regional LMI to engage with partners and stakeholders in the English regions, although effectively the utilisation of regional data, particularly that produced by the regional partners themselves allows an effective steer to develop on how the SSA is structured. I would argue the more uniformity in data utilised, then the more uniform the outcome.

SSCs were also advised that the SNA should exceed the earlier market assessment of skills needs, which SSCs undertook when they were licensed originally. Although the original work could inform SNA development, the SNA was required to take a view on longer term priorities, undertake a forward looking analysis that goes well beyond current skill needs, and finally a deeper and richer analysis of needs which moves beyond the information in generic skills surveys (SSDA, 2007, p21-22).

There is also an element of building and using scenarios and forecasts at stage 1 where SSDA (2007, p22) states that employers should begin to take decisions on the direction of future change, asking themselves how will the sector improve its competitive position, and what leading edge practice should be adopted, and how can the sector move up the value chain? SSCs are expected to plan initial workshops/dialogues with employers and key stakeholders to start discussing the scenarios and forecasts on what lies ahead, to inform the basis of the market testing, at stage 3 (SSDA, 2007, p22).

SSDA (2007) continues its guidance on the SNA, by stating that the SNA report should have a detailed analysis of the structure and competitiveness of the sector, the sector trends, productivity drivers and their impact on skills needs, the economic conditions in the sector, and action being taken to enhance competitiveness and performance (SSDA, 2007, p22). It then goes on to describe the four key components of the SNA, which are firstly, what drives skill demand, which is an analysis on how the sector defines success, competitiveness and good performance and how well is it performing, and what role do skills play in this? Secondly under this first heading, the report should analyse what market and regulatory pressures are employers facing, and how are they affected performance wise. Thirdly there must be an analysis of the current and historical economic conditions of the sector, the characteristics of key markets, products and services, including how the current position has been shaped by factors such as demographics, globalisation, technological developments and legislative requirements. The report is also supposed to look at changes in demand within the relevant sectors, and finally under the first heading, SSCs were required to look at what business strategies and processes are being pursued to secure competitive advantage within the relevant sector, and how this impacts on skill demand and how skills deficiencies are holding these back, thus influencing the performance and competitiveness of the sector (SSDA, 2007, p023).

The second heading has seven sub-sections to it, all of which an SSC must cover in their analysis of their sectors within this report. It is entitled current and future skill needs, and requires that an SSC will identify the current and future skills needs at all levels from basic and employability skills to level 4 and above, as well as determining the balance between different skill levels. SSCs were also required to determine the relative balance between higher and lower skills right for future competitiveness, analysing whether it was correct or in
need of change, and how any why this change was needed if necessary. It was also important to determine the type of skills i.e. technical, generic or transferable that were important within the sector. The current composition of the workforce by gender, ethnicity and age is also required, as well as an analysis of any divergence of skills held. SSCS within this heading are expected to assess how demographic changes are likely to affect skills and workforce composition, and finally is there or is there likely to be a ‘low skills equilibrium’ within the sector, and did the SSC identify any steps being taken to move up the value chain? (SSDA, 2007, p23)

The third heading requires SSCs within the SSA to undertake a thorough analysis of future trends within the sector, explore in detail the drivers of skill demand in the future, the likely character of future skills demand, and the factors that underpin such demand and associated development needs. A range of scenarios are required to be produced that demonstrate need for the next 5-10 years, and would form the vision for the sector post the SSA. SSCs were required under this heading to provide both forecasts and scenarios. Finally the final report was to provide UK coverage with separate reports of sub-sections for each home nation and each English region, unless there is a clear and explicit rationale for not doing so (SSDA, 2007, p23).

All this effectively was to be completed in eight months! It is argued that this was a very challenging target! Methods that the guide recommends that SSCs adopt include a secondary analysis of national data sources, such as LFS and NESS in England, Futureskills Scotland and Futureskills Wales in the devolved nations for example. This was supposed to be triangulated with primary research where there are knowledge gaps, through the utilisation of quantitative employers surveys and qualitative research such as focus groups with employers (SSDA, 2007, p23).

The Quality Standard for Stage 1, was an assessment document for SSDA to evaluate the performance of SSCs and has twenty-four areas of assessment, with an overall assessment that graded the work as being satisfactory, exemplar or developing, developing means basically a ‘fail’ grade, with remedial work being required. Under the heading sector analysis, there were eight sub-categories, the first of which was that the SNA should cover the minimum areas set out in SSA stage 1 guidance (the final version published when the final group of SSCs tranche 4, were coming to the end of their assessment period) including competitive analysis, productivity drivers, current skill needs, what lies ahead (SSDA, 2007, p26).

Secondly, an SSC was required to demonstrate and extensive understanding of the current and future skills needs of the sector, combining sector specific LMI for deeper insights, with core national and regional data for broader representative view. Thirdly, SSCs were to include benchmarking against the UK average, other countries of the UK and internationally. Fourthly, the SNA must offer sophisticated and distinct insights that interprets and analyses of data. Fifthly an SNA should show comprehensive up-to-date data sources supported by in-house research expertise. Sixthly, the SNA should provide full sector coverage at breadth and depth for the entire SSC footprint, and justify any partial coverage, and seventhly offers pioneering thinking (SSDA, 2007, p26).

