The Sector Skills Agreement and the role of the Devolved Nations of the United Kingdom

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Introduction

This paper looks at the work on the Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) within the devolved nations, and the way that national policy shaped the way that agreements were developed. In my previous work, I have in previous papers spoke about the way that new regionalism theories that have influenced New Labour thinking over the past ten years have had an impact on the way that a national policy such as a SSA within the UK context has had to be changed to meet a devolved nation specific. I have also spoke about the principal/agency control that the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) used to manage the SSA process, and this theme too, will also be evident in this paper.

This paper is not intending to theorise the process at this point, merely to set it out for subsequent theorisation, and to identify the main policy and practical issues that affected each of the devolved nations, and therefore this paper is split into three parts, to represent the devolved nations of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The nine English regions have been discussed in previous work, and therefore concentration is made on the devolved nations.

Northern Ireland

The first point to make about Northern Ireland is, that devolution to the province has led to a number of departments being created. The role of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and a major involvement for SSAs is the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). The major tool that the DEL used to develop policy was contained in the Northern Ireland Skills strategy. Other reports that were influential on the SSA were the Success through Skills Progress Report, FE Means Business Report, the Workforce Development Forum, the Public Accounts Committee Report on Job Skills, Training for Success, Leading to Success: Management and Leadership Development Strategy and Implementation Plan and the Essential Skills Strategy. All of these policy documents were in place or coming into being, when the SSCs started to develop their SSAs.

From this list, it can be seen that there already was a policy base from which policy was being developed in Northern Ireland, and the emphasis in Northern Ireland not surprisingly was (as it was in Scotland and Wales and the English regions) that SSAs should enhance existing policy, not radically change or challenge it, which of course is different from the way SSAs were originally perceived by the national Government in Westminster.

DEL Success through Skills: The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland

Regardless of whatever the SSA s would find, the DEL in its Skill Strategy originally published in 2004 (before the pathfinder SSCs had completed their SSAs) had already set out it’s challenges that it was seeking to respond to (DEL, 2004a). These
were defined as dealing with the impact of globalisation and the new skills and flexibilities that globalisation would bring. Secondly, working with the reality of a national and increasingly international labour market, with mobile labour being a major characteristic of this new global workforce, although what this means in practice is less certain, and realistically it is only the high skill that is mobile. One of the problems that Northern Ireland economy faces is the high levels of low skilled people within it. Thirdly, the skills strategy identified raising the general level of skills in the workforce, through sustained investment, and reducing the scale of the problem of literacy and numeracy, and ensuring that the educational system, which has significant strengths in the general curriculum is equally strong in relation to more applied skills. Fourthly, addressing the high level of economic inactivity, which is seen to be constraining the size of the workforce available for economic growth; and fifthly addressing the negative impact of skills deficiencies in the workforce on productivity and competitiveness (DEL, 2004a, p6; Hammond, 2007, p33).

The skills that the DEL (2004a) identified as being important were the essential skills of literacy, numeracy and information technology. Secondly, employability skills, including team working, problem solving, flexibility (whatever that is) and work based occupation and sector skills (DEL, 2004a, p4; Hammond, 2007, p33-34).

Very importantly, DEL (2004a) set out the agenda for the province and targets and solutions that policy will seek to address, while giving acknowledgement (p1) to the SSA process, it feels to the author like the course is set for skills policy, and SSAs will not be allowed to impact too much on that course. The effects of globalisation and rapid technological advancement that had led to a decline in the traditional heavy engineering and industrial sector, particularly surrounding Belfast; with serious underachievement in the groups that traditionally would have sort employment in those groups, is an area identified for action by DEL (2004). In addition DEL (2004) identifies too few people qualified at technician level 4. There is also fourthly, a concern that that demographic change will impact on the economic prosperity of the province, with 18% more people aged over 50 by 2011 compared to 2001 and 11% fewer children, leading to a need to retrain older workers to make up for the short fall in younger workers, and thus update their skills. Fifthly, Government needs to support business in articulating its skills need (DEL, 2004a ,p8-21; Hammond, 2007a,p34).

As a result of DEL (2004a) the Northern Ireland Government through DEL have undertaken to deliver the following twelve points. First, the development of a Skills Task force to develop a regional framework for employment and skills actions, including the identification of a set of regional skills priority areas. Secondly, DEL propose to develop a small number of employer-led Workforce Development forums at local level to advise DEL on the local demand for skills. This particular proposal looks innocuous at first, but worried many SSCs, as these 'local' bodies could have more influence than the national SSCs and ultimately could be in competition with the SSC for political influence with the DEL. The remit of these local forums will be considered later. Thirdly, the collation and use of Labour Market Information and Research to be enhanced in order to improve the demand side for skills. Fourthly, the reconfiguration of 16-19 provision and apprenticeships developed and extended. Fifthly the findings of the Further Education Review will be implemented, including

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1 One of the most difficult things about working within the devolved nations is the differences, sometimes it seems for difference sake of terminology. The key skills of literacy, numeracy, and IT are called key skills in England and Wales, Common Skills in Scotland, and Essential Skills in Northern Ireland. To mix up the terminology is to invite ridicule on any SSC from within the respective devolved nation, trying to get their head around all of them!
revised curricular, planning and funding processed. Sixthly the number of foundation degrees in areas of priority skills will be increased significantly. Seven, essential skills will be extended to include computer literacy and will utilise the existing provision for ICT. As Key Skills in England and Wales and Common Skills already contain an ICT element, in this sense, Northern Ireland is coming into line with the rest of the UK. In England, Ruth Kelly (when Secretary of State at the then Department for Education and Skills) announced a level 2 entitlement for all adults, and eighthly, this policy is replicated in Northern Ireland, giving an entitlement to a first level 2 qualification for those aged over 19. Nine, the DEL commits itself to developing management and leadership skills in Northern Ireland. Tenthly, Welfare reform will be amended in Northern Ireland to help those on incapacity benefit and those with barriers to employment to re-enter or enter the labour market. Eleven, the DEL proposed to develop a revised qualifications system, covering vocational education, to be in place by 2007, and twelve, the financial implications of education and training will be clarified and communicated to employers and individuals (DEL, 2004a, p8-121; Hammond, 2007a, p35).

Success through Skills Progress Report

Commensurate with the tranche four SSCs who were the final tranche to go through the SSA process, the DEL issued the Success through Skills Progress Report, which sought to build on the initial work from 2004. Two interesting developments that came out of this report, were that a policy was enunciated, that every apprentice in the province had to be employed status from day one of the apprenticeship beginning, which certainly would limit the numbers of potential apprentices that could be recruited to the number of employers willing to employ them, and in this way prevent the FE colleges from developing vocational courses without employment status. As will be seen in my later work, this became an issue for one SSA, which proposed to reduce the number of non employed status vocational courses in Colleges.

A further element of this report, was the use of grading systems for inspection of quality for FE providers. It should be remembered than in this, Northern Ireland was behind England and Wales, who had had through OfSTED and Estyn, inspection grading for FE from the Further and Higher Education Act 1992; and is an example of the difficulties that SSCs faced when trying to evaluate such diverse systems (DEL, 2005a, p29).

FE Means Business

Further Education Means Business (2004) is a key strategic document for the streamlining of further education provision within Northern Ireland. The streamlining outlined in FE means business, was the reduction in the number of FE colleges, from sixteen to six super colleges. This initiative has subsequently taken place, and the province now boasts six super colleges. Traditionally, FE provision in Northern Ireland had to take account of sectarian divides within the province, which meant that often a college would have two campuses either side of the ‘peace’ line offering identical provision for protestant and catholic learners. The peace dividend allows the streamlining of this provision, to reduce expenditure, although it will be interesting to see how this will work in practice, given the polarity of political opinion in the province, with Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party both being traditionally entrenched in their nationalist and unionist traditions.
Workforce Development Forum

This policy initiative, which I discussed earlier within this paper, emanated from the Skills Expert Group within DEL, and this group created a number of local Workforce Development Forums (WDF), which was intended to comprise of individuals from the public, private and social economic sectors, and whom had experience in the skills needs of each of the identified local areas.

The work of the forum is to match local skills supply and demand on an ongoing basis and identify emerging skills needs in the area. The WDF will therefore identify and articulate the skills needs for the local economy of the area, and promote a strategic response to those needs from existing local public and private sector training providers. The WDF is also tasked with making representations to DEL and other Government departments and agencies on matters affecting the demand and supply of skills in a local area, and through its chairperson, the WDF will contribute directly to the implementation of the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland and the development of a Regional Employment and Skills Action Plan (DEL, 2006a, p2; Hammond, 2007a, p37).

Further objectives of the Forum are to first, examine the local market skills needs and to share information within the forum and with the skills expert group and to advise future action. Secondly, to develop proposals to deal with identified local skills shortages. Thirdly, to co-ordinate the activities in this area of the public, private and social economy organisations represented by the forum, and fourthly to monitor progress in the implementation of proposals for action within the relevant area, and fifthly to consider the local implications of Skills Expert recommendations. (DEL, 2006a, p3; Hammond, 2007a, p37-38).

The work of the WDF is required to produce the following outcomes, first, a prioritised list of local issues to be progressed together with an identified means of progression. Secondly, an ad hoc or interim report or reports as are considered beneficial, and thirdly, an annual summary of the work of the local WDF, together with a report covering the main local labour market issues and skills forecast (DEL, 2006a, p4; Hammond, 2007a, p38).

An analysis of the role and outcomes of the WDF, appears to suggest to this author the creation of something approximate to the Regional Skills Partnerships in England. As DEL (2009) suggests, the actual makeup of the WDF resembles the RSPs in England in that there is clearly both demand and supply partners. The political make-up of Northern Ireland consists traditionally of six counties, although there are six WDF groupings, these are by a geographical rather than a county designation. The WDF groupings therefore are the Belfast Region, Northern Region, North Western Region, Southern Region, South Western Region and South Eastern Region. DEL (2009,p2-3). The contact names provided by DEL (2009) suggest a chair/ secretariat made up of one employer and a representative from one of the new six ‘super’ colleges, discussed above. In previous work, I have suggested that in relation to the implementation or success of an SSA, then SSCS needed to bring their work ‘into line’ with that of the RSP, if there was going to be regional agreement. Given that the creation of the WDF took place at the same time as the SSAs were being completed, there was not the same requirement on SSCs as there might have been if these bodies had been developed earlier, although it remains to be seen how SSCs will work with these bodies post implementation of the SSAs.
Public Accounts Committee Report on Job Skills

Jobskills was DEL’s largest training programme, which was introduced in 1995 and was meant to cater for people to whom an academic qualification was not relevant, with a view to raising their employability. The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) took evidence from DEL on the quality of training offered, the effectiveness of the programme, the targeting of skill needs and the financial monitoring and control of the programmes. PAC (2005) reported that contracting process with training organisations had not been very effective, and the objectives for the programme had not been achieved. Another negative factor PAC (2005) identified was that the training quality had a number of weaknesses attached to it. The report suggested that the DEL adopt an enhanced range of performance assessment measures, and benchmarked provision in NI against the rest of the UK. Thirdly, there was a need to agree improvement plans with poor performing organisations and establish an effective review, as well as monitor and review the attainment of individual “Key Skills” (essential skills) (PAC, 2005, p1; Hammond, 2007a, p38).

A further interesting conclusion comes from PAC (2005), which highlights how the ‘evolution’ of PCET is different within different nations, and that is that the Del had no comprehensive data on the skills needs of the Northern Ireland economy, and no clear system for analysing them, notwithstanding the fact that £65MN was being spent each year on the ‘job skills’ programmes. SSCs were given responsibility for developing this data, however again it is interesting to speculate if there is a desire by DEL to establish their own NI base for gathering this data, using the WDF bodies, to counter influence from the UK wide SSC network (Hammond, 2007, p39).

