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PHD

**Governing Skills, Governing Workplaces: State-steered Voluntarism in England under New Labour**

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**Governing Skills, Governing Workplaces:  
State-steered Voluntarism in England under New Labour**

**Hannah Durrant**

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
University of Bath

Department of Social and Policy Sciences

May 2012

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*I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my Grandparents*

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the Skills Strategy for England under New Labour as a contested project to govern workplace high(er) skill aspiration and behaviour. It analyses differentiated state strategies to promote and (re)produce responsible skills ambitions; the engagement of employer and employee representatives with these strategies to stretch and reshape, and resist and restate the project; and the implications for skills provision. The research involved interpretive analysis of policy documents, and in-depth interviews with policy-making elites; strategic representatives of business and worker/learner interests; and skills providers.

To support my empirical focus this thesis is located within theories of the changing form and function of the state. Adopting a 'cultural political economy' approach, and drawing on critical governance studies, to illuminate the interplay between meaning production and practice, I challenge the conclusion that mechanisms for skills creation in England are premised on a misunderstanding of the skills motivations of employers and employees. Instead I expose state work through policy to produce and export a skills logic; constituting and positioning governable subjects in relation to their internalisation of these logics; and the role of differentiated policies to manoeuvre subjects towards preferential skills behaviours.

The findings highlight that what is presented as a coherent 'partnership' approach to producing enhanced skills can be better understood as three distinctive state strategies, (demand-led; leading demand; circumventing lack of demand) , which are aimed at differently imagined and constructed workplaces, (enlightened; inert; or deviant), depending on their demonstrable degree of responsible skills ambition. I therefore term this project 'state-steered voluntarism'. However, I also expose the limitations and limits of this project. Attempts to present policy coherence lacquers over latent tensions and contradictions between the different skills strategies, creating policy 'opacities' which serve as spaces for the strategic voices of employer/employee representation to talk back; disorganising the practices and processes of skills delivery.



## List of Abbreviations

AIC – Advanced Industrial Countries  
AoC – Association of Colleges  
ASSC – Alliance of Sector Skills Councils  
CBI – Confederation of British Industries  
CfA – Council for Administration  
CME – Coordinated Market Economy  
BCC – British Chambers of Commerce  
BIS – Department of Business, Innovation and Skills  
DfES – Department for Employment and Skills  
DIUS – Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills  
EEF – Engineering Employers Federation  
ET – Education and Training  
FE – Further Education  
FSB – Federation of Small Businesses  
IAG – Information Advice and Guidance  
IoD – Institute of Directors  
IPA – Interpretive Policy Analysis  
ITB – Industrial Training Board(s)  
LME – Liberal Market Economy  
LSC – Learning and Skills Council  
MNC – Multinational Corporation  
MSC – Manpower Services Commission  
NEP – National Employment Panel  
NESS – National Employers Skill Survey  
NIACE – National Institute of Adult and Continuing Learning  
NIC – Newly Industrialising Countries  
NOS – National Occupational Standards  
NVQ – National Vocational Qualification

PIU – Performance and Innovation Unit  
QCA – Qualifications and Curriculums Authority  
QCDA – Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency  
SfB – Skills for Business Network  
SSA – Sector Skills Agreement  
SSC – Sector Skills Council  
SSDA – Sector Skills Development Agency  
SQS – Sector Qualification Strategies  
TUC – Trade Union Congress  
ULR – Union Learning Representatives  
UK – United Kingdom  
UKCES – UK Commission for Employment and Skills  
VoC – Varieties of Capitalism  
VET – Vocational Education and Training

## 1. Introduction

*“Welcome to the strange land of skills policy [...] where contradictory sentences coexist happily and words mean the exact opposite of what they seem” (Wolf, 2007)*

Contemporary comparative literatures on post-compulsory education and training systems define the UK as an archetypal voluntarist model, at least since the late 1970s and the abolition of the Manpower Services Commission: a system led by the private training decisions of economic actors – negotiated within the ‘black-box’ of the firm (Keep, 2002) - and therefore largely directed by the *ad hoc* demands and preferences of employers (King, 1997; Brown *et al*, 2001; Rubery & Grimshaw, 2003; Page & Hillage, 2006; Clarke & Winch, 2007).