Under Identifying skills priorities heading the eighth sub-heading require an SNA to identify skills priorities that flow from the evidence base, building significantly on the SSC market assessment, with ninthly a clearly presented and well structured logical argument, where tenthly, messages can be plainly extracted. The eleventh assessment criteria requires that the SNA is grounded in employer opinion and consultation and twelfth, provides short, medium and long term priorities embedded in the evidence, and under the thirteenth assessment category, the SNA must present advanced leading edge skills and productivity recommendations at the forefront of skills policy development, which stretches thinking, and
offers high level imaginative employer-relevant solutions. Skill requirements at all occupational levels have been considered and issues of sector demographics have been examined (SSDA, 2007, p26)

The third heading is entitled rigorous assessment, and the fourteenth point requires that an SNA bases intelligence and understanding on a wide range of rigorous and robust evidence, which is methodologically sound, including peer reviewed and employer endorsed academic and practitioner research as well as in-house work. The fifteenth assessment category requires SNAs to contain the most up to date data, and that the SNA is correctly referenced including a bibliography (assessment category sixteen). The seventeenth point is that the credibility of the sector analysis endorsed through wide collaboration with leading sector experts, although who these are how they are found, and how SSDA will assess this are not stated. The eighteenth point is that SSC research is peer reviewed with organisations such as trade associations, are employed, and the results are published (SSDA, 2007, p27-28).

The next sub-heading is entitled ‘continuous improvement’ and has two assessment categories within it. The nineteenth category requires that the SNA shows evidence that the co-operates with LMI partners to ensure synergy and eliminate confusion, this means that the SNA should utilise the evidence for ‘official sources’ and collected by other bodies, with trade associations and professional bodies being identified. The twentieth point requires the SNA to highlight sector research gaps and the means to fill them, building significantly on the SSC market assessment (SSDA, 2007, p28).

The fourth sub-heading is entitled dissemination and achieving influence, with the twenty-first assessment category being that the SSC produces an SNA report that is fit for publication and can be deployed by different users. The twenty-second assessment category requires that the SNA reflects within the main report a spatial analysis of the skill needs assessment including separate coverage of the home nations and of the English regions. The twenty-third assessment category requires that SSCs make sure that their SNA results are translated and tailored appropriately for different partners to access as an independent and robust evidence resource, which might include the production of specially tailored outputs. The twenty-fourth and final assessment category requires that SSC SNAs develop thoughtful and innovative mechanisms beyond formal reports, to maximise dialogue and the influence of SSC research over policy, planning and practice for example by action research conducted as part of the SNA (SSDA, 2007, p28-29).

The assessment categories it is suggested are a mixture of both objective and subjective criteria, some of which can be measured against data in the SNA report, some of which is more intuitive in nature. The recruitment by SSDA of consultants to undertake the assessment of the SNA reports, did create some problems, and this will be explored in further work, because it is suggested of the lack of sector specific knowledge that the consultants had, of the twenty-five sectors within the Skills for Business network. As will been seen in later work, this showed a tendency to concentrate on the familiar data sources, and it is suggested give less emphasis to the value of primary data. It is also difficult to see how an SSC could show peer review as part of the assessment. Over time, the whole of the assessment system appeared to fall apart, as time constraints drove the process.


The understanding of supply, or assessment of Current Provision (ACP) section as it was originally known (the terminology appears to have changed during the process) was the
second stage in the process and required a new report/ set of reports. The question that the ACP sought to address is qualified thus:

“\textit{The overall question for the intelligence phase is “Are the patterns of provision and qualifications in the sector sufficient to satisfy short and long term skill needs for future competitiveness and to improve productivity? If not, where are the gaps and how can we fill them?” (SSDA, 2007,p30)}\textit{\text{}}}\

The ACP report is required to answer some specific questions, the first of which is an analysis of the education, training and skills provision across the whole sector, and is it enough to deliver the priority skills the sector needs for the future? SSDA (2007, p31) provides that this analysis should take place at pre-entry level, for new entrants, at different occupational levels and for the existing workforce. Further questions that the report is required to answer are what broad competence is necessary for someone joining the workforce, the number of course/ places and variations by skill group, region, provider, and is the current supply sufficient for current and future skills needs, and if not where are the gaps/ problem areas? Finally under this heading , the extent of private training provision is required to be assessed within this report (SSDA, 2007, p31).

The second specific question leading on from the first, is what is causing skill shortages? How will this affect future priority skill needs? What action needs to be taken? Within this question, the ACP report is required to consider if there are too few places on existing courses with levels of provision (public or public) not meeting needs nationally or regionally. Is there a lack of courses in particular skills areas, or is there a lack of take up on courses needed by the sector? The ACP should identify the skills, qualifications and experience of new recruits of any age, and are employers satisfied with that? Also the ACP should consider in which occupational and skill area is there a fit between supply and demand, and where does supply not meet current demand and if so what is causing this? The report should also examine if employers prefer recruits from specific courses/ with specific qualifications and if so which and why? Also how do skill requirements now and in the future map against occupational standards and qualifications, and what are the implications for the volume, mode, structure and content of provision? (SSDA, 2007, p31-32).

The third question required the ACP report to analyse how employers are investing in the existing workforce and whether this requires change? Under this general question SSCs are required to define the features of employer investment in skills, and analyse the balance between formal and informal training. The report also needs to consider the areas of current provision that employers do not use, with an indication of why this might be. There also needs to be an indication of what is driving employer investment, is it for example responding to skills deficiencies, enhancing business performance or up-skilling. There also a need to discover whether employers use private of public provision, and how much do they spend per employee on training and development? The report is also supposed to assess individual investment in skills (although how this is done in such a short time was never explained). Following from the following point, the report should identify which occupations are individuals most likely to invest in their own skills and why, and how significant is this investment to the sector (SSDA, 2007, p32).