Hammond (2007a) concludes:

“with the objective of reviewing the Job Skills provision an 18 month consultation process and subsequent implementation plan was developed by DEL to establish a revised training provision for vocational courses. This new provision is entitled “Training for Success” and will commence in September 2007. The training for success provision offers both non NVQ training and Apprenticeships at different levels across all occupations within Northern Ireland.” (Hammond, 2007a, p39)

Again the SSCs with their SSAs, were in the position of responding to this policy initiative, and not to using the SSA to drive it to any great extent. Many of the SSCs are very interested in the concepts of Apprentice training, and even here, SSCs were only giving feedback along with other partners and stakeholders.

Training for Success

As stated above, this consultation document was produced by DEL in July 2006 and contained proposals by DEL for future policy in relation to apprenticeship training. Hammond (2007a) describes how in response to this, one sector skills council consulted with employers throughout the province before responding. The questions that were asked were as follows: First is there support for employed status from day one, with the removal of the current traineeship NVQ2 level schemes, and would employers commit to undertake apprenticeship training within a model built on employed status from day one? Secondly, apprenticeship training to be provided at NVQ3 level only (excepting trades where NVQ 2 is the industry or occupation objective, and where no NVQ level 3 is available). Thirdly, what the sector’s views were on the benefits of the employers incentives and whether an Electrical managing agent/ training body should be retained in its current format, with the creation of a
mechanical industry recognised training body, to accompany it. Finally, what were the sector’s views on the proposals for adult entrants to the workplace and up-skilling of the existing workforce, and remove barriers to employment (Hammond, 2007a, p40, DEL, 2006b).

On this process, Hammond (2007) concludes:

“Following the consultation process, employer views were presented to DEL. The outcomes of the subsequent tender scenario have again been broadly welcomed by industry with the respective IRTB’s securing the training contracts for the Level 3 provision. Concerns however do still exist to the nature of the Job ready strands of the provision and the initial failure of this provision to be either linked to the employer or indeed have approval of the SSC.” Hammond (2007a, p40).

Although Hammond (2007) clearly shows that the SSC did relatively well in getting what it wanted from the consultation, again, this consultation and development came out of DEL, not from the SSC, or the SSA, even though SSAs were well developed by this time. SSAs simply did not have the weight to do more than influence existing DEL policy it seems; certainly they did not drive it forward.

**Leading to Success: Management and Leadership Development and Implementation Strategy**

Further development of this work, will theorise about the business driven focus of the skills agenda across the UK, and the influence of this agenda can be seen to be at the heart of the Northern Ireland skills policies. DEL (2006b) commits the province to becoming a leader in the development and deployment of management and leadership capabilities, to fit the province to respond positively to the challenges of the 21st century. This will be achieve through the development of ‘sustainable strategic partnerships’ in both the demand and supply sectors, which are intended to create Northern Ireland managers able to compete in the global economy against the best from other countries (DEL, 2006b, p7). Many of the SSAs did identify leadership and management to be an issue, not just in Northern Ireland, but across the UK, although this initiative cannot be said to have derived from the SSA.

**Essential Skills Strategy**

The essential skills strategy was produced by DEL in 2002, and therefore pre-dates the SSAs, but was highly influential upon it. The main findings of DEL (2002), were that 24% of those people of working age (16-65) within the province had the low literacy levels, and literacy and numeracy levels were lower in the inactive people within the population, rather than those with employment (44% as opposed to 19% in employment), which inferred a barrier to employment due to essential skills deficiencies among the unemployed. (DEL, 2002, p1; Hammond, 2007a, p41-42).

The impact of this report was large, as for SSCs seeking to get an SSA working within Northern Ireland, there had to be clear policies to show that the SSC was using the SSA to address the issues of essential skills for new entrants. This might cause tensions, where the employers within the sector feel that their sector/ industry is not suitable to employ people with these low essential skills either as apprentices, or as adult entrants.
The Skills Agenda in Northern Ireland

The DEL have identified a number of challenges that they feel the province has to face, which follow the standard challenges identified by the UK government in the SSA documentation that were identified by the SSDA as part of the SSA. These challenges are identified as globalisation, a national and international labour market, general levels of skills in the existing workforce, high levels of economic activity, and finally the negative impact of skill deficiencies on productivity and competitiveness (DEL, 2005b, p1).

The aim of the skills agenda is to help people to progress up the skills ladder in order to lift the skills levels of the whole workforce and raise productivity, improve competitiveness and to enhance the employability of those currently excluded from the labour market (DEL, 2005b, p2).

There are four themes, the first of these is understanding the demand for skills, which is the theme related to Labour Market Information, which the DEL identify as the theme through which the SSCs can support most effectively the policy of the DEL. The questions that the LMI project looks at include how might labour market information best be used to understand the demand for skills in Northern Ireland, Secondly, how might this information best be presented to inform careers choice. Thirdly, how might LMI be used to extend advice offered to jobs and benefit office clients and finally what future needs and what improvements in LMI are required (DEL, 2005b, p3).

From this the Regional Employment and Skills Action Plan Project is created, which involves the development and maintenance of a regional skills plan to recognise and articulate local skills needs, and secondly, the development of skills expert group and workforce development for a (WDF) (DEL, 2005b, p4).

Within this Employers’ Skill Needs Analysis Project, DEL (2005b) identifies the role of the SSCs in analysing the skills supply and demand information deriving from SSAs and ensure that the relevant SSA information is co-ordinated and used to inform skills policy in Northern Ireland (DEL, 2005b, p5).

Finally, there is the skills for innovation initiative as part of theme one, but this project will identify the skills needed to deliver an innovative economy and assess and address gaps in current provision (DEL, 2005b, p6). Other themes, within this initiative are: improving the skills levels of the workforce, improving the quality and relevance of education and training and theme 4, tackling the skills barriers to employment and employability (DEL, 2005, p6-14).

Conclusion

As can be seen from the above policy documents, there was a significant amount of policy documentation and initiatives that were going on, or came on stream, at the same time as the SSCs were preparing their SSAs. This pre-existing national policy data meant that SSCs were struggling to create solutions and an SSA that could challenge any of the existing policy initiatives. Rather than shaping policy then, an SSA to be successful was either confirming it, or ‘bending’ its solutions to meet the needs of the localised policy.

In the next section, some of the practical issues that faced SSCs preparing an SSA, are considered.
Northern Ireland SSA Management

The devolved nations (as has been stated in previous research) chose to manage the SSAs with project boards, who were responsible for signing off the SSA in their particular nations. In Northern Ireland, the constitution of the project board shows an extreme Government and public sector bias towards sign off and implementation (which as will be seen, is replicated in all the devolved nations). The constitution of the project board was as follows: An assessment manager from the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), a member of the Research and Evaluation branch in DEL, a representative from the Further Education Policy branch of DEL, and a representative from the Higher Education Policy Branch of DEL, a member of the NI Careers Service from DEL, a representative from the Training Programmes from DEL, a representative from the strategic planning branch from DETINI the main Government department in Northern Ireland concerned with economic development. There was also a representative from the Northern Ireland trade unions, but this is the only ‘employer’ type organisation on the project board. Other members of the project board included a member of the Business Improvement Services from Invest Northern Ireland, a manager for QCA Northern Ireland, a member of the Sectoral Development branch from DEL and a member of the data contacts from DEL, and finally, a member of the analytical services department from DEL (SSDA, 2005a,p1-4). The DEL centric nature of the project board suggests that it is highly unlikely that any SSA that did not infill into the policy initiatives (described in the last section) would get their SSA signed off by a project board so public sector centric and Government focussed.

In Northern Ireland, the process was highly focussed, a note from the minutes of a project board meeting in September 2006, make this clear.

"[The chair] explained that meetings of the project board are structured so that SSCs attend only when they have significant input to make. Key sign up points occur at the completion of Stage 1-3 (important point in DEL’s Skills Strategy) and Stages 4-5. For formal sign up the partners on the Project board require key reports (Stages 1-3 or 4-5) at least six weeks before the Project Board meeting." (SSDA, 2006a,p1)

There was some attempt to consult with SSCS over the management of project boards in the province, as the following minute suggests that SSCs were surveyed on their views on the project board.

"[The Chair] was currently conducting an informal survey of pathfinders, tranche 2 and tranche 3 SSCs to seek feedback on their experience of the NI SSA Project board to date and to suggest any changes they may wish to see in the future." (SSDA, 2006a,p1).

A key document related to the work of the project boards in Northern Ireland is entitled the “Policy Specification for Sector Skills Agreements in Northern Ireland”. An interesting issue that comes out of this is the immediate assumption that the SSA must be integrated into the policy context of the DEL skills strategy, and in particularly the first of the four themes within the context of understanding the demand for skills. Other themes are improving the skills level of the workforce, improving the quality and relevance of education and training and finally, tackling the skills barriers to employment and employability (SSDA, 2006b, p1-2).

In relation to the integration of SSA the SSDA (2006b) concludes:
“All of these themes include activities and projects which are directly relevant to the Sector Skills Councils. However, it is the ‘Employers’ Skill Needs Analysis Project” within Theme 1 which provides the context for Sector Skills Agreements. To quote from the implementation plan: “The Project involves a comprehensive skills demand and supply analysis of 25 sectors during the period 2005-2007, which will form the core evidence for Sector Skills Agreements. In this 5 stage process, the initial focus for the Project will be on Stages 1 to 3, which cover LMI, supply and demand issues. The initial objective will be to ensure that information from the first three stages of the Sector Skills Agreement informs the formulation of skills policy in Northern Ireland as soon as that information becomes available. The ultimate objective of the project is to put in place a suite of Sector Skills Agreements across all the sectors. The project will be delivered by the Sector Skills Development Agency with management input from the Department (DEL).” (SSDA, 2006b,p2).

SSDA (2006b) then goes on to define the role of the project boards. The project board in Northern Ireland (which as we have already seen is significantly weighted in favour of DEL) is responsible and has authority for the overall development and delivery of the Sector Skills Agreements Project in Northern Ireland, which includes responsibility for developing a policy specification and guidance for Northern Ireland, while taking account of the UK context. Secondly steering pathfinders, tranche 2 SSCs and those which follow and finally providing support for the development and implementation of SSAs and “wider roll out” (SSDA, 2006b,p2).

Accountability for the project board is through the SSDA, the DEL and the Northern Ireland Administration. The NI project board is represented on the UK Sector Skills Policy forum Working group by DEL, which consists of departments with responsibility for skills in each of the four nations, the SSDA and the DTI (as SSDA co-sponsor) co-ordinates the overarching UK SSA Project Plan (SSDA, 2006b, p2).

The role of the project board in Northern Ireland is to be first the key decision making mechanism for the overall SSA project in Northern Ireland. Secondly, agree the mechanisms for managing the SSA development processes, and thirdly, ensure that key stakeholders in Northern Ireland buy into SSAs and fully understand the SSA development process. Fourthly the project board approves and monitors the implementation of a project plan for the project. Fifthly the NI project board, reports on the progress and key issues to the Northern Ireland administration. Sixthly the Northern Ireland project board agrees appropriate milestones to meet the deadlines for SSAs, and finally agrees the mechanisms for dealing with the next stages of SSA engagement (SSDA,2006b,p3).

The project board is supported by a project team, which consisting of DEL (sectoral and research branches),SSDA and SSCs with SSA’s in development, which meets at least three weeks before each board to agree the agenda, key action points and the forward work programme, and if that were not enough, the work of the project team is fed into a further creation namely the NI Skills Expert Group (SSDA, 2006b,p3).