Within such a model the role of the state in shaping skills provision and the skills product is largely relegated to the realm of managing the supply-side (designing and overseeing the implementation of various initiatives and programmes available to be taken up by employers should they so wish). The stated aim is one of seeking to ensure the institutions of education and training are aligning themselves to the demands and preferences of employers and delivering the economically valuable skills they require. Nevertheless, the British state exercises this role in the paradoxical context of voluntarism which provides no incentive nor ascribes any responsibility on employers to exhibit actual demand for skills. Indeed, analysis of workplace training decisions in the UK shows employers to have, at best, highly polarised demands for skills, and at worst, low, or no, demand for skills at all (Keep & Mayhew, 1996; Brown *et al*, 2001; Clarke & Winch, 2007). It is this paradox which has preoccupied much of the critical literature concerned with the nature of the UK skills system; wherein skills policy scholars and commentators have sought to highlight the problems of the combination of demand-side voluntarism and the strong managerialism of the supply-side (see for example, Keep & Mayhew, 1996; Keep, 2005; Keep, 2006; Keep 2007).

With the election of a New Labour government in 1997, however, the locus of paradox in skills policy in the UK/England has been subtly shifted. Into the context of voluntarism of skills demand and managerialism of skills supply, emerged a new inflection in policy that suggested a more interventionist role for the state in 'leading' (shaping and directing) the nature of skills ambitions amongst private workplace actors (employers and employees); directing them towards high(er) skills aspirations. This new inflection instigates a move towards what this thesis identifies as 'state-steered voluntarism'; an approach to the governance of skills in the UK/England which exhibits a new paradox of being about delivering both a '*demand-led*' (often treated as synonymous with employer-led) approach to skills development, *and* a state strategy to '*lead demand*' of employers and employees in the *context of voluntarism* of private decisions to train and utilise skills.

This thesis was motivated to address this new paradox at the heart of skills policy in England. It is a paradox that has been acknowledged by skills policy scholars and commentators (Brown & Lauder, 1996; Keep, 2002; Wolf, 2007; Payne, 2008), but – this thesis argues – has not been satisfactorily accounted for. As stated above, it was a paradox particularly and acutely apparent throughout the on-going development of a 'Skills Strategy' – fervently claimed to amount to a 'Skills Revolution' (Pring, 2004; DIUS, 2007a) - during successive New Labour administrations, and that I experienced as a perpetual source of confusion and frustration for the five years I worked within the Further Education sector in England<sup>1</sup>.

The tension, between a demand-led and a demand leading strategy for skills, recurs in New Labour policy documents (for England) through the frequent juxtaposition of inherently contradictory statements (Wolf, 2007); statements that speak to a dual intention of both responding to employer and employee demand, and raising employer and employee demand for higher skills. For example, the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) report – 'In Demand: Adult Skills in the 21st Century' (2001) – makes this

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<sup>1</sup> I worked as Project Manager for Bridgwater College in Somerset between 2001 and 2006. In this role my specific remit was to develop, implement and 'mainstream' project-funded innovations in relation to the strategic agendas of both Widening Participation and Employer Engagement.

somewhat ambiguous and incomprehensible claim about the ambition of policy in relation to the future of workforce development:

*“Change must focus on raising the demand for [training and skills]<sup>2</sup> from both employers and individuals, through the development of a demand-led system based on empowering individuals and employees to increase their demand for [training and skills].” (PIU, 2001:5)*

A couple of years later the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) White Paper - ‘21st Century Skills: Realising Our Potential – Individuals, Employers, Nation’ (2003) – with equal clarity of purpose, added:

*“We must put employers’ needs for skills centre stage, managing the supply of training, skills and qualifications so that it responds directly to those needs. We must raise ambition in the demand for skill. We will only achieve increased productivity and competitiveness if more employers and more employees are encouraged and supported to make the necessary investment in skills” (DfES, 2003:8)*

And so it went on, through a rapid succession of consultations, White Papers, and Reviews; through assorted policy statements, press releases, Ministerial speeches, and so on. In each case policy discourse could be seen to shift seamlessly and fluidly between the importance of a “demand-led approach” and the facilitation of a “new culture for learning and an appetite for improved skills amongst individuals and employers” (Leitch, 2006, emphasis added), and from a vision of “a demand-led system”, to a policy emphasis on “stimulating demand” (Strategy Unit, 2002).

Explaining the source and cause of this paradox - the governance dynamics that forged its existence in skills policy - provides the analytical starting point of this thesis. Understanding the factors that seal its irreconcilability forms the basis of the conclusion. To begin however I will set this endeavour in the context of existing analytical and

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<sup>2</sup> The report uses the term ‘workforce development’ (WfD) rather than skills, but defines WfD as: “a relatively new term for training and skills development. It sits between training (which has a narrow focus) and education (which is broad), and is firmly grounded in business need” (PIU, 2001:3)

evaluative work that has equally had an empirical focus on skill policy, and the paradox it contains, in the UK/England.