The fourth section looks at skills across the sector, and the ACP was required to look at the relative balance of investment between public funding, employer funding and individual funding. Secondly, looking at the skills of the existing workforce and given the government commitment to focus resources on those below level 2, will the relative balance of funding need to change? How should investment be redirected to meet future needs, how can the use of public funding be maximised and which agencies need to be involved, and how could
employer investment be better used and where could joint action be taken? (SSDA, 2007, p32).

SSDA (2007, p33) provides the data sources from which it is anticipated (by SSDA) that the report will come from, and these include secondary literature sources, primary data collected by the SSCs including case studies. It interesting to note that SSDA (2007, p33) appears to call quantitative surveys primary data, whereas the more qualitative ‘case study’ data is categorised separately, which suggests that the writer did not really understand that the definition of primary data, could extend to the outcomes of qualitative research. Management information, from organisations such as awarding bodies is also applicable, as well as existing research by Government bodies in the UK and devolved nations. Finally there is an interesting heading entitled “discussions with key partners and providers” which could be qualitative interviews, but appear from the text appear to be informal or formal conversations with other planners of provision. How SSDA saw the methodological contextualisation of such data would be interesting, but is not commented on in the report. These seemingly innocuous methodological confusions, may have however caused some issues in relation to quality later, because as with the SNA, the ACP was subjected to assessment.

There are twenty-nine assessment categories that the SSDA used to quality assure the ACPs, and these are as follows: under the first heading entitled a high level analysis of provision, the first requirement is that the ACP develops an analytical framework that enablers a mapping of workforce development within the sector. Two, the report must present a picture of trend information on education and training provision in each of the home nations and English regions if possible. It never really was possible because the LSC data provided was cut at course code level nationally only, regional data was provided in Learn Direct codes, which was confusing. Thirdly, the report should be able to map out at a high level, the main suppliers of skills, such that it is known who delivers what, where and to whom as far as possible by occupation and skill level from school to entry level to CPD and senior management. Fourthly, the report must show the use of multiple sources of information and methods, drawn from both the public and private sectors, to build a picture of the quality of provision. Fifthly, the report should include benchmarking against the UK average, other countries of the UK and internationally, and sixthly, has comprehensive up to date data sources drawn from across the four nations supported by in-house research and expertise. Seventhly, the report should have data and analyses that triangulates information and views from employers, learners, suppliers and funders (SSDA, 2007, p36-37).

The second heading is entitled the Depth Analysis of Key Supply Issues. Under this heading, the ACP report eighthly, should offer sophisticated and distinct insights that interprets and analyses data. Ninthly, the ACP should analyse the workforce development data alongside the skills priorities identified in the stage 1 report to identify if there are particular issues around skills or occupations or sub-sectors to warrant further investigation. Tenthly, the ACP should show evidence of in-depth analysis of the supply issues in the sector that provides real insight into why problems of supply have occurred historically or why they might occur in the future. Eleven, in undertaking the analysis the ACP should demonstrate an understanding of the policy landscape as it applies to workforce development and provision, the funding regimes and qualifications infrastructure in each nation. Twelve, the ACP should explore fully whether the issues lie with the public and/or private sector with regard to volume and access, distribution, quality of provision, mode of delivery or qualifications and accreditation. Thirteen, the ACP should explore whether the issues are ‘infrastructural’ and require system changes or behavioural and require cultural changes, amongst employers, learners or providers (SSDA, 2007, p37-38)

The third heading is entitled Identifying priorities, and the fourteenth point under this heading is that the ACP should identify the issues and the underlying parameters (presumably of the curriculum offer, although this is not stated, and leaves a lot of room for interpretation).
Fifteen, the ACP is supposed to identify priorities that flow from the evidence base. Sixteen, the analysis is clearly presented with logical argument, and is well structured. Seventeenth, it plainly extracts key messages (again presumably from the data). Eighteen, it is clearly grounded in employer supply side opinion and consultation, and nineteen, it provides short, medium and long term priorities as drawn from the evidence, and twenty, presents recommendations at the forefront of skills policy development, which stretches thinking, and offers high-level, imaginative employer relevant solutions. This heading has the shortest explanations related to the assessment criteria, and is therefore the most subjective in nature, leaving a certain amount of leverage for the SSDA in the assessment process (SSDA, 2007, p38).

The fourth heading is entitled rigorous assessment, with the twenty-first point being that the ACP should base intelligence and understanding on a wide range of rigorous and robust evidence, which has a sound methodological base, and should include peer reviewed and employer endorsed academic and practitioner research as well as in-house work. Twenty-second, that data sources are up to date, and that the work is correctly and thoroughly referenced throughout including a bibliography, and twenty-four, credibility of analysis is endorsed through wide collaboration with funders, providers, employers and other stakeholders in each of the nations (SSDA, 2007, p38-39).

The fifth heading for assessment is dissemination and achieving influence. The twenty-fifth point required that the ACP was a UK wide report, with separate reports or sub-sections for each nation, fit for publication that could be deployed by different users. Twenty-six, that within the English report, there should be an analysis of the supply infrastructure and how it varies across the regions where this is significant given the priorities identified in stage 1. Twenty-seven the ACP should ensure that results are translated and tailored appropriately for different partners to access as an independent and robust evidence resource, which could include the production of specially tailored results. Twenty-eight, the ACP should show that the report develops thoughtful and innovative mechanisms beyond formal reports, to maximise dialogue and the influence of SSC findings over policy, planning and practice. Twenty-nine, the SSC ACP (almost a repetition) must be UK wide, with separate reports or sub-sections for each nation, fit for publication that can be deployed by different users (SSDA, 2007, p39-40).