“The Northern Ireland Skills Expert Group has been established to facilitate the development of a regional employment and skills action plan that will recognise and articulate skills needs at local and regional levels and determines Northern Ireland’s priority skills areas. Research
from the SSA development process will play a significant role in informing the Expert Group’s discussions. Effective communications between the Expert Group and the Project Board will be facilitated by DEL’s Research and Analytical Services Team.” (SSDA, 2006b,p3).

The members of the project board have to fulfil the following criteria, first, they have key responsibility within the SSC for the development and implementation of Sector Skills Agreements, or have senior responsibility within a key stakeholder for policy development and implementation in areas related to Sector Skills Agreements (SSDA, 2006b,p3). The development of specific SSAs will be of strategic importance to other Northern Ireland Government Departments and Agencies, with memberships also including each SSC as it is developing its SSA (SSDA, 2006b, p4).

Within Northern Ireland the SSA agreements have a number of different levels (which are not dissimilar to the Scottish process described in more detail later), the first level sets out the commitment of employers within the province to undertake collective action to invest in skills. The second level of the Northern Ireland SSA, is that the agreement operates between the SSC and the partner organisations that need to act in various ways in order to achieve the objectives of the agreements. At the third level, the agreement operates between the sector and the Northern Ireland Administration (SSDA, 2006b, p4).

The DEL (2006b) formal sign up process for the SSA, was prescribed in the follow way: When an SSC completes SSA Stages 1-3 and this is validated by the project board members, then the project board chair writes to the Chief Executive of the SSC to confirm the Project Board’s support of the Stages 1-3 of the report. When subsequently an SSC completes the SSA stages 4-5 and this is validated by the Project Board Members, the Project Board Chair will write to the Chief Executive of the SSC to confirm the Project Board’s support of the Stage 5 action plan. At that point, the DEL permanent secretary to confirm that the project board has signed up to the Sector Skills Agreement, the DEL permanent secretary will be asked to circulate this letter to the permanent secretaries in the other relevant Northern Ireland Departments (SSDA, 2006b,p4-5).

Scotland

Understanding Scottish FE

When approaching Scotland, the first task that has to be undertaken, is to understand Scottish FE in relation to that of England primarily, but also Northern Ireland and Wales. Despite the claims to the contrary by the Welsh, it is argued that in relation to their further education systems, then the Welsh system is not that dissimilar to the English system. The Northern Ireland system however, is probably more akin to the old pre1992 system in England, when FE colleges in England were within the control of the local authorities. This is not to say of course that the systems are identical, but FE colleges in Northern Ireland have only recently become incorporated in the same way that they were under ‘The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) in England and Wales. Scotland has a somewhat different history again, and it is proposed to set this out in some detail here, as it is not just a case of the Scottish Government and public sector bodies being unwilling to engage in SSAs, but rather that they are legally unable to do so.
Although both Scotland\(^2\) and England have experienced problems with the incorporation of FE colleges, in relation to governors and boards of management losing control of their colleges resulting in financial mismanagement, in England the Government has moved to the Learning and Skills Act (2001) and through the Learning and Skills council towards a more strictly planned model, whereas in Scotland the legislation has been retained albeit not in perhaps as market driven and neo-liberal in tooth and claw form as was perceived by the Conservative Government that enacted it originally, and indeed appears\(^3\) to have been adapted and amended to suit a more socially democratic agenda incorporating social justice\(^4\) and learner choice within a wider commitment to social justice.

The Conservative Government in enacting the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) wished to use the market and demand coming through the learners and the employers to determine the curriculum, the reasoning being that the learners and the employers would determine their requirements and the providers would provide those courses, and courses that were not perceived as meeting the needs of the learners and employers would wilt away, and indeed many courses and departments (particularly engineering and construction departments which were very cost intensive) were closed to make way for the expansion of other courses\(^5\). This phenomenon may have been more pronounced south of the boarder, because as Howgego (1993) points out, from its inception, Principals in Scotland argued that weightings needed to be applied to address the need for more cost intensive curriculum, and a student had to be worth a different amount of monies related to the course studied. This concept was followed in England also by the FEFC to protect high cost curriculum from simply disappearing (Hammond, 2003)\(^6\). Eggar (1992)\(^7\) was comfortable that the Further Education Sector would undergo as a result of this process some rationalisation, with providers closing or merging with other providers. In actuality in England the closures were restricted to a handful of colleges, but mergers did take place more commonly (Hammond, 2003). The position was similar in Scotland with some mergers taking place and indeed still proposed to take place.

The ethos therefore behind the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) was that Colleges would close or merge and the sector as a whole would become ‘leaner and meaner’, and that employer and learner demand would drive the curriculum. It was assumed by the Government of the day that business would benefit through more business focused courses, there was also an assumption that students would choose courses that would benefit their eventual employability and earning power. A corollary to this being that Colleges would be able through incorporation is able to respond quickly to the demands of the economy, through appropriate curriculum. To facilitate this, Section Six in Scotland\(^8\) compelled the Secretary of State to fund any curriculum that led to a qualification or to a qualification leading to a traditional qualification, which as already stated in England led to the development by Colleges of a plethora of qualifications particular at low levels, but which satisfied the criteria,

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\(^2\) In Scotland, Moray College (see later) was investigated for financial irregularities; in England, significantly more FE colleges had difficulties, such as Halton College and Stoke on Trent, Barnsley and Bilston, to name just a few, in Wales, Gwent college was also subject to a NAO inquiry.

\(^3\) See later element on social justice

\(^4\) The author remains intrigued at the legislative re-engineering that appears to have taken place within this context and proposes to carry out more research into this phenomenon through the auspices of the University of Huddersfield and publish further on this later.

\(^5\) Information Technology for example was very popular during the 1990s in England.

\(^6\) Hammond (2003) in his work interviewed the former Chief Executive of the FEFC for England who confirmed that weightings had had to incorporated to protect Construction courses and departments as the problem that they were becoming not cost effective and were closing down affecting the curriculum spread across the country.

\(^7\) A conservative Further and Higher Education Minister while the English Further and Higher Education Act (1992) was going through parliament.

\(^8\) See the relevant element on the differences in policy between England and Scotland
but effectively gave a significant amount of control into the hands of the providers to determine the curriculum. To what extent this policy (apart from costing the Treasury a significant amount of money) was successful is the author would argue a debatable point, although it certified areas that previously had not been certifiable. The Select Committee (1998) were much intrigued by the provision of a NVQ 1 in England for ‘Ambient (Supermarket) Display’, which the Chairman Ms Margaret Hodge MP tartly suggested was a qualification in ‘shelf stacking’ (Select Committee, 1998).

The point of this discourse is that in England the Learning and Skills Act (2001) transferred the control of funding to Learning and Skills Councils who theoretically controlled the courses that it would fund in line with the market needs identified by research and LMI within the nine regions of England, and could therefore withdraw or reduce funding from curriculum not felt to be relevant to the development of the region, thereby through funding effectively controlling curriculum. Scotland however has no such structure, with effective control of the curriculum still lying in the hands of the providers, who would no doubt argue that they can only put on courses that their learners want, due to the funding formula.

GHK (2006) in their report to the Scottish Executive on the Skills for Business Network point to the different position that Sector Skills Councils have in Scotland as opposed to England, where the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) are an essential part in creating a new responsive system for employers to directly influence the supply of provision and the content of the curriculum. In Scotland, Sector Skills Councils are required to be one of many voices, with GHK (2006) concluding that the thrust of Scottish Executive policies being focused on individuals, and those that are at the margins of the labour market (GHK, 2006, pp2-3).

The creation of the SSCs and the creation of the Skills for Business Network (SfBN) were subsequent to the development of many of the policies created by Scottish Executive and its partners and stakeholders post devolution, and therefore the SfBN it could be argued was ‘late to the party.’ This therefore has led to a divergence of hypothesis on which the skills and productivity agenda is contextualized, with some of the stakeholders arguing that the SfBN’s analysis of the degree to which skills drive productivity improvements is flawed (GHK, 2006, p3).

From this, the stakeholders within Scotland conclude that the SSCs in Scotland can provide a strategic employer voice to articulate future skills needs (in partnership with FutureSkills Scotland) and shape “although not direct” supply (GHK, 2006, p3).

The Incorporation of Colleges of Further Education in Scotland

Scottish Further Education followed the pattern set in the south prior to the Further and Higher Education Scotland Act (1992). This piece of legislation enacted by the Conservative Government of John Major 1990-1997 was to all intents and purposes identical to the Further and Higher Education Act (England and Wales) (1992)

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10 How effective this process has been in actuality is outside the scope of this work to discuss.
11 And an investigation into the veracity of this argument is outside the scope of this work.
12 Perhaps this should be better stated as the SSDA view, as it is through the SSDA that much of the steerage takes place.
passed in the same year, but later than in Scotland\(^\text{13}\). South of the border this legislation was to usher in a new model for Further Education based on market forces and market driven demand, and concluded the work that the Education Reform Act (1988) had carried out earlier under the Thatcher Government 1979-1990 (Hammond, 2003). Prior to the enactment of the Further and Higher Education Act (Scotland) (1992) there was already some degree of autonomy enjoyed by the Scottish Further Education Authorities which included financial freedom obtained through the Scottish Office, but the new act went much further and proposed a divorce between Further Education Colleges and the Local Authorities in Scotland who as down south had previously had the responsibility for managing them (Howgego, 1993, para 2.2). The Acts therefore both in Scotland and south of the border vested the power for managing the college in the hands of the newly created incorporated bodies of the colleges, known as the corporations, with the process itself being known as incorporation as colleges became separate corporations.

Between the Scottish and English models proposed in their respective acts, there were some differences, although these were of style not of ideology. The diverse nature of Scottish FE, particularly in relation to the demographics of the nation, with the remote communities in Highlands and Islands requiring access to provision was an issue that needed to be considered more than in the south, and there was generally at initiation a reluctance in Scotland to follow the model in England and have an Further Education Funding Council type model for the sector. The Scottish Office therefore retained control of the grants for recurrent and capital funding, with the argument for this difference from England and Wales being first, that the sector was smaller and the additional bureaucracy and cost of a funding council could not be justified, and secondly that the Scottish Office currently contained the expertise that was required to manage the sector properly (Howgego, 1993, para 3.4).

Another difference in the Scottish Act was that colleges not work was being funded, which was different from England and Wales where eventually HE work was funded by HEFC in Colleges and the FEFC funded FE work\(^\text{14}\). There was therefore in Scotland no creation at that time of a duality of funding\(^\text{15}\) that was present in the English and Welsh systems (Howgego, 1993, para 3.4). The proposals as in England and Wales drew support from the employers and certifying bodies such as SCOTVEC and resistance from the trade unions representing employees within the colleges and students and from the local authorities themselves (Howgego, 1993, para 3.6). As the bill passed through parliament in Westminster the opposition was concerned about the safety of Adult and Community Education, because traditionally this type of education is cost intensive and not business driven\(^\text{16}\). There was also a concern that the lack of a funding council in Scotland would not give Colleges a buffer between them and the Government\(^\text{17}\). At the report stage of the bill these concerns were responded to by the Government giving the Secretary of State the power to create a funding Council without need for further legislation. The Act was

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\(^{13}\) After the General Election in May 1992, which the Conservatives won, although with a reduced majority particularly within Scotland. In Scotland the legislation went through parliament before the dissolution for the 1992 General Election.

\(^{14}\) This of course was not always as clear cut as it sounds, because FEFC funded HNCs and Professional Courses which might be deemed to be at HE level, whereas HEFC picked up HND and Degree Qualifications. Since the Learning and Skills Act (2001) all HNC courses have transferred to HECFE and foundation degrees have remained with HECFE from their inception.