## **1.1 The Empirical Context: Dynamics of Skill Policy in UK/England**

### **1.1.1 Policy Paradox: a Chronic Affliction?**

As discussed above, for many commentators the paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy may be explained as reflective of a deeper affliction from which the governance of skills in the UK/England suffers; the source and cause of which traces back well before (and extends beyond) the New Labour era. For these commentators the paradox continues to be a manifestation of the contradiction of a dominant state-led and utilitarian 'new vocationalism' paradigm, that constructs and arranges education and training in service to the putative high(er) skills needs and demands of the economy without challenging the voluntarism of private decisions to train, and, therefore, without addressing the historical absence of effective social partnership and collective manpower planning mechanisms. The issue for these commentators is that effective social partnership and collective manpower planning mechanisms are necessary not just to articulate high(er) skills demand, but, in the first instance, to build workplace relations based on trust such that high(er) skills needs can manifest as 'demands' (Avis et al, 1996; Brown, 1999; Coffield, 1999; Keep, 1999; Keep & Mayhew, 1999; Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Payne, 2008)<sup>3</sup>.

It is argued that the absence of mechanisms necessary to build trust – to activate, actualise, and articulate high(er) skills demand - has produced low skills equilibrium conditions in the UK/England; conditions oft bemoaned by employers, Trade Unions and

---

<sup>3</sup> For many (for example, Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Keep *et al*, 2008) this paradigm – that education and training should meet the needs and demands of the economy, or more particularly employers - extend back to the 'Great Debate' on education and training (initiated by - then Prime Minister – Callaghan's Ruskin College Speech, 1976). Although Keep & Mayhew (1998) highlight that policy concerns regarding the relevance of education and training for the economy have a history that extends back well before that.

governments alike. The term 'low skills equilibrium' was coined in a seminal article by Finegold & Soskice (1988) to explain a pattern of iterative interaction between the education and training (ET) system and national economic performance, that explains the self-reinforcing consequence of firms establishing a historical comparative advantage in low cost, low value product market and production strategies, and the implications of such a prevalent production and employment regime for the ways in which ET systems have developed, are organised and regulated, and continue to produce a low-skills workforce in the context of low demand for high skills.

Despite the original and explicit intonation of Finegold & Soskice's conceptualisation of low skills equilibrium as the product and cause of a particular 'two-way' relationship between demand for, and supply of, skills, periodic resurgence of concern regarding skills levels, as a critical economic and social issue in the UK/England, tends to frame the problem as an issue of supply (Keep & Mayhew, 1999; Lauder, 1999; Keep, 2002; Keep et al, 2008). Indeed, in the dominant political discourse, the historic failures of skills supply are widely perceived as the cause of the comparative productivity and competitiveness gap, as well as labour market inequalities, insecurities, and ultimately poverty and social exclusion (Lloyd & Payne, 2002; Pring, 2004). More recently, the problem of skills supply has been seen as the cause of a growing concern with in-work poverty that frames a new categorisation and articulation of the 'deserving poor'.

It is argued that framing the low skills equilibrium and the associated ills as an issue of supply has led to a situation where the state has seized and increased managerial control over directing education and training provision in putative relation to the (imagined) needs of the economy (Avis et al, 1996; Ainley, 2001; Hyland, 2002; Pring, 2004; Keep, 2006; Wolf, 2007). Furthermore, that this has taken place despite, and in direct contrast to, growing scepticism regarding the ability of centralised bureaucracy to anticipate and 'plan' for complex and dynamic economic need (Pring, 2004), and whilst retaining ideological claims for the importance of preserving the voluntarism of employer training decisions.

In short, what this brief historical contextualisation of UK skills policy contradiction has illuminated is how we can easily explain and account for – indeed expect – high(er) skills projects to be conceptualised as a ‘demand-led’ strategy in the context of voluntarism, where the principle source and cause of tension is that actual demand for high(er) skills is unlikely in the context of low-skills equilibrium maintained by voluntarist training systems, and in which case the state attempts to ‘fill in the gaps’ by managing a largely customer-less supply with an increasingly iron grip. The question however remains as to how we properly explain and account for a new inflection in skills policy; that demand is to be led by the state? The answer can perhaps be found by considering old afflictions in new economic and social contexts; contexts that have once again reinvigorated calls to urgently address the problem of low skills from governments and employer and employee representatives alike.