In addition to this exhaustive assessment criteria, there are four pages of additional guidance for SSCs undertaking the ACP report, enabling an SSC to view what is required to achieve the ‘meets’ standard, or the (presumably) more prestigious exemplar status. So for example under A (and the list goes through to K) to meet the required standard in assessment criteria 18,21 and 24, the SSC ACP report must provide a summary of the methodology, which highlights who has been consulted, how and when in each of the four nations using the stakeholder maps as a key source of information. If however an ‘exemplar’ standard is sought, then the SSC ACP will provide a detailed methodology for those who wish to read it or signposts the reader to where they can be found. The report clearly explains the size of the sample and rationale for its choice for each nation. It highlights the reason(s) for any under representation of employer and provider views and action taken/planned to address this. Finally, it lists all those consulted in an appendix (SSDA, 2007, p41-44).

As with stage 1, the assessment show an interesting mix of predominantly contract control of the outcome, while at the same time seeking to incorporate within this a ‘pseudo’ academic assessment system, such that might be used to mark a dissertation, although ultimately, all SSCs were required to get up to the meets standard, although the majority of the funding had already been paid to them, on submission of the report for assessment.

Stages 3-5 of the SSA
In relation to this part of the report, the SSDA (2007) guidance concludes:

“SSCs that have been through the SSA process say that the nature and pace of the work changes considerably as you enter stage 3. The scale, approach and skills needed for stages 3-5 may well be different from anything the SSC has done in the past. Stages 3-5 will be happening simultaneously as you move backwards and forwards between your proposed solutions and action, discussion and consultation on these and the final sign up with funding and delivery partners” (SSDA, 2007, p45)

It continues later on the same page:

“At stages 3 to 5 you will be seeking agreement from employers and stakeholders on the skills gaps identified and your proposed solutions. You will be carrying out negotiations with employers, funding bodies and providers to develop agreement about a range of actions/solutions across all sub-sectors, employees and geographic area.” (SSDA, 2007, p45).

Under a heading of working with employers at the agreement phase, there are a number of interesting headings in SSDA (2007), the first of which is managing expectations. Employers must be enthused the report concedes to get them involved, but don’t over promise. Presumably quoting an SSC from tranche 2 or the pathfinder tranche, the report continues:

“It is the job of the SSC to facilitate understanding on both sides. Tell the supply side what employers want: tell employers what is possible.” (SSDA, 2007, p48)

This is the agreement, although the tone of the above statement suggests that employers are potentially asking for the impossible. Also it implies that the supply side determines the possibilities. This appears to be quintessentially leaving the supply side ‘unmolested’, and the ‘secret garden of the curriculum’ still in the hands of the supply side. Thus working with employers means communicating the conditions under which the public sector will fund programmes, and that employers will need to make a commitment to do their part (whatever that is, and probably means funding) and finally asking them to take a leap of faith. Employers the document informs the reader need to understand that the SSA process is creating real change in the skills infrastructure (although this contention of course can be challenged when the SSAs are evaluated) employers therefore need to ‘seize the opportunity to influence that change for their organisation and their sub-sectors, and they themselves are expected to take action, and not see the SSA as being about more public subsidy for training and development (SSDA, 2007, p48).

Employers therefore move from a passive to an active role in stage 3, and need to be seen to commit to the process. The report states that SSCs may be hindered in that employers may be unwilling to commit until they know what they are agreeing to and what the public funders will do, something that may not become apparent until the end of stage 5, whereas the public stakeholders want to see evidence of employer commitment before committing themselves, thus leaving potentially an SSC being ‘piggy in the middle’ seeking to make two reluctant participants to commit. The report concedes that this and other factors may mean that negotiations remain fluid and thus don’t happen in distinct stages, leading more to a direction of travel outcome, rather than a solid agreement at stage 5 (SSDA, 2007, p49).
A large part of the report then, is taken up with discussion and tips on how the SSC may engage with employers and stakeholders. One interesting point that shows the more conciliatory nature of the SSA process, and shows how the supply side have used their planning and funding cycles to control the impact of SSA impacts:

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

A similar remedy is prescribed to tackling the devolved nations of the UK. SSDA (2007, p57) first recommends that the SSC familiarize themselves with current policies and initiatives so that these can be built into solutions, with the report also suggesting that the nation managers within the devolved nations also being included in the negotiations. The report suggests that SSCs have some very specific ideas about solutions, and who can deliver these. The report also warns about assuming that a UK wide idea can be implemented in the same way everywhere. Finally the report recommends that SSC use bi-lateral and Project Board discussions to further discussions with stakeholders to further advancement of the process (SSDA, 2007, p57).

Another interesting statement that comes from SSC experience is the relationships within the SSCs. Under the heading of ‘Don’t rely on LSC National Office to broker the LSC deal’, the report concludes:

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

Gap Analysis and Market Testing: Stage 3 Report

The purpose of stage 3 is stated as follows:

“The purpose of Stage 3- the market testing stage- is to try out a range of potential solutions, and actions with employers and stakeholders to gauge their opinion and response. At the end of this stage there will be general agreement on where the sector is now in terms of skill needs and skill supply; what needs to happen to deliver any key skills needed for the future and who needs to do what to achieve that. This provides the basis for detailed negotiations at stages 4 and 5, when employers funders and delivery partners will sign up to specific actions.” (SSDA, 2007, p65).