\(^{15}\) The creation of funding councils for both further and higher education and their subsequent amalgamation was not considered initially within the proposals but came later.

\(^{16}\) A point conceded in the Leitch report, leading to him to conclude that this curriculum should be ring fenced from an employer driven curriculum.

\(^{17}\) This was a particular problem in Scotland where the Conservative Government 1990-1992 was in the minority in Scotland, leading to claims that there was no Scottish Mandate for the policies inflicted on Scotland during that time. The Conservatives lost more seats in Scotland in 1992, leading to further claims about mandate.
also amended to further protect in Scotland the needs of learners with special needs. A final twist in the debate about the merits of a funding council came in the form of a published letter from the Association of College Principals in Scotland stating their opposition to a funding council, which reduced debate in the Lords and the Commons, and meant that the Act was passed into law before the General Election of 1992 (Howgego, 1993, para 5.1-5.3).

The initial decision not to create a funding council in Scotland, meant that the inspection system that was operating in the colleges using HMI continued unchanged, whereas in England transfer of inspection responsibilities went to the funding council, and inspection and funding became in England for example the two arms of responsibility for the FEFC. Howgego (1993) suggests that in anticipation of incorporation, the Inspectorate in Scotland had been working hard to develop robust inspection processes, which supported their claim to retain inspection responsibilities within the incorporated sector (Howgego, 1993, para 6.5). Hammond (2003) points to the development in the South of a very strong funding methodology, which also imposed some extremely challenging growth targets of 25% over three years on Colleges without equivalent funding increases in direct funding, with Colleges making savings through efficiencies within their organisations (Hammond, 2003, pp21-23). In Scotland it was decided that the sector would be funded through the Student Unit of Measurement (SUM) as well as incorporating features from an established ‘Fife system’ but also incorporating the departments own approach to higher education funding (Howgego, 1993, para 7.4). Despite the development of a funding formula, it was decided that the funding would remain the same as historical levels from local authorities during the first year of incorporation to give time for the new system to settle down, and this was in line with what happened in England and Wales (Howgego, 1993, para 7.5; Hammond, 2003).

To advise the Secretary of State for Scotland through the Scottish Office a Core Group on Capital funding was created, and this group sought to develop procedures for the allocation of capital expenditure on equipment. Initial proposals were to use student numbers based on the SUM through which to develop capital funding. A further unforeseen (and expensive) factor in incorporation, not initially seen was the need for Colleges to arrange and pay for insurance cover, which caused many colleges in Scotland to need to rearrange their financial plans accordingly immediately prior to incorporation (Howgego, 1993, para 7.8-7.9).

The change from local authorities to incorporated status control in colleges in Scotland and in England and Wales placed a number of onerous new duties on the members of the corporations, called boards of management in Scotland. So the members of the college boards became responsible for the management of buildings and control of the contracts of employment of staff including conditions of service. Scotland followed England in regard of the fact that colleges decided to negotiate with the unions on a national basis, thus the Employers Forum negotiated on these matters for Scottish College Boards. The desire of the then Conservative Government to make the FE sector more responsive to the needs of industry and to break the traditional term system, without increasing public expenditure on the sector, required the newly incorporated colleges to develop more ‘flexible’ contracts for their staff, which in essence required staff to work longer hours and have fewer holidays (Howgego, 1993, para 10.6; Hammond, 2003).18

18 The rather robust approach taken by the CEF (the English equivalent of the Scottish Employers Forum) and its Chief Executive meant that contractual deadlock ensued in England for many years, forcing some colleges in England (possibly out of exasperation) to sign local deals for their staff with trade unions, which meant that there were different sets of terms and conditions available at some colleges. The author has not found any evidence to suggest that the situation deteriorated to that degree in Scotland as it did in England.
A further requirement in England of the legislation was the exclusion from the boards of local education authority representatives but this was tempered in Scotland so that the legislation allowed that the local authority could have members on the board, though they were not automatically allowed a place on the board, and were they so represented, then they were not allowed to assume the chairmanship of the committee (Howgego, 1993, para 4.4). The tasks required of governors running the incorporated colleges are significant, and required a significant amount of new skills, which is why the Conservative Government anticipated that the corporations would be populated by significant numbers of people with experience in business and commerce, the assumption being that these type of people would be better able to cope with the demands of running what are in fact extremely complex organisations (Hammond, 2003). In Scotland the Secretary of State on incorporation was vested with the power (after consultation and recommendation) to invite suitable persons to join the corporations of the colleges, but the Further and Higher Education Act (Scotland) (1992) specified that half the Governors should be appointed because of these skills in industry, commercial, employment or the practice of a profession, and of these one should be appointed by the local LEC (Further and Higher Education Act, 1992 (Scotland), Schedule 2; Howgego, 1993, para3.5).

The Policy Departure between England and Scotland Post 2001

The creation of incorporated colleges managed by corporations and boards of management had a profound effect on the further education sector. For academic and support staff, terms and conditions of service changed and became more onerous, and in England to meet evermore demanding growth targets and efficiency gains, FE colleges were forced to become more innovative, and as a result in England the proliferation of franchising agreements whereby private training providers carried out work for FE colleges at a reduced unit cost, which the FE colleges claimed from the FEFC at full cost proliferated. Franchising resolved growth problems for many colleges, with courses delivered by private training providers at a distance actually meeting growth targets, even though the college students could be two hundred miles from the location of the college (Hammond, 2003).

As governors were part time and presumably had businesses to run themselves, it is perhaps natural that there was a tendency for members of the corporation to put too much trust in the Principals and Senior Management Teams within the college. In England particularly there followed both pre and post the general election of 1997 a number of highly publicized cases of sleaze, mismanagement, fraud and false accounting, which has lead in England to a number of Principals being dismissed, and in one or two cases having to face potential criminal liability. Hammond (2003) in his doctoral thesis interviewed a number of senior Government policy makers who cited these problems as being the reason for the Government’s decision to move away from the policies of the Further and Higher Education Act (England and Wales) (1992) in England and Wales and bring more control back into the Learning and Skills Councils and ELWA (the Welsh equivalent). The creation of the Scottish

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19 Repealed by the Learning and Skills Act (2001) in England and Wales, where it is now mandatory for the Local Authority to have a representative on the corporation of the college.

20 In Scotland at incorporation almost all Scottish colleges had a governor from the local authority. Another difference between Scotland and England was that the Scottish legislation provided that the Principal of the college must be a member of the corporation, although in England and Wales this was not mandatory although most (if not all) of the college principals were governors of their corporation.

21 There was the instance of Gwent College in Wales where there were significant problems (NAO, 1999b).

22 ELWA has subsequently been incorporated into the Welsh Assembly Government
Executive and the Scottish Parliament meant that responsibility for further education had been devolved from the Secretary of State for Scotland to the Scottish Parliament and Executive, and thus far the Scottish Executive and Parliament has not followed the English and Welsh down the planning route.

This is not to say that Scotland has not had similar problems to England with boards of management losing control of their colleges and getting into a mess because they did not effectively scrutinize the work of the principal and senior management properly. Even the subsequent creation of the Scottish Further Education Funding Council could do nothing to prevent the problems for example at Moray College, where due to persistent weakness in governance by the management board a £2million deficit was allowed to develop. The Scottish Executive were forced to accept the recommendations of the Scottish Parliament’s Audit Committee that:

“In the Committee’s view, consideration should be given to expanding the powers of the Scottish Further Education Funding Council in order that it can get involved directly when there is poor governance in a further education college” (Welsh, 2001, p1).

This recommendation is in keeping with the recommendation of the Select Committee (1998a) into Further Education in England, which Hammond (2003) argues was a major milestone on the road to the Learning and Skills Act (2001). Subsequently further recommendations were made coming out of the problems at Moray College, which were that the SFEFC should improve training and induction for new governors at the college, and where there are colleges in Scotland with financial problems then these should have access to expert financial advice earlier, before the problems become really serious. The recommendations also point out that the skills mix on the corporation was wrong, and there were insufficient people with the relevant skills to identify that the college was having problems (Walsh, 2002, p2).

Although not stated directly, there is the inference of misconduct against members of the senior management team then at Moray College, as the SFEFC is tasked with ensuring that the Boards of Management can act before retirement and that the Scottish Public Pensions Agency is appraised of all material information (Walsh, 2002,p2). Such powers as were given to the SFEFC were transferred by the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act (2005) to The Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council, a body now having responsibility for both Further and Higher Education.

In England the Government decided to remove the FEFC and the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) in favour of a unified system of provision that brought together the whole of training under the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). This was enacted in the Learning and Skills Act (2001). A distinct part of this act was the creation of a planned model for FE to take away the indiscriminate competition of the FEFC model and allow funding to be more targeted to the needs of the economy, rather than the desires of the individual. From the creation of Sector Skills Councils

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23 Now combined with the Higher Education Funding Council to fund singularly both further and higher education.

24 Hammond (2003) argues that in England the constituency of corporations was controlled significantly by the chairman and the principal, and that invariably the principal chose the members of his corporation.

25 Presumably this means disciplinary action against the Principal or other members of the senior management.

26 This very cryptic phrase may be suggesting that as in the Civil Service and Health Service where gross misconduct is proved then a pension can be removed totally. The mass murderer Dr. Harold Shipman being an example of where this sanction was applied, it is the author is given to understand very rarely invoked as the extreme example above would appear to indicate.

27 This concept is discussed further in the analysis of social justice.
and the Learning and Skills Act (2001) there has been a desire by the Government in Westminster to provide a demand led model, which gives employers the say in what curriculum is being developed and delivered, based on the needs to skill the workforce for the future to maintain competitiveness. This model though is challenged by the interests of social justice, and the argument (which comes initially from the liberal education schools) that people should have some control or say in what they learn. Leitch (2007) has concluded that employers should (through Sector Skills Councils) determine which curriculum is necessary for them to have the skilled workers of the future, but Leitch (2007) concedes that there is some curriculum that must stand outside of this model, particularly that related to Basic/Core Skills.\textsuperscript{28}

In England therefore the LSC would be able to implement any recommendations made by a Sector Skills council (whether as part of a Sector Skills Agreement or not) based on a Leitch criteria\textsuperscript{29}, but this is probably not the case in Scotland and may subsequently reduce the effectiveness of any SSA ‘deals’ that are made within that context, although this may be in keeping with Scottish policy in relation to social justice (see later).

**Why Scotland is Different: An analysis of the Legislation**

Scotland is different because under Section 1 of the Further and Higher Education Act, the Secretary of State is required to secure provision of Further Education according to Section 6 of the Act (Further and Higher Education Act (Scotland), 1992, p1). Section 6 (1) provides that courses of Further Education that may receive funding in Scotland are as follows:

“A programme of learning falls within this section if it-
(a) prepares a person for a vocational qualification
(b) prepares a person for-
   (i) a qualification awarded the Scottish Qualification Authority; or
   (ii) a General Certificate of Education Qualification of England and Wales or Northern Ireland
(c) provides instruction for persons who are participating in a programme of learning which falls within this section and who have a learning difficulty.
(d) Prepares a person for access to higher education;
(e) Is designed to assist persons whose first language is not English to achieve any level of competence in English language.
(f) Is designed predominantly to prepare a person for participation in any programme of learning which falls within this section.(Further and Higher Education Act Scotland ,1992,p3)

There is plenty of scope within 6 (1) for Colleges to develop a number of different courses, and as happened in England through the Open College Network there is significant opportunity for the sector to develop a significant number of these courses, particularly at low levels such as pre-entry, entry and level 1 level, and under its sister act in England there was no prerequisite for progression, or any analysis of whether the qualification had any utility for

\textsuperscript{28} An analysis of the Leitch report can be found in SummitSkills National Assessment of Current Provision Document in Hammond (2007b).