### **1.1.2 The (global) High Skills Rhetoric: Consensus without Convergence**

*“More and better skills, so the argument goes, and prosperity will follow.”*

*(Ashton & Green, 1996:3)*

Throughout successive New Labour administrations the urgent need for higher skills returned to occupy a pivotal position at the forefront of economic and social policy and policy debates. This period of resurgent concern with the workforce skill level was framed (as other periods have been) by apprehension regarding the competitive strength of the nation (Wolf, 2007). Specifically, policy and policy debates were again preoccupied with the economic and social problem of low skills. However, as Gleeson & Keep (2004) argue, the particular need for higher skills in this period emanated from perceptions and indications of rapidly accelerating and intensifying change to the ‘knowledge-based’/knowledge-weaponised dimension of national economic success and social security in relatively open, technologically advanced<sup>4</sup>, and dynamic global markets (Avis et

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<sup>4</sup> In particular the ‘conceptual’ skills of the workforce has become associated with the capacity to adapt to and utilise new technologies and adapt to and implement new forms of production, systems of work organisation, and ways of working (Rubery & Grimshaw, 2003:106 also Aston & Green, 1996)



al, 1996; Brown & Lauder, 1996; Aston & Green, 1996; Brown, 1999; Brown & Lauder, 2001; Crouch et al, 2004; Brown, 2008).

Indeed, taking the 'dynamic' economic conditions of the global economy as their starting point and policy linchpin, higher skills were fervently and repeatedly depicted by New Labour governments as singularly fundamental to sustaining business productivity and individual employability. Therefore as the critical determining factor in maintaining and enhancing national economic competitiveness and ensuring (a particularly defined version of) inclusive social justice and prosperity (Lloyd & Payne, 2002; Hodgson et al, 2008; Keep et al, 2008). The alternative was equally zealously portrayed as inevitable economic decline, deprivation and social desperation in the struggle to ride the ever rising tide of global change and uncertainty (Crouch et al, 2004).

Rhetoric regarding the benefits of high skills has not been isolated to the UK/England, or to the political project of New Labour. Indeed it is argued that globalisation and global processes have been, and are having, a transformative effect on the education and training policies of nations around the world; particularly, but by no means exclusively, in the advanced and advancing industrial countries increasingly unable to compete effectively on price in an open global economy (Crouch et al, 2004; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Brown & Lauder, 2011). In this context a broad consensus regarding the central importance of higher skills to knowledge-based production, productivity and competitiveness has emerged (Lloyd & Payne, 2002). This consensus is argued to be apparent within countries between groups representing the interests of both capital and labour and political parties of differing ideological persuasion; and between countries attempting to organise (for example in the case of the Lisbon Strategy for the 'economy of the European Union') and/or compete for their share of global trade and wealth (Brown & Lauder, 1996; Aston & Green, 1996; Crouch et al, 2004; Knell et al, 2007).

However, the assertion that national education and training policies will converge around some common approach to the exponential production of ever higher skilled workers for

knowledge-based production, has been widely questioned and disputed. In contrast it has been suggested, and empirically confirmed, that divergent historical, political and social/cultural contexts of skills formation continue to mediate global changes at the national level (Ashton & Green, 1996; Brown & Lauder, 1996; Ball, 1998; Brown, 1999; Brown et al, 2001; Crouch et al, 2004; Green, 2006; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Brown (1999) argues that whilst there is a broad rhetorical consensus regarding the importance of higher skills for businesses and worker-citizens increasingly operating in conditions of global competition, country-specific responses to common challenges will be filtered and managed according to the national logic of 'possibility' and 'limitation'. These logics of possibility and limitation are considered to be conditioned by the existing institutional configurations of the regime and the balances of power that support and maintain them, and determine the political economy of skills formation (Brown et al, 2001; Crouch et al, 2004).

This is an important point for this thesis which similarly takes the perspective that logics of possibility and limitation are of critical significance to understanding skills policy under New Labour. In light of this point, the question here becomes whether the inflection in the New Labour Skills Strategy that demand is to be led by the state represents a new and somehow compatible logic of possibility for governing high(er) skills? If so, how do we explain it and account for a residual commitment to a 'demand-led' strategy in the context of voluntarism? To address these questions the chapter will now review how the New Labour Skills Strategy for England has been analysed and critically evaluated.

### **1.1.3 Policy Paradox: Policy Failure?**

For some skills policy scholars and commentators there was initial cause for guarded optimism regarding the possibility for aspects of the New Labour Skills Strategy to address the 'chronic affliction' that has historically beset skills policy in the UK/England, and finally tackle low demand for skills. Prior to their first electoral victory, New Labour - identified and categorised at the time by Brown & Lauder (1996:1) as: "centre-left Modernizers" -

were seen to offer something of a favourable contrast to the incumbent New Right informed government, in terms of the direction and trajectory of their agenda for economic development. For instance their agenda was perceived as incorporating some welcome leanings towards a more active enabling role for the state in shaping - particularly through strategic investment in education and training - a higher-skills, higher-value, higher-wage economy/society; better able to secure a fairer distribution of prosperity gains.