The report goes on to define the skills that are needed at stage 3 by the SSC. These are first excellent communication skills though which to share the technical findings from the evidence base in a clear and simple form. Secondly, facilitation skills, by which the SSC is able to run workshops and bilaterals and to manage the different views of employers, sub-
sectors and stakeholders and partners, with thirdly deal making and negotiation skills particularly when dealing with stakeholders within the regions. Fourthly, product development skills, that requires vision, imagination and pragmatism to develop the products that will take the sector forward. It also takes an understanding of both the needs of employers, and the workings of the public funding systems in all of the nations. Finally, there is the need for careful management within the SSC as solutions are developed in the English regions and devolved nations, as these require different knowledge bases (SSDA, 2007, p66).

It is interesting to note, that the quality assessment standard for stage 3 is considerably smaller, having only fifteen points on it, rather than the 20+ points that related to stage 1 and 2. Under the title ‘Gap analysis and market testing, there are four assessment categories. The first requires that the Stage 3 report have a synthesis of evidence from Stages 1 & 2. Secondly, the Stage 3 report should identify the key gaps and potential short, medium and long term solutions that flow from the evidence base for market testing. Thirdly, presents a clearly argued narrative that is informative, well evidenced, logical, persuasive and robust. Fourthly, plainly extracts messages. Fifthly a gate way criteria requirement is that the stage 3 report should be grounded in employer supply side opinion and consultation. A gateway requirement was a new concept that SSDA placed within the Stage 3 assessment. The meaning of it was, that if the SSC didn’t fulfil this criteria, then the report couldn’t be accepted, it was therefore a key assessment category, presumably allowing some latitude in other categories (SSDA, 2007, p69).

The sixth assessment criteria provided that the stage 3 report would provide short, medium and long term priorities as drawn from the evidence. Seventhly, and again a gateway criteria, the credibility of analysis is tested through wide consultation with funders, providers, employers and other stakeholders in each of the nations and regions. Eighthly, and again a gateway criteria, a series of proposed solutions and a provisional action plan have been communicated to employers and key partners for discussion, assessment and ultimately endorsement. Nintthly, the stage 3 report must secure a balance of employer and individual views, which also shows trade union involvement. Tenthly, the stage 3 report should develop thoughtful and innovative mechanisms beyond formal reports to maximise dialogue, and the influence of SSC findings over policy, planning and practice (SSDA, 2007, p69).

The second heading is entitled dissemination and achieving influence, and under this heading, the eleventh assessment criteria, which is also a gateway criteria, requires that the SSC produces a stage 3 report or action plan for every nation and region as appropriate, which is fit for publication, and that can be deployed by different users. Twelfth, and also a gateway criteria, the stage 3 report must ensure that results from this stage are translated and tailored appropriately for different partners to access as an evidence resource and basis for early negotiations on agreements. Thirteen, the stage 3 report should articulate the respective roles of the public and the private sectors. Fourteen, the stage 3 report lays out options for potential deals, and fifteen, the nations reports or action plans include a statement of the evidence set in a UK context; the emerging strategy set in a UK context, agreed issues for the short, medium and long-term, set in the appropriate national or regional context; a proposed collaborative solutions and lead partners identified, set in the appropriate national or regional context. The regional action plans should also cross reference to the English national report, map across to regional priorities and include information to inform purchasing (SSDA, 2007, p70-71).

Stage 4: Action with Employers

Stage 4 of the SSA, is the only stage that does not have a report associated with it, and therefore the guidance is relatively small in this area as a consequence. Stage 4 is about brokering the agreement between the SSC and employers, different individual employers and different groups of employers. The main skills that SSDA (2007) identify as being important
are firstly, negotiating skills, secondly working in partnership, and thirdly, weighing different opinions and types of evidence so that agreements are broadly representative of the whole sector (SSDA, 2007, p73).

The key questions that the stage seeks to look at, are what areas of skill shortage and growth are employers going to support? What action needs to be taken? Who is involved and what will they do? What level of/ type of investment are employers prepared to make?

Because of the nature of stage four not having a report, this tended to merge into stage 5, which was the final stage in the SSA, the making of the actual agreement.

Stage 5: The Agreement

SSDA (2007, p77) defines the purpose of the agreement thus:

“The purpose of stage 5 is to get formal sign up for the potential solutions and provisional action plans that you set out at stage 3. A range of partners will sign up and carry out actions, costed where appropriate, that will address skills issues in the sector identified at other stages and that will complement the agreements with employers” (SSDA, 2007, p77)

The stage 5 reports are essentially an updated version of the stage 3 reports, but as a minimum are required to contain, the overall vision for the sector, a summary of the overall vision for the sector, a summary of the demand evidence base, a summary of the supply picture, the collaborative solutions for each of the skills issues and success measures that should link to the Skills for Business network objectives, thus relating the agreement back to the performance of the Skills for Business Network generally (SSDA, 2007, p77).

The key recommendation of SSDA (2007) in relation to a successful stage 5 document is to develop a strategic focus, which involves the identification of 3 or 4 big ideas, with 5-10 high level solutions, identified as “your big ticket ideas”. There should also be a focus on the levers for change, which are the key strategic points for leverage that will make a difference to skills supply, as well as an opportunity to be visionary and present innovative solutions, and finally the challenge function, which is, is the current policy framework adequate to deliver what the sector needs? (SSDA, 2007, p77-78).