\textsuperscript{29} The criteria envisaged by Leitch (2006) would probably be to remove out of date or unused qualifications and to remove funding from all courses that were not of a type or standard required by industry.
society generally or the economy, and this may well be the case in Scotland. In England, many of the courses that were developed under the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) covered the construction industry and the building services engineering sector specifically particularly in plumbing, which were unsuitable as a progression qualification for employment within the sector, and worse may have led the recipients to believe themselves to be qualified to practice in the sector, and who may have then become ‘cowboys’ working on the periphery of the sector.

The Further and Higher Education Act (Scotland) (1992) does however give some power to the Secretary of State as 6 (2) provides:

(2) The Secretary of State may order, from time to time, amend subsection (1) above by taking or removing any entry relating to a programme of learning or by varying any such entry.

But:

(3) An order shall not be made under subsection (2) above unless the Secretary of State has consulted-
   (a) such persons or organisations appearing to him to be the representative of boards of management and education authorities; and
   (b) such other persons as appear to him to be appropriate as to the amendments proposed to be made by the order.

The Secretary of State for Scotland therefore it is argued would need to amend the legislation to restrict the development of courses that did not meet the needs of the building services engineering sector and before doing so would need to carry out a consultation exercise that would have to extend beyond the Sector Skills Councils to encompass the providers and other partners, although whether a Sector Skills Agreement signed by all of the partners would constitute all or the majority of the consultation required for the amendment of the legislation would require legal opinion.

It is argued that currently there is no mechanism within Scotland (as there is in England for example) to compel providers to cease offering provision related to the sectors covered by Sector Skills Agreements, that does not meet the needs of the sector and indeed may damage the reputation and quality of operative within the sector without a change in the primary legislation as suggested in 6 (2). The existence of inappropriate training provision for example is damaging the building services engineering sector within the United Kingdom due to ‘rouge’ and cowboy builders proliferating the construction sector, who are part qualified, but in Scotland, there is nothing that can be done to prevent this phenomenon.

The social justice context within Scotland

The creation of a Scottish Parliament has led to a number of policy objectives, which look at the concept of social justice. So for example in The Way Forward: Framework for Economic Development in Scotland (2000) a skilled workforce was identified as a key to economic growth (WFFEDS, 2000, pxiii). The document continues:

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30 This is not the case with the current level 2 entitlement in England which will only fund a person to get a first level 2. subsequent level 2 qualifications are not covered.
31 And presumably all the other sectors covered by Sector Skills Councils and Sector Skills Agreements
32 An issue discussed at the time of the SSAs by the Scottish National Party, but not acted upon.
“In particular the Framework is concerned to include all individuals in society who can contribute to the economic development of the country and to overcome the barriers to their participation, whether related to physical location or to social deprivation. The Executive is committed to an economy-led social justice agenda, and economic success and opportunity for all are therefore of fundamental importance to tackling poverty and exclusion.” (WFFEDS, 2000, p4).

The report then goes on to talk about the productivity gaps that exist between Scotland and other economies both within Europe (France and Germany) as well as the USA (WFFEDS, 2000, p9). The report also pointed to the fact that at that time, Scotland was running a balance of payments deficit, not only with other countries in the world, but with England and the other devolved nations within the UK (WFFEDS, 2000, p13). That education had a part in turning the issues in Scotland around can be seen from the suggestion that Scotland might wish to follow the lead of Singapore through the development of a ‘radical strategic change’ that would address the issues identified earlier in the report:

“Education and training, like health, are too often seen as goods that are delivered to people by experts rather than as an ongoing process that is shaped by individuals. There must be a transition from being taught to being an active participant. In some areas this is more difficult change for Government to drive forward, since it involves incentivising the consumers of education and training rather than acting on the supply side where it has some control. Singapore provides an example of a radical strategic change in the approach to education. They have identified a need for their workforce to become more able to think creatively, in order to continue moving their economy up the value chain, and are now implementing a radical shift in the education with this in mind. This change aims to allow all students to develop thinking skills and aptitudes for lifelong learning rather than simply exam-passing skills. Does Scotland require a similar radical shift and what roles can the Executive play in this regards? (WFFEDS, 2000, p45).

The report concludes that in relation to the promotion of social justice that there may be a growth in the Scottish markets and increase entrepreneurship by developing “Scotland’s Key Asset- its people” (WFFEDS, 2000, p73). Other benefits identified are that the promotion of social justice may improve the skills and abilities of the population in disadvantaged areas and strengthen the potential for economic development (in those areas) as well as increasing sustainability through social cohesion (WFFEDS, 2000, p73). The potential demerits of the social justice promotion centered on whether the money that would be required to meet the social justice agenda might be better spent on ‘other’ policies and receive a better return (WFFEDS, 2000, p45).

A major report on the social justice agenda for Scotland is Social Justice: a Scotland where everyone matters (2002) which looks at social justice issues within the various societal sub-sections of Children, Young People, Families, Older People and Communities, which builds on a report of the same name and restates the goals Scottish Executive identified in that report in relation to the achievement of social justice within Scotland, and these are:

1. The elimination of Child Poverty in a generation.
2. Enabling all our young people to contribute and develop life-skills.
3. Full employment by providing opportunities for all those who can work.

Where Sector Skills Councils are effectively engaged in this strategy, is in the concept within the report (based on point two above) that every young person matters, and deals with the need to qualify young people from leaving school, as the report reiterates that people leaving school with low or no qualifications are likely to be unemployed or living on a low income in later life, and those not in education, training or employment (NEET)\textsuperscript{33}. A long term strategy of the Social Justice policy for Scotland is the need to make sure that every nineteen year old is engaged in education, training (leading to employment) or work (SJ, 2002, p31). Similar issues are raised within the report under the concept of: Every Family Matters, where poor literacy and numeracy, and the inability for people in families with low skills and education to break out of low paid employment because of an inability to gain new skills is identified. The long-term targets are to achieve full employment in Scotland in the sense of achieving ‘opportunity for all’. There is also a desire to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to undertake some form of learning to widen their knowledge and skills (SJ, 2002, p43).

In 2003 the Scottish Executive produced Life through Learning through Life: The Lifelong Learning Strategy for Scotland. The lifelong learning strategy has five goals which are:

1. A Scotland where people have the confidence, enterprise knowledge, creativity and skills they need to participate in economic, social and civic life.
2. A Scotland where people demand and providers deliver a high quality learning experience.
3. A Scotland where people’s knowledge and Skills are recognised, used and developed to best effect in their workplace.
4. A Scotland where people are given the information, guidance and support they need to make effective learning decisions and transitions.
5. A Scotland where people have the chance to learn, irrespective of their background or current personal circumstances. (LTLT, 2003, p33).

Under number three of the goals above the report makes an interesting observation, which appears to put some responsibility for productivity failings at the door of the employers. The report concludes:

“We know that Scotland has a higher level of skills in its workforce than England but lower productivity than the UK average. In this light, it is interesting to note that organisations reporting skill problems in the recent FutureSkills Scotland skills survey were more likely than the average to have been growing and to provide training for their staff. That raises the possibility of extensive latent skill deficiencies, where employers do not see that more investment in, or better use of the skills of their workforce could yield improvements in performance. For example of the 800,000 adults in Scotland who are estimated to have low levels of literacy and numeracy, 650,000 are of working age with 520,000 of those in employment. This is a major barrier for the individual and the employer.” (LTLT, 2003, p48).

\textsuperscript{33} See later in this element for a more detailed analysis of the Scottish Executive Policy on NEET.
A third possibility might equally be that the skills that the employees have obtained in the Scottish Education System do not match as effectively as they should the actual skills that employers need to be able (through skills along with the other factors of production) to maximise productivity. If this were a feasible alternative then the current system of curriculum funding and procurement might act to continue this phenomenon through not providing employers with an adequate voice to influence and direct curriculum content.

In a Smart Successful Scotland (2004) which the Scottish Executive ostensibly published to give strategic direction to the Enterprise Networks and an enterprise strategy for Scotland, made one of organising themes Skills and Learning. More in the language of business the sub-text of this theme talked about the development of skills to make the best use of our human capital to prepare for tomorrow’s labour market (SSS,2004,p5). The business context of skills continued later in the report, where it was concluded that the ability to respond quickly and flexibly to changing demands of employers is a characteristic of an effective labour market, which the report concludes can be achieved through a culture of lifelong learning amongst both those in the market (employees and employers?) and those involved in supplying the market (providers) (SSS, 2004, p19). This policy document while identifying skills within the context of economic performance does not appear to place skills in this instance within a social justice context.

A further policy document that while not having either a direct social justice context, nevertheless has a significant social justice theme running throughout it is the Workforce Plus: an Employability Framework for Scotland. This policy document looks at the link between economic inactivity and certain social constructs, which invariably typify these people, which includes a lack of qualifications (and by definition but not stated skills)34 (WPEFS, 2006, p3). To address these issues, then the Scottish Executive propose to develop a Local Workforce Plus Partnership to address the social issues that face the economically inactive and it is expected will include: Jobcentre Plus, Communities Scotland, Local Enterprise Companies, Local Authorities, NHS Boards, Scottish Prison Service, Community Justice Authorities, local FE Colleges, Community Health Partnerships and Alcohol and drug Action Team (WPEFS, 2006, p6). It is assumed that employer input to this strategy will come through the LECs rather than the SSCs.

A policy document that touches on the use of equal opportunities as a mode of achieving social justice is the report entitled: Jobs for the boys and the girls: promoting a smart, successful and equal Scotland (2005). This report contains much information that was contained within for example the SummitSkills Sector Needs Analysis (SNA) (see Hammond (2006a); Hammond (2006b)). In the SummitSkills SNAs for Scotland primary research for those reports pointed out that woman had still not broken into the craft areas of the building services engineering sector, and the SummitSkills research appears to be validated by the table below from this paper:

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34 The other issues are: lone parents, have care responsibilities, disability or health problem, ex-offenders, homeless, have drug or alcohol problems.
Table 5  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Total Returns</th>
<th>MA Employer</th>
<th>Total MAs</th>
<th>Female MAs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plumbing</td>
<td>14 (20%)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>1 (2.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>22 (35%)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>2 (2.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>8 (20%)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>4 (1.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>3 (19%)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>37 (64.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td>16 (36%)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>31 (96.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>63 (27%)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>72 (14.6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It is assumed the Scottish Skills Strategy proposed by the SNP will continue to stress the context of Social Justice within the skills and education policy within the country.

Social Justice and the NEET Policies of Scottish Executive

Scottish Executive within their social justice policies are concerned to look at what is a perennial problem not just for Scotland, but the whole of the UK, which is those young people 16-19 years of age who have left compulsory education, but are not in Education, Employment or Training, and this group is known as NEET. The report entitled More Choices, More Chances: A strategy to reduce the proportion of young people not in Education Employment or Training in Scotland (2006) concludes that those people likely to become NEET include those leaving care, careers (to other family members), young offenders, young parents, low attainers, persistent truants, young people with physical/mental disabilities and young people who misuse drugs and/or alcohol. Additionally the report argues that these people can be sub-divided into young people with few or no additional support needs, those with intermediate needs and those with very complex needs (MCMC, 2006, p1). By low attainers this report identifies below SVQ2 as being low level qualifications, of which 37% of the NEET group falls, with 28% having no qualifications (Scottish Labour Force Survey, 2003 in MCMC, 2006, p9). The rest of the perennial NEET having a range of other problems defined above.