Although (for those with an informed and prescriptive analysis of the scale of the task required to reverse Britain's historic training failure and meet the challenges of globalisation) such guarded optimism did not obscure concern that there was a lot more to be done, in particular the need to address deeper causes of economic and social inequality (Brown & Lauder, 1996; Keep & Mayhew, 1998; Brown & Lauder, 2001; Gleeson & Keep, 2004). Nevertheless the threads of policy particularly apparent through early documents such as the PIU report (2001), received as presenting an agenda to take seriously and address the demand-side deficit, offered some hope (Keep & Mayhew, 1998; Keep, 2002; Coffield, 2002; Keep, 2006).

Over time however, much of the initial optimism dissipated as analysis and critical evaluation highlighted the rhetoric vs. reality gap (Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Payne, 2008). It seemed the persistent 'tenacity of voluntarism' (King, 1997) had once again trumped and subsequently hollowed-out the rhetoric of tackling the demand-side, and employers retained their inherently private management prerogative over workforce training decisions (Grugulis et al, 2004).

Furthermore, given the identification by many – termed by Lloyd & Payne (2002) the 'knowledge economy sceptics' - of continuing low employer demand for skills in the context of voluntarism (Aston & Green, 1996; Keep & Mayhew, 1999; Lauder, 1999; Brown et al, 2001; Lloyd & Payne, 2002; Lloyd & Payne, 2003; Lloyd & Payne, 2004), it was more concerning still that a retained and renewed policy insistence on the need to ensure

a 'demand-led' system was perceived as allowing employers to extend their claim to 'rights' over the shape and trajectory of skills policy. Rights that were analysed as both independent of any reciprocal accountability (Gleeson & Keep, 2004) and as wielded without clarity and coherence of objective (Huddleston & Keep, 1999; Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Payne, 2008). Rights that became a privilege used to further downplay any suggestion of the increased responsibility of employers (Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Payne, 2008; Hodgson et al, 2008), and which arguably came at the considerable cost of other stakeholders and wider social considerations. For example, it was noted that as employer's rights were accentuated so was the individualised 'responsibility' and risk of (potential) employees; specifically the onus to make themselves labour market compatible through training and skills (Avis et al, 1996; Coffield, 1999; Keep, 1999; Brown et al, 2001; Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Ball, 2008a).

Overall therefore, the inflection in the New Labour skills project that demand is to be led by the state was broadly treated as amounting to policy failure. An agenda premised on a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of policy-makers about the true motivations of employers (even employees) with regard to attaining and utilising skills. Specifically it was perceived as fatally flawed and ultimately crowded out as a consequence of embedded institutional constraints and a 'weak' state (Brown, 1999; Keep & Mayhew, 1999; Coffield, 2006; Payne, 2008); or more accurately a state seen to be configured in such a way as to lack the ability and willingness to intervene too far in the regulation of the market (Lauder, 1999; Brown et al, 2001; Lloyd & Payne, 2002; Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Keep et al, 2008).

As a result of this misunderstanding about the high(er) skills motivations of employers and the inability and unwillingness of the state to intervene in private skills decisions, much of the analysis and critical evaluation of the New Labour high(er) skills project pointed to the further inflation of central coordination and control of skill supply (Grugulis et al, 2004; Keep, 2006; Lloyd & Payne, 2006; Wolf, 2007). Specifically this analysis and evaluation highlighted the strong managerial role afforded through policy to a range of government departments (with remits and responsibilities in relation to education and training as well

as industry and business, work and welfare and, significantly, HM Treasury); their agencies; and the (often newly established or refocused) QUANGOs that were ultimately accountable to them (Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Pring, 2004; Coffield et al, 2005; Keep, 2006; Payne, 2008).

Pring (2004:109) identified this inflated central control as “micro-managing from the centre”, and as amounting to a rigid “framework for ‘setting targets’, ‘driving implementation’, and ‘reporting on delivery’” (*ibid*). All of which boiled down to a strong state agenda to lead supply but which had little to contribute by way of leading demand. In essence the point being made here returns us back to where we started: that a ‘chronic affliction’ besets skills policy in the UK/England; an affliction arising from the contradiction of constructing and arranging education and training in service to the putative high(er) skills needs of the economy without challenging the context of voluntarism as a cause of low skills equilibrium and, therefore, the source of low demand for skills.