Although initially it may have been the intention of the Government to use SSCs and the SSA to develop a demand led function, SSDA (2007) maintains that the SSA process revolved around new approaches and new ways of working, of which funding is only one component, but a particularly important one, because it reflects the status of SSCs or not, and the status of the SSA. The concept of an SSA deal implies benefits for both parties, and this, and it might be argued the whole of the SSA approach from stage 3 onwards reflects the ‘New Labour’ trait identified in Newman (2001) of ‘something for something and partnership approach’. SSDA (2007, p78) gives three interesting examples of where this might work. First, Government departments or agencies may agree to financial support for elements where employers are prepared to invest. Secondly, funding councils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland may be willing to support innovative proposals, if the sector will support the development or where the proposals will help contribute to their targets. With the latter possibly having more influence it is suggested than the former. Finally, institutions such as FE colleges in Scotland where they have autonomy over how funding should be deployed, may be open to ideas where sectorally based proposals will help them achieve wider goals, such as social inclusion or employer engagement (SSDA, 2007, p78).
Although SSDA (2007) argues that stage 5 is only an addition to stage 4, it contains within the assessment and quality assurance section, twenty-seven assessment categories. Under the heading of the SSA for each home nation and English region as appropriate, the first assessment criteria provides that the stage 5 report will establish an evidence base that fully articulates the gap between skills demand and provision now and in the near future. It is assumed that this means the economic short term of up to one year. Secondly, the stage 5 report should articulate a clear and strategic focus and vision and programme of action for the sector, grounded in the evidence. Thirdly, and this is a gateway criteria, the stage 5 report should identify key strategic initiatives that will leverage significant change in the supply of skills. Fourthly, the stage five report, must set out the roles and responsibilities of employers, partners, and other key stakeholders. Fifthly, and again this is a gateway criteria, the stage 5 report should include commitments to act and fund from employers, partners and other key stakeholders. Sixthly, the stage 5 report should set out a jointly owned action plan with broad agreement between the industry, the SSC and the relevant delivery partners. Seventhly, the stage 5 report should demonstrate that either a wide cross section of the sector buys into the solutions presented, or that the solutions will not have a detrimental effect on those who are not signed up. Eighthly, the stage 5 report should include a report for each nation and a regional action plan for each English region, with staged milestones for delivery. The regional action plans should also cross reference to the English national report, map across to regional priorities and include information to inform purchasing. Ninthly, the stage 5 report should have clear and measurable performance measures (SSDA, 2007, p79-80).

The second heading is entitled Employer Engagement. The tenth assessment category is a gateway criteria and provides that at every stage of the process, the SSC must be able to show that it has been able to engage employers. The eleventh criteria is that the SSC is able to demonstrate in the stage 5 report that the foundation of the analysis lies with robust and representative information from across the sector and regions. Presumably, although this is not stated, this refers to the research in the stage 1 and stage 2 reports. Twelve, the stage 5 report must show leading edge and larger employers in the sector have made substantial contributions in time and resources to the process. Thirteen, the SSA has engaged with SMEs and the support of employers across the sector including SMEs and/or SME representative bodies (SSDA, 2007, p80-81).

The next heading is entitled Employer commitment. Under this heading the SSC was required to demonstrate in the fourteenth assessment category, that as with assessment criteria twelve, in fact interestingly the wording used is identical, that leading edge and larger employers in the sector have made substantial commitments to the SSA, financial or otherwise. The fifteenth assessment criteria requires that SME commitment is evident in endorsement of the deals and in agreements to participate in/sign up to some of the micro deals. Sixteen the stage 5 report must show that there is a reasonable balance between ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ deals and between commitments to provide funding and other commitments in kind. The seventeenth point requires that the stage 5 report shows that employer commitment is balanced by nation and region as deemed appropriate to the sector. Eighteen, the stage 5 report should show that the named employers have offered to lead in the development and implementation of certain collaborative actions (SSDA, 2007, p81-82).

The fourth heading is entitled partner engagement. The nineteenth assessment criteria requires that at every stage of the process, the SSC has been able to engage with the key partners and stakeholders in the home nations and regions. The twentieth assessment criteria requires that the foundation of the SSA analysis draws on intelligence held by partners across the nations and regions. This is an interesting assessment to make here, as it is suggested that this should have been assessed during the stage one and stage two assessments rather than here at stage five, where it would it is supposed difficult to correct if it was not present, although if it were not present, then it is suggested that regional partners would be unlikely to sign up to the SSA agreement. The twenty-first assessment criteria is a gateway criteria, and
requires that partners and stakeholders have participated in a critical discourse and consultation exercise where the evidence and the conclusions drawn have been subjected to review and agreement. The twenty-second assessment criteria is also a gateway criteria, and provides that key partners have participated in an on-going dialogue to formulate and design collaborative solutions and their respective roles within them (SSDA, 2007, p81-82).

The fifth heading is entitled Partner Commitment, and the twenty-third assessment criteria provides that the stage 5 report must show that key partners have made substantial commitments to the SSA, financial or otherwise. The twenty-fourth assessment criteria provides that the stage 5 report should show a reasonable balance between “macro” and “micro” deals and between commitments to provide funding and other commitments in kind. The twenty-fifth assessment category requires that the stage 5 reports show evidence of partner commitment that is balanced by nation and region as deemed appropriate to the sector. This criteria makes allowances for the fact that the presence of many sectors differs between regions and nations, where there may be a concentration or clustering of the sector in one region or nation and little or no presence in others. The twenty-sixth assessment criteria requires the stage 5 report to show that partners have offered to lead in the development and implementation of specific collaborative actions, and finally twenty-seven, the stage 5 report should show evidence that partners have committed to include the agreed collaborative solutions within their own strategic and business plans (SSDA, 2007, p83-84).