Problems with NEET groups subsist throughout the whole of Scotland, but are concentrated for the purpose of this policy in seven NEET hotspot areas of Glasgow, West Dunbartonshire, North Ayrshire, East Ayrshire, Clackmannanshire, Inverclyde and Dundee, where NEET is a particular challenge. NEET can also be associated with deprivation (perhaps not surprisingly) as the table below indicates:

Table 6  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEET Statistics</th>
<th>15% Most Deprived wards in Scotland</th>
<th>Rest of Scotland</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MCMC, 2006, p14

Scotland therefore faces a NEET problem, which is particularly localised to a degree in areas of high deprivation.

Conclusions

It can be seen, that in Scotland, there are two themes coming through clearly, which are that business and economic needs of the nation predominate the skills agenda

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35 Not in Education, Employment or Training
as they do in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. The second phenomenon, which has also been discussed in this report is the social justice agenda, and the need to get young people out of the NEET category, which as I have suggested elsewhere means that in relation to SSA work, there is a tension between the needs of employers and the needs for Government agencies to achieve their NEET reduction and other targets. In the next section, it is proposed to look at how SSCs were managed in Scotland, through the SSA process.

SSA Management in Scotland

The management of SSAs in Scotland is not dissimilar to that in Wales, and it is suggested that in fact many SSDA documents for the devolved nations were prepared simultaneously, using a considerable amount of ‘cut and paste’ in their development, as indeed SSDA (2004b) concedes by describing the terms of reference and membership for the SSA project board, as being based on the English model. As in Northern Ireland and Wales, the management of SSAs in Scotland, was through a project board.

The Project Board in Scotland has responsibility for the delivery of the Scottish end of the SSA, which includes the development of a specification steering pathfinder SSCs and those that follow. Specifically, they would oversee and steer the activities of the project team (discussed later), secondly, be a key decision maker mechanism for the project. Thirdly, ensure that key partner organizations are brought into SSAs and are aware of the decision making process. Fourthly the project board is required to approve and monitor the implementation of a Project Plan/ Work Programme for the Project and fifthly to oversee the evaluation of Pathfinder Sector Skills Agreements in Scotland. Sixthly, the project board is required to report on progress and key issues to the Scottish Executive and Ministers as appropriate, and agree appropriate milestones to complete the pathfinders SSCs by March 2005 for the Pathfinder SSCs, and finally from this agree the mechanisms and timescales for dealing with the next stages of SSA engagement for all SSCs (SSDA, 2004,p1).

The composition of the project board in Scotland, as in England and Wales, is completely dominated by stakeholders, with the exception of trade union engagement. There are no employer organizations, such as the IoD or the CBI. There were however three representatives from SSDA, two from Scottish Executive, one member from Scottish Enterprise and one from Highlands and Islands Enterprise36, two members of the SQA37, a member of Futureskills Scotland, which is in my opinion a strange inclusion, as Futureskills Scotland, are responsible for producing LMI on Skills for Scotland, and thus produce LMI that many SSCs relied on in producing their SSAs. Futureskills Scotland even cut their data by SSC footprint, which leads me to ask the question of what would happen if primary research carried out by an SSC had contradicted the futureskills data, how would that have affected the reception that it got at the project board? Also what pressure did the presence of Futureskills Scotland on the project board exert on SSCs to use their data, outside of the pressure that was applied elsewhere by the SSDA? Careers Scotland were also on the project board, as well as the Scottish Funding Council38,

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36 These two organisations represent the LECS in Scotland, which are the Scottish equivalent of the TECs in England, the TECs in England being subsumed into the LSC post the Learning and Skills Act (2001). The LECs have been retained in Scotland currently.
37 Scottish Qualifications Authority similar but not identical in scope to the QCA in England
38 The Scottish Funding Council is similar in nature to the FEFC post 2001 in England, a funding but not a planning body.
learndirect Scotland, the Scottish Trade Union Congress and Jobcentre Plus (SSDA, 2004, p2).

SSDA (2004b,p2) did however conclude that ‘other ‘bodies needed to be involved in a communication strategy emanating from the project board. It is interesting to see that although employers bodies are in this group, predominantly, this group is still a stakeholder group. It consists of the following groups: CBI, Universities Scotland, Jobcentre Plus, Association of Scottish Colleges, Awarding Bodies, Training Providers, Federation of Small Businesses (SSDA, 2004, p2).

In SSDA (2006f) entitled ‘Sector Skills Agreements-Frequently Asked Questions’ (a document not dissimilar to the one produced for Wales) it is stated that the project board in Scotland has responsibility for the overall development and delivery of the Sector Skills Agreements project in Scotland including the development of a specification, the steering of SSCs through the SSA process and the supporting of the wider implementation and wider roll out of SSC (SSDA,2006f,p1).

The project board is accountable through the SSDA to the Scottish Executive and also via the Scottish Executive to Ministers (SSDA,2006f,p1). As in Wales (see later) there is also a project team, although unlike Wales the composition of the team seems to be more fluid, as membership consists of those who are close to the activity in Scotland, and include a representative from each of the SSCs, the Scottish Executive and the SSDA(SSDA,2006f,p2).

As a result of concerns that SSAs from the pathfinder SSCs were not ‘Scottish’ enough, the Scottish Executive announced that SSCs through the SSDA, were to receive an additional £50,000 to make their SSAs for Scotland more Scottish (SSDA, 2006f,p4). Invariably this meant that there was an expectation that the Scots would receive their own national report, in addition to a UK national report.

In previous work on SSAs, I have discussed the considerable amount of control that SSDA sought to have over the development of SSAs. A further very good example of this related in this instance to Scotland, is a paper produced by SSDA, entitled ‘Scottish Leads’ Meetings with Stakeholder Organisations’. It is suggested that the introduction begins what appears a somewhat patronizing tone running throughout the paper.

“Establishing good contacts with stakeholder bodies is important. Knowing the requirements of stakeholders and being able to discuss these with your contact in the stakeholder organization will assist both you and the stakeholder in gathering the information that you need for your Sector Skills Agreement (SSA). The purpose of this briefing paper is to suggest some of the issues and topics that you might want to discuss during meetings with Scottish Stakeholders. Of course the meetings will vary as you go through the process of developing your SSA, and the focus of the meetings will change. We hope that using the prompts in this paper will help you to plan for and get the most out of all of your meetings and will assist both you and the stakeholder to be clear on your respective needs at different stages of the process.” (SSDA,2006g,p2).

SSDA (2006g) then goes on to ‘suggest’ a number of things that an SSC might want to do before a Stakeholder meeting, such as find out about the stakeholder through reading any of their policy documents, also thinking about the SSCs own information and data, and finally, drawing up an agenda for the meeting, which one might have
thought was axiomatic (SSDA,2006g,p3-4). SSDA (2006g) is also full of wholesome advice on what to do at the meeting with the Stakeholder:

“This meeting will allow you to identify matters on which you will need information from the stakeholder organization and any timescale issues arising from these. It will also allow you to update the stakeholder on your progress towards developing your SSA. The stakeholder will be able to brief you on initiatives, priorities and policies in his or her organization and this will be helpful to you in the general process of information gathering. At the end of the meeting both you and the stakeholder are likely to have a number of things to follow up on, arising out of your joint discussions. If this is the first meeting you will probably spend a bit of time clarifying what the organization can do for you and what your own expectations are. Being clear on this now will help to avoid confusion or disappointment later. The agenda will be of assistance to you here.” (SSDA,2006g,p4)

SSDA (2006g) talks about themes under the general heading of the meeting with the stakeholder, with one being the exchange of information with the stakeholder, and agree arrangements for follow up. The language again it is suggested is somewhat patronizing.

“While you will be able to clear up many questions during the meeting it is likely that neither you nor your contact will be able to answer all questions or deal with all issues on the spot. So it will be useful to agree before the meeting closes what still needs to be supplied (either by you or the stakeholder) and who will be responsible for following these issues up and when. It would also be helpful to discuss at this point the information that you are likely to seek in future. You might want to meet with (and discuss your findings with) a number of different individuals in the stakeholder body in future and your contact might also suggest this to you. It will be sensible to confirm and agree the protocols for contacting others within the stakeholder organization. For example, will you make direct contact with the individuals your contact names or will you ask him or her to do this on your behalf beforehand?” (SSDA,2006g,p6).

Finally there is a section entitled after the meeting, which again not only goes on to state the obvious, but again it is suggested does so in a way that shows a certain degree of patronization of the SSCs. For example under a sub-heading of ‘brief your colleagues’ it states:

“Report the outcome of your discussion and pass on any information or details about data and statistics to relevant individuals in the SSC, particularly the Research Team. Make sure they are aware of the stakeholder’s timescales for supplying data” (SSDA,2006g,p6)

Further prescription is applied under a sub-heading of ‘Write to the stakeholder’. The advice given again is startling in its prescriptiveness:

“Put what you have agreed with the stakeholder in writing and send it to your named contact in the stakeholder body. You could use the section headings in this paper and your agenda as an outline for writing this letter.” (SSDA, 2006g,p6).
While it is suggested that the tone of SSDA (2006g) is patronizing in nature, an example of control, can be seen in SSDA (2005b), in the paper entitled ‘Sector Skills Agreements: Scottish Paper’ under a sub-heading of: Summary of Potential Topics Relating to Agreements with Funding, Planning and Delivery Agencies’, where the note is described to be a prompt for those elements of an agreement that SSCs might like to consider in steering their work with delivery partners (p9). It continues:

“The SSC must also consider what actions can be taken within a sector to address their identified priorities, and those things that employers acting collaboratively can achieve. They must also consider what role the sector should play in helping to address some of the issues covered below.” (SSDA,2005b,p9).

What is interesting about the list that then follows is that it is entirely dedicated to ‘supply side’ issues that the majority of employers, for whom this SSA is being delivered would it is suggested have little experience in practice or interest or both. They are as follows:

- Qualifications and skills development: which might include issues of how to drive up relevance and quality; key qualifications that a sector wants to target for utilization, contextualizing management skills within sector qualifications; help shape school vocational curriculum and core skills provision etc.
- Progression routes: making sure that key links between qualifications are made and developing a framework for progression that the sector actually (or the SSDA thinks it needs) needs, linking it to likely career progression paths as appropriate and set against the backdrop of the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework.
- The provider network and infrastructure: looking to develop stronger links between industry and providers, identifying potential need for extending the provider base and identifying what can be done to develop greater reliance and quality.
- Delivery models and mechanisms: this is deemed to cover issues like time and place of training delivery, such as the relative merits of workplace delivery compared to say college based; ensuring adequate assessor capacity to support the achievement of qualifications, and achieving adequate numbers of high quality work placements. Also to include the relevance and role of e-learning.
- Information, advice and guidance services: looking at the potential to work more closely with careers Scotland to provide careers and labour market information on the sector, and/or working with learndirect Scotland to offer specific advice on the provision available across the sector.
- Entry routes/recruitment: Examining what can be done within the sector to take advantage of all available entry routes, potentially including work with colleges, HE institutions, and jobcentre plus on recruitment and training packages.
- Business support services: potentially taking forward work with Scottish Enterprise Networks, including the Small Business Gateway, to offer tailored and sector specific services, which might be linked to specific training packages to support business development (SSDA, 2005b,p9).

In Scotland, even signing up to the agreement appears to be complicated. So the first sign up is supposed to take place at stage 3 of the process, where the sector will identify its priority issues, the second sign up will require the sector to have identified
its contribution to the package of measures finally agreed between all parties at stage 5. SSDA (2005c, p13) describes the process in the following way:

“At the second level, the agreement operates between the SSC and the stakeholder organizations that need to act in various ways in order to achieve the objectives of the agreement. This element of the agreement should conclude in the second sign-up point at stage 5 of the process, bringing together the activities of the SSC, the sector and the stakeholders into a single agreed action plan.” (SSDA, 2005b, p13).