The limitation of this analysis and evaluation of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England is that whilst it offers an explanation of why policy stipulations that appeared to take seriously the intention to tackle the demand for skill failed (policy-maker misunderstanding about the true motivations of employers, even employees; embedded institutional constraints; a weak, unable and unwilling state), this is not the same as accounting for the existence of the paradox in the first place. Indeed, in the last analysis such explanations tend to resort to writing-off the paradox and smoothing out the contradictions it implies. Furthermore, whilst reading policy intentions back in a relatively straight line from outcomes may lead to the conclusion that claims for the need to lead demand in the context of UK voluntarism are empty gestures or smoke and mirrors tricks, such conclusions don’t account for, and therefore tend to downplay, the implications and effects of the tensions that are produced and felt. For example, Payne (2008) points to such implications in his research into the dispiriting search for ‘employer engagement’ by Sector Skills Councils (SSCs); one of the (re)inventions of the New Labour Skills Strategy caught between being demand-led and demand-leading organisations. Payne’s (2008)

research highlights the very real tensions SSCs experience between delivering the demand of employers and the demand of the state in the context of what appears to be both a demand-led and demand-leading strategy for skills.

This thesis therefore fills a gap in current knowledge by asking how can the paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England be accounted for and explained. In doing so this thesis seeks to redirect analysis away from accounting for 'misunderstanding', and towards accounting for 'understanding', by identifying what normative and meaningful underpinnings (logics) gave the New Labour Skills Strategy its inflection to be both demand-led and to lead demand in the context of voluntarism, and how this obvious tension was considered to be managed and reconciled within the high(er) skills project. In addition this thesis seek to explore how this tension was received and responded to by non-state skills actors, and with what implications for the delivery of skills in England?

## ***1.2 The Research Question, Aims and Scope of the Study***

This thesis sets out to explain and understand the source and cause of paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England - a 'demand-led' strategy, wherein demand is to be led by the state, in the context of voluntarism.

This is not a project about how high(er) skills (demand and supply) should be created, or why. There is excellent literature on that topic (a selection of which was discussed in part above) that offers much to be hoped for in realising the promises of a 'high skills' society/economy (Brown & Lauder, 1996; Brown, 1999; Brown et al, 2001; Brown & Lauder, 2001). This is a study of what was done (under the New Labour administration in England) and with what intended and unintended implications for the political ordering and organising of social relations within workplaces; and between workplaces, the state, and the institutions of skills provision. In other words, this thesis is concerned with the governance of skills policy, by which I mean the way in which doing skills was ordered and organised, both by the state (policy-makers) - and as a consequence of how this project

was interpreted and responded to, and with what implications - by the strategic representatives of employers, employee/learners, and the organisations of skills delivery.

In being interested in the governance of skills policy this thesis asks on what logic(s) was the case for high(er) skills built? How did these logics inform policy in terms of the meaningful construction and positioning of workplace actors; the role of the state; and the shape and functions of the skills delivery infrastructure? What were the consequences for how policy ordered and organised doing skills for workplace actors, and what opportunities existed for the remaking of meanings and practices, to contest and seek to reorder the high(er) skills project? In short by being interested in the governance of skills, this thesis is interested in the politics of 'doing skills'.

The thesis is guided by the following overarching research question (RQ) and three empirical sub-question (SRQ):

**RQ:** How can the governance – ordering and organising – of skills policy under New Labour be explained and understood?

**SRQ1:** How did New Labour establish the logic for, and give meaning to, a high(er) skills project in England?

**SRQ2:** How was the logic for a high(er) skills project used to order and organise skills policy in England?

**SRQ3:** How did employer and employee representatives interpret and respond to the New Labour high(er) skills project for England, and with what implications for the ordering and organising of skills delivery?

### ***Notes on the temporal and geographical limits of scope***

The scope of this thesis is restricted to the New Labour Skills Strategy for England, up to the completion of fieldwork in 2009. The research was restricted to England because skills is a devolved issue and the constitutive nations of the UK can, and most do, draft and implement separate skills strategies and policies<sup>5</sup>. Given the nature of the study, a comparative element would have compromised the required depth of analysis. Therefore I focused on England. However, in some cases policy documents and interview conversations refer to broadly common agendas across the UK as a whole. Finally, although New Labour defined their Skills Strategy for England as commencing with the publication of the '21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills: Realising Our Potential – Individuals, Employers, Nation' White Paper (2003), the review of relevant documents includes important 'agenda setting' reports published prior to the official start of the Skills Strategy.