Having looked throughout this paper at one document, albeit the ‘bible’ of sector skills agreement publication, it is proposed to conclude by looking at some of the surrounding information given to SSCs by the consultants who ultimately were paid by the SSDA to provide the marking for the agreements in accompaniment with the SSDA research team themselves. For example Walsh (2005) in a document entitled ‘Sources of international comparative statistics for benchmarking’ given to SSCs at the workshop about to embark on Stage 1 of the agreement sought to bring to the attention of SSCs the importance of international benchmarking, which had not according to SSDA et al been carried out well up to that time. This document seeks first to identify the reasons why international benchmarking was seen as so important to the SNA process. The reasons cited were that international benchmarking provided a wider contest for how things are done in the UK. Secondly, it identified opportunities for alternative approached to use of resources (capital and labour) and workforce development potential, and finally, to learn from the experiences of other countries.(Walsh, 2005, p1).

SSCs were also advised to focus on individual countries rather than groups, such as the EU, to use gateways to access relevant material at country level and seek out quantitative as well as qualitative data. SSCs were also advised when seeking to do this comparative international benchmarking, to concentrate on labour productivity and costs, and output measures; and labour force characteristics such as gender, age, education and working hours, mode of working, time off; and skills composition and utilisation (Walsh, 2005, p5). Part of the package for SSCs paid for by SSDA was a workshop on the development of the reports for each stage of the SSA. Lanz and Walsh (2005a) in their handout to accompany the workshop identify the various avenues of guidance and support from the official SNA guidance documentation to the informal support provided by researchers within the intelligence network. The role of the SSDA in giving advice (although how that relates to their role as assessors is not developed) is also identified as a potential source of information, as well as the SSDA website, as well as their commissioned research. It is proposed to look in more detail at the drivers of the SSDA in a subsequent working paper (Lanz and Walsh, 2005a, p5).

The guidance goes on to give advice on the collection of secondary data before the commissioning of primary data collection. The assumption that Lanz and Walsh (2005) make that SSCs will commission their primary research out to consultants is interesting. Many SSCs in any event contracted out the whole of the research process to consultants, which...
included the sourcing of the literature. SSCs were however supposed to understand the coverage and currency of the available data, sectoral and occupational detail and statistical robustness. The SSC is then required to undertake a gap analysis (not to be confused with stage 3 of the process, see above) between what exists and what is required against the SNA guidance to develop a depth SNA for the sector and to inform what additional research work is required and focus efforts efficiently (Lanz and Walsh, 2005a, p6).

Lanz and Walsh (2005a, p7-15) then cite a number of data sources that SSCs can access, which they in fact are expected to access to build up their sectoral analysis. SSCs are then informed as to where they can access these documents, and these are defined as websites and data portals e.g. NOMIS, ONS, SSDA, FSW, FSS, the knowledge base/SSDA Matrix, Working Futures and NESS (National Employers Skills Survey), the SSDA newsletter and the consultants own data bases that SSCs can use (Lanz and Walsh, 2005, p17). On face value this seems really helpful given the time constraints, but another argument could be made, to suggest that the SSDA and the consultants are having a significant influence on the outcome of the work by the SSCs and are inhibiting any level of academic freedom in relation to the production of SSAs by the research teams or consultants undertaking the research. As will be developed in subsequent work, there was a significant amount of control on the content of outcomes of the research elements, which while requiring the use of academic referencing, undermined the ability for ‘academics’ to have control on outcomes or fashion them themselves, or question the validity of some of the sources that were prescribed in the guidance document.

A further innovation related to the SNA, was the development of Scenario planning, which in a separate handout given to SSCs by Lanx and Walsh (2005b) advised SSCs, that all decisions are taken within an atmosphere of uncertainty, planning therefore needs to be considered in a number of different scenarios and from a steady state, and optimistic view, and a pessimistic view (Lanz and Walsh, 2005b, p1). Lanz and Walsh (2005b, p2) then go on to identify the DTI (as it then was) Future Focus as being a tool that SSCs might wish to use, they then go on to discuss the approaches that the SSCs may wish to use, in undertaking a scenario forecast, such as using existing sector forecasts, commissioning of new forecasts and combining general economic forecasts, with the problems being identified as generality and resources and costs (Lanz and Walsh, 2005b, p5).

Finally in Lanz and Walsh (2005c) the consultants took SSCs through the requirements for assessment that they were required to consider, thus the consultants in one movement, changed from supporters of SSCs on the process to examiners, so SSCs were required to consider the various audiences that the employers were to consider, including employers, all the organisations listed in the SSA project boards in the devolved nations, the RDAs, LLSCs and RSPs in England and the Learning providers (Lanz and Walsh (2005, p2).

Lanz and Walsh (2005c,p3) then discuss the structure of the report, concluding that there is no formal structure for the report, although advice is given in annex 2 of the report guidance, and content is effectively determined by the assessment criteria, discussed in SSDA (2007) above. Although the document suggests that SSDA would prefer one overarching UK wide report, this could be supplemented, and for the devolved nations effectively had to be substituted with devolved nation reports (Lanz and Walsh, 2005c, p3).

To give SSCs even more guidance then Lanz and Walsh (2005c, p5) quote the findings of a SSDA commissioned study carried out by GHK consultants on evaluation of the SSA (it is proposed to consider this report in the analysis of the role of the SSDA). First, they identify that there is a need for SSCs to balance employer and partner consultation against data gathering and analysis. Secondly they identify the importance of engaging employers directly in scoping and shaping the SNA. Thirdly, SSCs are asked to consider what constitutes evidence, as this can differ across partners and finally SSCs own research is given greater
prominence than national data and other evidence sources. (Here the wording is confused in the original and in fact makes no sense, presumably Lanz and Walsh (2005c, p5) are arguing that the GHK report is encouraging the value added ‘bit’ of the SNA i.e. the SSCs own primary research is given more prominence than the national data sources, which are freely available for the partners to view themselves (Lanz and Walsh, 2005c, p5).