The SSA at the third level in Scotland operates between the sector and the Government. In return for the sector’s commitment to take effective collaborative action on skill then the Scottish Executive at this stage proposes to use the instruments that it has available, for example, the SSDA, the Lifelong Learning Forum, the Trade Union Working Party on Lifelong learning, the Executive’s annual business conference, the SSCs Scottish Managers, Scottish Stakeholders group, as well as liaising with bodies like CBI Scotland, and the Federation of Small Businesses to promote successful implementation of the agreement (SSDA, 2005b, p14).

The Scottish Executive will also want to consider any significant barriers in education and training systems identified through the Sector Skills Agreements, and any proposed changes or flexibilities that are put forward as a result. These barriers may relate to any aspects of the agreements that are identified, such as enabling colleges and training providers to be more responsive to employers’ and learners’ needs; achieving better working between agencies; or achieving effective collaboration within sectors, in other words, things that are themes in the lifelong learning strategy (SSDA, 2005b, p14).

**Wales**

Wales is a country it is suggested that where skills policy is concerned tends to mirror what goes on in England, more than Scotland and Northern Ireland. For example both The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) and the Learning and Skills Act (2001) related to both England and Wales, and therefore generally the development of skills policy in Wales tends to mirror England. That said, there are a number of challenges that a SSC promoting an SSA needed to be aware of. In Wales (which has seen a very difficult transformation from industrial heavy engineering in the south towards a more services/light engineering economy, and has the lowest GDP/GVA in the UK, with high deprivation and unemployment) there is natural desire post devolution to thinking terms of social justice (WAG, 2005a, p22-23).

Skills and learning are seen as a means of obtaining social justice and fairness in a society with low aspirations and in preparing an SSA there were identified eighteen policy documents related to social justice, where a consideration might have to be made for skills policy emanating from the SSA (Hammond, 2007c, p30). These are:

- Preparing Local Housing Strategies (2007)
- Tackling Substance Misuse in Wales (2005)
- The Home Energy Efficiency Scheme: Making a Difference in Wales
The amount of input that these reports and papers have on skills is limited, although the Eradicating Child Poverty in Wales: Measuring Success (2006) has a discussion about what are known as the NEET group (Not in Employment, Education or Training) and targets are set for reduction of this group, such that by 2010, 93% of 16-18 year olds within the principality are to be in employment, education or training, rising to 95% by 2020. Wales within the same document has also set itself a target of 95% of young people by the age of 25 to be ready for high skilled employment and/or further or higher education, rising to 97% by 2020 (ECPW, 2006, p13). These internal targets set by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) are of course policy documents, and thus any employer driven policy that reduced the potential for achievement of the targets would not be likely to find favour with the Government.

As with the other devolved nations however, there were a number of specific policy documents emanating from the WAG that bore a direct relevance to skills, which SSCs seeking to produce a Welsh SSA, were obliged to consider. These are discussed below:

Wales: A Better Country: The Strategic Agenda of the Welsh Assembly Government

Education and skills form a major part of this strategic policy document, as the WAG are committed to creating better jobs and skills (WABC, 2003, p7). The report argues that Wales cannot seek to compete on a low skill/low cost economic policy, and thus investment in education and skills is essential if Wales is to compete at the high skills end of economic development. The report also laments the ‘brain drain’ from Welsh Universities to England, because the Welsh economy is failing to produce sufficient jobs to meet career aspirations (WABC, 2003, p8-9).

The WAG agenda from this report, has a number of commitments related to post compulsory education and training and lifelong learning. First, there is the production of an Individual Learning Account for Wales, with a view to providing a financial incentive for lifelong learning. There is also an intention to reform the 14-19 age range curriculum with the intention of extending education at school into lifelong learning as an adult. The WAG proposes to provide each learner with a learning pathway to give them the skills, experience and opportunities for successful life and work. This again it is suggested is a policy steeped in social justice, which any SSA would have to take cognisance of, if their SSA were to be acceptable to WAG, although (and this theme will be developed in subsequent work) the curriculum that is
provided to meet this policy need, may not be that which the sector feels is beneficial to the sector. There is also within this policy document a commitment to address the basic skills needs that are present in the principality, and make more Welsh people able to enter the job market (WABC, 2003, p16-17). Finally, within this policy document, the WAG is also committed to developing the knowledge economy in Wales through stronger links between FE, HE and business with the intention of translating educational strengths into business strengths, particularly through the promotion of entrepreneurial activity and scholarships (WABC, 2003, p19). As can be seen, there are many similarities within the devolved nations (and English regions for that matter) on the subject of entrepreneurship and the role of business in developing education, and much of the language between this paper and ‘FE means Business’ (2004) in Northern Ireland is almost identical.

The Learning Country 2: Delivering the Promise

The Learning Country 2, follows the production of an earlier report of the same name, entitled ‘The Learning Country’. The Learning Country made a commitment to build stronger foundations for learning, by radically improving early years provision and support for special needs, as well as improving transition between primary and secondary school, as well as developing schools working practices to be more flexible, innovative and responsive, thus transforming provision for 14-19 year olds including developing better services for young people. There is also a commitment to give stronger support to practitioners, strengthening careers information, advice and guidance, and promoting greater access to post-16 learning. The document also recommends tackling the skills deficits in Wales and the modernising of the collaborative efforts of higher education in Wales (LCDP, 2006,p2).

In relation to FE and skills, the report does identify a number of challenges needing addressing, and these are first, the need to raise the general level of skills and qualifications in the principality at levels 3 and 4. In relation to quality and standards within FE, then there are deemed to be a number of programmes in both FE and work-based learning where there are weaknesses in the quality of teaching and achievement is still too low, and on work-based-learning courses, learning, management and responsiveness is still seen as a serious problem. The report suggests that further support in teaching and management, will be offered to practitioners in the providers (LCDP, 2006,p3-4).

In this report, higher Education in Wales is tasked with reconfiguring or collaborating together to exploit their strengths and develop the research base in Wales (LCDP, 2006,p5).

Skills and Employment Action Plan for Wales 2005

The aim of this report is to create a Wales where all the people have the skills, motivation and the opportunity to obtain good quality jobs that meet their aspirations and abilities, and where employers work with Government to raise their employees skills to the highest possible level to support high quality jobs in what was then a ‘growing economy’. The document contains a number of key actions, which include a joined up comprehensive approach to support business, and a new model for addressing human resources needs through workforce learning accounts, which is a mechanism whereby business needs can be assessed and flexible packages of training provided as support to meet them (SEAPW, 2005, p5).

In addition, this proposes a new basic skills strategy, which includes free tuition for literacy and numeracy, and a new strategy for getting the economically inactive back
to work through ‘Want to work’ pilots, which are accompanied with a new flexible programme offering comprehensive ‘employability’ teaching accompanying it (SEAPW, 2005, p6). An excellent example of how the SSA was used to respond to the existing policy context, can be seen in Hammond (2007c).

“Sector Skills Agreements will be used in Wales to address the employer need for skills. Employers are also to be encouraged to invest in Investors in People (IIP) with particular emphasis on management and leadership training and development” (Hammond, 2007c,p32)

The report also proposes to support further free training up to level 3, with specific labour markets being targeted where there are persistent low skills. There is also an intention to create better progression opportunities and flexible options through 14-19 learning pathways and workplace learning programmes, and an increase in the opportunities for graduates to take up employment in Wales through the GO Wales programme. Finally the report recommends the setting up of a skills observatory to provide better information on skills in Wales (SEAPW, 2005, p6).

Wales: A Vibrant Economy (WAVE)

In this report, the WAG commits itself to developing an entrepreneurial action plan from which it proposes to develop subsequently a new Knowledge Bank for Business, which is aimed at firms with high growth potential. The report while acknowledging the advances that Wales has made in recent years, points out that nearly 20% of working age adults at the time of the report had no qualifications, which is significantly worse than England and many other EU countries; with in addition, a smaller proportion of the working age population in Wales having intermediate and higher skills levels than in other parts of the UK (WAG, 2005, p53).

The report then reiterates the four main points within the skills and employment action plan for Wales, which it identifies as being to improve the mechanisms for workforce development, supply new entrants to the labour market with the skills needed for employment (and here cross reference should be to Wales: A learning country 1 where the initiatives of basic skills, careers Wales and the Welsh Baccalureate are outlined). The third item referred to in WAVE (2005) taken from the Skills and Employment Action Plan for Wales is the need to work with employers and employees to improve skills. Finally the underlying theme of all the development in this report is the need to help more people into sustained employment (WAG, 2005, p55).

People, Places, Futures: The Wales Spatial Plan

The role of the Welsh spatial plan is to ensure that the WAG and its partners and agents develop policy in ways which take account of the different challenges and opportunities in the different parts of Wales. The spatial plan is also intended to provide a basis and momentum for working together on a shared agenda locally, so that the different parts of Wales can establish their distinctive approaches to meet the objectives set in the strategic plan entitled Wales: A Better Country and the WAG sustainable development schemes (PPFWSP,2004,p4).

Although not specifically about skills, the spatial plan is a key document for SSCs developing their SSAs, as the way that the document was developed, to meet the needs of the WAG was essential, if the SSA was to have any effect, as Wales could not be treated as a single nation, but rather had to be treated effectively as four spatial areas, North East, North West, South East and South West respectively.
Geographically and economically of course the regions are different, and the South of Wales is considerably different for the North, as South East Wales prospers due to the M4 corridor through Bristol for example (Hammond, 2007c).


The higher education strategy for Wales is another key document in that SSCs with a higher education remit within their portfolios, need to take it into account in their SSAs when making recommendations related to higher education. The report begins by being highly complementary of the performance of Welsh Universities in their ‘commercialisation’ of their research and their ability to attract over 50% of their learners from Wales itself (RHHELC,2002,p1).

Welsh Higher Education however does face a number of challenges, as currently only 26% of their entries come from disadvantaged social groups. Strategically however, Wales HEI fail to generate critical mass through collaboration, which has made it difficult for them to make successful applications for research funding. The poor road and rail networks within the principality between the HEI’s in the North and the South, and on the west coast of mid-Wales make it difficult for collaboration, which also inhibits the ability of the HEI’s to lever additional funding through corporate sponsorship, trusts, alumni, or endowments with research funders outside the funding councils. There is also a need for Welsh HEIs the report concludes to continue to develop its relationship with industry, with a view to increasing yet further the amount of commercialisation of research taking place (RHHELC, 2002,p3).

The strong emphasis on the commercialisation of research, will be an anathema to many academics both in Wales and the UK generally, and in this way, the role of academia in developing a post-industrial Wales, is very starkly stated in this report, and in this sense it is suggested fits nicely with the developing emphasis of the Sector Skills Agreements, and the bringing together (allegedly) of industry, government and academia to forge a common strategy for advancement.

**14-19 Learning Pathways in Wales**

This report follows from the commitments made in ‘The Learning Country1’, and sets out an entirely new approach to 14-19 education and training in Wales. The report takes into account the work of the Common Investment Fund (CIF) which supports a range of projects with the aim of achieving greater collaboration between 16-19 education and training providers across Wales. The report also considers the Geographical Pathfinder Project, where six areas of Wales were undertaking an in-depth review of current learning provision, leading to recommendations on options for how this provision might be ‘configured’ in the future (LPW, 2005, p3).

The last particular objective of the report is of course immediately problematic as it predetermines any recommendations that might arise from an SSA. Throughout the devolved administrations (and the English regions for that matter) there seems to be a constant relegation of the purpose of the SSA to effect change on the provider network in the name of employers, by the retaining of policy initiative by the devolved national governments, then expecting the SSCs and their SSAs to revolve around them.