### ***1.3 Outline of the Chapters***

Having positioned this study in relation to existing analysis and critical evaluation of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England, and having presented the research question(s) and scope of the enquiry. The remainder of the thesis progresses as follows:

*Chapter 2:* sets the scene for the empirical focus of this thesis. Since the research question aims to understand the governance of skills policy in England under New Labour and account for the paradox to which this thesis is addressed, it is first necessary for this chapter to review the existing theoretical perspectives that are equally engaged in this task of understanding skill governance, and that have sought to explain the history and future trajectory of skill policy in this national context. The chapter draws on and contrasts two different analytical models. The first offers a functionalist explanation of the institutional arrangements of skill governance (Estevez-Abe *et al*, 2001; Mares, 2001; Hall

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<sup>5</sup> There are a number of accounts of the differences between these national strategies/policies (see Payne, 2008; Keep, 2008; Durrant, 2009).



& Soskice, 2001). The second is concerned with the power and politics of skill governance and exposes conflicts and struggles over skills between actors with differing abilities to act in their own interest (Korpi, 2006). Whilst both offer a strong account of, and justification for, the continuation of demand-led strategies in the context of characteristic voluntarism, the argument of this chapter is that neither can account for nor explain the inflection in New Labour policy for demand to be led by the state.

*Chapter 3:* is set in response to the limitations of the approaches to explaining skills governance in England under New Labour reviewed in Chapter 2, and develops the conceptual approach for this study; an approach that takes meaning-making (associated with governmental rationalities) as state work seriously, and explains the relationship between policy meanings, practices and processes. The chapter draws on a combination of approaches: 'cultural political economy'; and critical governance studies. Utilising these approaches I argue the importance of discursive meaning-making for the political ordering of the social world and therefore the significance of interpreting the discursive meaning that policy inscribes on the objects and subjects that it seeks to govern. In particular, the creation of governable subject positions which policy seeks to steer subjects towards. Beyond this, however, I also argue that it is important to consider the fallibility of meaning-making as discursive and material practice. I draw on prominent theorists in the field of critical governance studies to highlight both the ambiguity and contestability of state projects and policies. Both the conceptual approach taken in general and the focus on meaning-making fallibility – its inherent fragility and contestability – pave the way for my methodological approach and design.

*Chapter 4:* presents the methodology adopted in this study. Given the conceptual approach to studying policy meanings that I propose in Chapter 3 this thesis adopts an ontologically constructivist position and an interpretive approach to policy analysis. In particular the methodological design is informed by my attention to the fallibility of meaning-making as state work, which informed my decision to capture the meaning-making activity of employer, employee/learner, and skills delivery representatives,

alongside policy-makers, in the original empirical analysis. I conducted both an extensive document analysis and semi-structured interviews with skills policy 'elites': policy-makers; strategic representatives of employers; strategic representatives of employees; and strategic representatives of skills delivery. I define 'elites' as operating close to policymaking, having authoritative power to speak and act in relation to policymaking, and as having an ascribed role to represent a wider actor group in promotion or defence of their interests.

*Chapter 5:* is the first of four empirical chapters, and directly addresses the first of the empirical sub-questions guiding the research. It presents an analysis of policy-makers' narratives that determines how the logic for skills was built by the New Labour Administration as related to a powerful discourse of economic and social uncertainty-based complexity, and a powerful discourse of high(er) skills as able to reconcile multiple interests and agendas. As such the chapter argues that the logic for skills was based on the need to pursue 'progress in partnership'. The importance of constructing the logic for skills in this way lies in the subject positions that it seeks to create, and invite employers and employees (interacting at the site of the workplace) to adopt.

*Chapter 6:* is the first of two closely linked empirical chapters that explain how the logic for skills was used to order and organise skill policy. Taken together the two chapters (Chapter 6 and Chapter 7) present the analytical work and contribution of this thesis to explicate three distinct strategies for skills from within the so-termed 'coherent' policy approach that New Labour presented. This chapter describes the first of these three distinct skills strategies; which I term the '*demand-led*' strategy. The demand-led strategy represents governance architecture that is premised on an imagined and idealised '*responsible workplace*': comprising *enlightened employers* and *motivated employees*; that meet an *empowering state*; and a *demand-led system* for skills delivery organised to respond to the '*voice and choice*' of workplace actors as *partner-customers*. The chapter argues that governing the demand-led strategy involves 'making-up' the responsible workplace and bringing it into discursive alignment with certain aspects of state economic

and social policies – to ‘support’ production and labour market competitiveness and better social functioning – to present a bounded version of the skills policy terrain.