Lanz and Walsh (2005c, p6-7) identify a range of weaknesses in previous SNAs that SSCs in the pathfinder and tranche 2 had submitted, and these were first, limited evidence and analysis by individual UK country and English region, i.e. a national report that was too national and not local enough. Point two follows naturally from this, and points to a lack of understanding of the infrastructure and policy difference across UK countries, and thirdly, breadth of evidence sources not used, and fourthly a need to tailor findings to different policy contexts, which Lanz and Walsh (2005, p7) feel is difficult, but conclude researchers need to be aware of this expectation and consider whether this can be done through one overarching SNA. Stakeholders apparently thought that there was a lack of international and sector benchmarking, and a need to go beyond the generic skills analysis, e.g. IT, communication skills, and a need by SSC in their stage 1 reports to answer the “so what does this mean” questions rather than descriptively reporting data (Lanz and Walsh, 2005, p8).

Finally, Lanz and Walsh (2005c, p14) identify the recent evaluation messages, that had come through from tranche 3 SNAs that had been marked by SSDA and the consultants. Given the sheer volume of information and requirements emanating from SSDA about what had to be included it is perhaps not surprising, that it was concluded that some of the SNAs were too long at 400+ pages, or had been broken into discrete reports, or SNA sections that lacked coherence. There was still concern that generic skills needs rather than sector specific skills, leading to a conclusion that deeper sector analysis was required. There was still a belief that there was a lack of benchmarking both sectoral and international. There was also a feeling that skills priorities were often not clearly presented and that there was limited workforce and sector profiling. Finally there was a feeling that the full range of secondary data was not utilised by SSCs in their SNAs (Lanz and Walsh (2005, p14).

A similar process took place for stage 2, where How (2006) took the delegates at a day workshop through the requirements for the stage 2 report, which were first to assess quantity, quality and relevance of and investment in current provision. Secondly, to identify whether existing supply will be sufficient to satisfy short and long term skills needs for future competitiveness. Thirdly, to understand the policy and operational contexts of the four nations. Fourthly, capturing the insights of suppliers and employers and fifthly being the starting point for stage 3 (How, 2006, p1). Although the original guidance was developed in 2005 the evidence from the evaluation of the pathfinder SSAs suggested that this was the weakest part of the agreement. The failure of this stage to get to grips with supply of provision would of course have made it easier for the supply to unpick the whole of the agreement.

Toppin (2006a, p1-2) then goes on to give SSCs advice on presentation that one would have thought would have been axiomatic such as presentation of the reports needing to be logical with clear signposts for the reader for each section/ sub-section, using data sources that are up to day, correctly referenced throughout, plainly extracted and logical argument. SSDA national members then took the SSCs through the requirements and policy contexts of the individual nations of the UK, thus Toppin (2006b, p2) pointed to the need for SSCs within the English context to consider the Education White Paper containing policy on specialist schools, vocational learning, and employer links. Secondly, the 14-19 Strategy & Implementation Plan with the introduction of specialist diplomas, functional skills and apprenticeships. Thirdly, the HE Strategy and the development of employers and HE knowledge exchange, with the expansion of foundation degrees. Fourthly the FE White Paper, with SSCs required to look at the UK vocational qualifications reform, level 3
entitlement and train to gain for HE and fifthly the skills strategy with the regional, sector infrastructure and delivery targets to consider (Toppin, 2006b,p2).

Downey (2006,p1) described the DETI Economic Vision for Northern Ireland, the DELNI FE means business and the Northern Ireland Skills Strategy and the DENI three year strategic plan Education, which at that time was in preparation. At the time of this conference, the PCET world in Northern Ireland was in ‘ferment’ as the number of FE colleges across the six counties of the North was being reduced from sixteen to six, as well as the proposed creation of a new single Education Authority and realignment of DELNI role and function. The Skills Strategy was an overarching strategy that contained as Essential Skills Strategy (the Northern Ireland name for Key Skills) a Further Education Review, a Government Funded training Programme initiative, Management and Leadership policies, a response from HE to the Skills Agenda, a welfare to work Agenda, and a Careers IAG, within four themes: theme 1 was understanding the demand for skills; theme 2, improving the skills of the workforce; theme 3, improving quality and relevance of education and training; and theme 4, tackling skills barriers to employment and employability (Downey, 2006, p3-4).

Jones (2006) also points out the policy context in Wales at the same event, the policy document Wales: A Vibrant Economy was considered, this is a key document to improve the skills base of Wales, using the opportunities created by mergers (it is assumed that this refers to the taking into the Welsh Assembly Government of ELWA the FE funding equivalent of the LSC and the Welsh Development Agency to name but two bodies) to deliver more demand-led training tailored to the needs of businesses. Other policy documents identified were ‘The Learning Country’, People, Places, Futures: The Wales Spatial Plan, the Work Based Learning Improvement Plan and Skills For Business Response and the 14-19 Learning Pathways Action Plan (Jones, 2006, p1-2).

Pontin (2006) at the same workshop, pointed to the Scottish context, which were as follows, Life through learning, Learning through life, a Smart Successful Scotland and the Framework for Economic Development in Scotland (Pontin, 2006, p1-2). The rest of the workshop was taken up in telling the SSCs where data could be obtained from and from whom, with contact details included.

From this paper, and previous work in this series that I have produced, it can be seen that SSCs were simply ‘swamped’ with data, and the amount of data that was required was significant, and the time to complete the reports very challenging, it is therefore not surprising that the SSCs struggled to meet the exhausting requirements put forward by SSDA. It might be argued that SSDA were simply expecting too much in too short a period of time for most SSCs.

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