One major policy initiative that the report promotes, is the development of the role of a Learning coach, who is responsible for providing learner focussed support, guidance and mentoring support to young people. A learning coach role it is
purported, can be undertaken by a range of professionals with different experience in working with young people, to ensure that individual learners have support from someone with the relevant skills and qualities to meet their needs. The report suggests that a learning coach may be an individual working with a group of young people, or could be a function undertaken by a team of learning coaches with different skills. Learning coaches will however be professionals with experience in teaching, youth work, community work, social work, training or other similar background and they will be trained to a standard which allows for the accreditation of previous learning and/or experience. More work is needed on the development of this role, and this is conceded in the report (LPW, 2005, p9).

**Laith Pawb: A National Action Plan for a Bilingual Wales**

A perennial problem for SSCs the majority of whom are based in England is the need to make their SSAs fit with the nationalist agendas within each of the devolved nations. Although as has already been stated, the Welsh FE systems is the most similar system to England, the one issue that differentiates Wales as much from the rest of the UK as from England is the need for all work to be translated into the Welsh language. Thus all SSC documents, including essential summaries of the SSA had to be in Welsh to satisfy the needs of the Welsh language policy (NAPBW, 2003, p1).

**Words Talk- Numbers Count**

This report is mentioned in ‘The Learning Country’ and is relevant to the SSAs in that it addresses the Basic Skills issues that are prevalent within the population of Wales. The report proposes a number of strategies, which are as follows:

- All young children should be prepared for learning when they begin school (whatever that means).
- The number of children leaving primary school struggling in reading, writing and the use of number should be further reduced.
- Fewer young people should leave compulsory education still struggling with basic skills, and finally, the number of adults with poor basic skills should diminish significantly (WTNC, 2005, p4).

The second Basic Skills Strategy expands this somewhat so there is an all age approach that concentrates on ten horizontal and ten priority groups. The scheme also proposes:

- An expanded language and play programme, targeting communities first areas.
- There is a need for there to be recognition of basic skills as a core part of the 14-19 agenda under Learning Countries: Learning pathways.
- There is a requirement that all learning providers assess the basic skill needs of all learners and take follow-up action to support their needs.
- An Employer Pledge scheme with more support being provided by employers.
- Development of a fit-for-purpose suite of qualifications and associated assessment tools.
- There is also a need for new learning programmes developed to be flexible and attractive to learners across the settings as well as an integrated programme of basic skills support for offenders and enhanced support for English Spoken as Other Language learners.
A new best practice programmes plus dissemination support carried out notably through the strategy website (WTNC, 2005, p6).

The report contains a range of targets, so that by 2010, 80% of working age adults are to have Level 1 literacy skills and 55% to have level 1 numeracy skills. In addition, all schools to maintain the Basic Skills Quality Mark standards and all post-16 learning providers to hold the Quality Mark by 2006 (WTNC, 2005, p7).

Statistically, in Wales 25% of working age adults (approximately 450,000) have low literacy skills and 53% (approximately 980,000). Around half of those with poor basic skills are already in the workforce and 70% of the workforce for the year 2020 has already left compulsory education. The cost to Wales is estimated at £600 MN per year, in lost potential productivity. Basic Skills underpin other vocational training, as on average 46% of level 1 NVQs require Level 2 reading skills, with the report concluding that Level 3 skills are the minimum required for the workforce to match the ambition set out in the document (WTNC, 2005, p8).

The report also talks about the employers pledge to support basic skills training in the workplace. It is argued again, that this very detailed and in-depth policy initiative gives little scope for SSCs through their SSAs to develop any strategy that does not fit in with the strategy of the WAG agenda in this area. In the next sub-section, it is proposed to look at the development of the SSA agreement through the literature provided in Wales.

Wales SSA Management

As with Northern Ireland and Scotland, Wales also managed the SSA process through a project board. In SSDA (2006c) the following comment is made in the ‘Wales SSA Project Board Meeting Schedule’ (p1):

“SSA Project teams consist of SSDA and Welsh Assembly Government. This gives SSC Wales Managers (and SSA leads where appropriate) an opportunity to discuss in more detail work on SSAs in Wales on the ground- where this is helpful” (SSDA, 2006c, p1).

SSDA (2006d) expands and develops this theme further, by answering the question of where authority and responsibility for SSAs in Wales, by concluding:

“The SSA Wales Project Board has authority and responsibility for the overall development and delivery of the SSA Projection Wales including: developing a specification, steering SSCs through the SSA development process and supporting the implementation and wider rollout of SSAs. The Project Board is accountable through the SSDA to the Welsh Assembly Government. The SSDA is ultimately responsible for SSAs UK-wide. The Project Board is represented on the UK Sector Skills Policy Forum by the Welsh Assembly Government.” (SSDA, 2006d, p1)

The membership of the project board in Wales is as follows:

“The Project Board is chaired by SSDA and has representatives from the following organisations. SSDA, Welsh Assembly Government,
In this way, Wales is like the other devolved nations, in that the project board is completely dominated by people from the WAG and other public sector bodies related to it, a position that has become more obvious since 2006, when the Welsh Development Agency and ELWA (the Welsh equivalent of the LSC) was absorbed into the WAG. This, as already stated prevents there being much scope for employer feedback, as the whole process is driven by ‘civil servants’ and indirectly the supply network. In this way Wales (and the other devolved nations) are even more controlling than the Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) in England, which do at least have some employer representation on them, although these of course pre-date the now defunct English SSA Project Board.

In SSDA (2006e) entitled the ‘Stakeholder Map Wales’ the specific role of the project board is described as being the key decision making mechanism for the overall SSA project in Wales. Secondly, to ensure that key stakeholders in Wales buy into SSAs and fully understand the SSA decision-making process and thirdly, to approve and monitor the implementation of a Project plan for the project. Fourthly to oversee the evaluation of pathfinder SSAs in Wales, although this role is interesting, as in evaluating the pathfinder SSAs, then it is suggested that this creates a conflict of interest that seems to be lost of the SSDA, as the project board is being asked to evaluate a process, where they are likely to be a major partner in the success of the SSA in the principality. What this move did do, was give the project board the opportunity to influence SSAs to make them fit the agenda of the project board organisations rather than any challenging demands that might come from employers (SSDA, 2006e,p3).

A further task of the project board was to report on progress and key issues to the Welsh Assembly Government and the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning and skills as appropriate. The Project board was also required to agree appropriate milestones to meet timescales for SSAs across the UK, agree the mechanisms for dealing with the next stages of SSA engagement, and finally to agree the mechanisms for managing the SSA process (SSDA, 2006e,p3).

In Wales as well as a Project Board for the SSA, there was a project team made up of the SSDA Wales manager, and a manager from the WAG. The role of the project team was to provide direction to SSCs, to assist SSCs with problem solving, promote SSAs (presumably within the WAG and the public sector), facilitate appropriate engagement and support implementation and broker dialogue with stakeholders, ensure that reports and communications are brought to the board with appropriate recommendations and finally to monitor and review SSAs as they are developed (SSDA, 2006d, p2).

The role of the Project Team is stated to be:

“The Wales SSA Project Team operates as more of a working group, allowing an informal setting for individual SSCs to raise specific Wales issues with the SSDA and Welsh Assembly Government. They are aimed at SSC Wales Managers, but SSA leads are always welcome to attend if they find it useful. The project team in Wales has emerged as an important mechanism for developing SSAs in Wales, and will have
continued use for the remaining tranches of the SSCs.” (SSDA, 2006d,p2).

In this paper, I have already suggested that quintessentially from the primary legislation, be that the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) or the Learning and Skills Act (2001) the way PCET has developed is very similar in Wales to that in England. So, the 2001 Act created the LSC for England and ELWA (now part of WAG) for Wales, OfSTED became responsible for quality of FE Provision in England, Estyn in Wales. In relation to inspection, then there appears to be no equivalent to ALI in Wales, but the systems work the same. It is in Wales it is suggested that the nationalist obsession in the devolved nations with being different can be seen most clearly as in answering the question of why is developing an SSA different in Wales? The answer given demands SSA’s couched in difference, rather than in the homogeneity of issue facing a sector across the UK.

“The policy, education and training system in Wales is different from other parts of the UK and this must be reflected within the SSA. Welsh stakeholders will expect to see Welsh solutions to Welsh problems or, at the very least, proposed UK-wide solutions must be tested and proven to be required and applicable to Wales specifically. Collaborative solutions are the SSC’s proposed actions needed to meet the priorities of their sector in Wales. These specific solutions have to be discussed in detail with providers and funders of education and training in Wales, including the level of support required from key partners and the timescales for delivery. The Welsh Assembly Government is fully committed to SSCs and the work they are doing to deliver SSAs in Wales. It announced its commitment to SSAs in Wales in January 2004. This commitment is set out in the Assembly Government’s Skills and Employment Action Plan (SEAP) launched in January 2005. It says that SSCs: “…will be the basis for developing Sector Skills Agreements with partners in Wales to deliver learning provision more effectively geared to the needs of employers”” (SSDA, 2006d, p2-3).

The broad components of an SSA, as set out in the Skills and Employment Action Plan (2005) (p16, paragraph 27) dictate that for Wales the SSA will cover the current and future skills needs, including the Welsh language needs, the current learning provision, the gaps and weaknesses for provision against current and future forecast needs, the opportunities for collaboration by employers and the actions to improve skills and what employers and employees will contribute. Within the same paragraph the WAG also indicates that it is willing to explore the potential for SSAs to open up employment opportunities for women, the inactive, people from ethnic minorities and people with disabilities; and opportunities for young people who are not in education, training or employment to re-engage with learning through workplace training opportunities (SSDA, 2006e,p1). It is suggested that it is unlikely that many of the issues mentioned in SSDA (2006 e) would be high on the majority of employers in the current recession.

The overall aim therefore of SEAP 2 is for a Wales where employers work with employees and the public sector agencies to raise skill levels to the highest possible level that it is possible for them to be, to support high quality jobs in a growing economy, with the belief being that SSAs will provide a significant mechanism for achieving the aim by enabling employers, trade unions and Government to collaborate in meeting the priority skill requirements of industry sectors, and in
particular those skill requirements that are needed to drive improved business performance (SSDA, 2006e,p2).

Conclusions to this Paper

There are a number of themes that are common to the devolved nations, the first is that SSAs are not perceived in the devolved nations (nor for that matter the English regions, although this is not specifically the purpose of this paper) to be the driving force behind the development of policy within the nations. By the time that many SSCs had embarked on their SSAs, there was a reduced expectation that the SSAs were there to inform policy, but to accommodate themselves to existing policy enunciated within the nations. This accommodation is directed in the main through the SSDA, and leaves no room for challenge, or indeed for the creation of the demand-led system that ministers intended SSAs would usher in.

The creation of project boards and project teams which are totally composed of the supply/policy side of the skills agenda, with the complete exclusion of employers or employer groups seems to further negate against there being an employer managed process.

What this paper also shows further (I have discussed this point further in other work) is the amount of control that the SSDA has had on the process. The dictation through the guidance documents shown in this paper and elsewhere has been to control to the utmost the inputs that the SSCs have had on their SSAs.

Ultimately it is suggested that the impact of SSAs has been negligible therefore on driving the demand led agenda forward or impacting on policy in relation to what had originally been envisaged.

The Business agenda of ‘New Labour’ is however highly visible in the language of all the devolved nations, suggesting a certain degree of hegemony over skills policy in the UK, notwithstanding the social justice agendas in the devolved nations.

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This document was added to the Education-line database on 12 March 2009