*Chapter 7:* is the second of two closely linked empirical chapters that presents the remaining two analytically explicated distinct strategies for skills. These strategies are premised on two versions of negatively imagined ‘inert’ or ‘irresponsible’ workplaces: these workplaces comprise *deficient* or *deviant* employers and/or employees; encounter either an ‘*enhancing*’ or ‘*exhorting/emancipating*’ state; and therefore either a ‘*system to lead demand*’ for skills, or a ‘*system to mitigate and circumvent lack of demand*’. The chapter illuminates how this thesis builds an explanation for the paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy, as governing skills involves reimagining and ‘making-up’ inert and irresponsible workplaces, bringing them into discursive alignment with different aspects of state economic and social policies – to ‘shape’ or ‘emancipate’ production and labour market competitiveness and better social functioning – and present differently bounded versions of the skills policy terrain. The paradox is hence explained with the coexistence of three different skills strategies which target different types of imagined workplaces, employer and employees. However, what confuses strategy meaning (and obscures the source of paradox), is that the distinctions between the analytically distinct strategies are blurred in policy discourse and the narratives of policy-makers, rendering the policy opaque.

*Chapter 8:* is the final empirical chapter and begins by presenting the interpretation and response to the New Labour Skills Strategy for England from employer and employee/learner representatives. The chapter finds that as a consequence of the intricacies, complexities, and ultimately opacities, involved in state work to articulate and assemble three distinct strategies for skills governance as a coherent project employer and employee representatives are able to utilise the opaque spaces between lines of strategy to engage in a second level of strategic selection of discourses. In essence employer and employee representatives engage in stretching and reshaping, and resisting and restating parts of the project in support of their interests, ultimately disrupting the

sequencing of policy meanings, practices and processes for governing skills. The remainder of the chapter presents how this second level of strategic selection by employer and employee representatives is experienced by skills delivery as disorganising and further frustrating the tensions in their role to deliver both *demand-led* and *demand-leading* strategies for high(er) skills.

*Chapter 9:* concludes this thesis. Bringing together the discussions in each of the empirical chapters to summarise the findings and capture the theoretical and empirical contributions, and the policy implications of this thesis.

- *Theoretically:* this thesis contributes a conceptual approach to the study of skills policy, informed by a commitment to taking meaning-making as state work seriously; an approach which is able to account for and explain the paradox in New Labour skills project.
- *Empirically:* this thesis offers a novel conceptualisation of the way in which (state and non-state) actors act within policy in conditions of opacity of policy meaning, and develops an account of strategic skills actors as engaged in second order strategic selection of meanings and practices for governing skills to explain how skills actors act from within policy, and with what implications for delivery.
- *Policy implications:* this thesis argues that the problems for governing skills in England are problems of policy opacity. The thesis argues that by collapsing the distinctions between the different strategies normative policy intentions are obscured and lost, with real effects for skills delivery. Therefore the thesis effectively demonstrates the limitations and limits of '*state-steered voluntarism*', and showcases frustration over ambiguous policy meaning 'on the ground' when considering the perspectives of providers.

## 2. Skill Governance in England: Theorising the Policy and Politics of Voluntarism

### 2.1 Introduction

*“Education is never for its own sake, whatever people often pretend.” (Ainley, 1990:1)*

This chapter sets the scene for the empirical focus of this thesis: governance of skills policy and politics in England under New Labour. As the above quote indicates, the significance of the policy and politics of skill governance – how the ‘doing of skills’ that determines the social context and societal capacity for skill formation (Brown, 1999; Brown *et al*, 2001) is ordered and organised - lies in what is at stake for both employers and (potential) employees, and the relations between them at the site of the workplace. Education and training (ET), particularly vocational education and training (VET), relates to and affects the nature of the production regime (i.e. high-skilled or low-skilled), and is intrinsically concerned with the social development of labour. Determining who has access to, and choices in, what parts of the labour market, and on what terms of ‘being skilled’ (Ainley, 1990; Brown *et al*, 2001; Clarke & Winch, 2007; Lauder *et al*, 2008).

Since this thesis aims to *explain and understand the governance – ordering and organising – of skills policy under New Labour*, it is necessary for this chapter to first review the existing theoretical perspectives that seek to explain the governance of skill - skill policy and politics - in the UK/England. The overarching aim of this chapter is to highlight the limitations of existing theoretical perspectives of the governance of skill in the UK/England in accounting for the paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England, to which this thesis is addressed: the paradox of both a *demand-led* strategy, and a state strategy to lead demand in the *context of voluntarism*.

I draw on and contrast two different analytical models that provide explanations of skill governance – ordering and organising the ‘doing of skills’ - in specific national context. The first (section 2.3) offers a functionalist explanation of the institutional arrangements that determine actor preferences for skills (skill aspiration and behaviour) and therefore the social context and capacity for skill formation (Estevez-Abe *et al*, 2001; Mares, 2001; Hall & Soskice, 2001). The second (section 2.4) is concerned with the power and politics of skill governance and skill formation, and exposes conflicts and struggles over skill preferences between actors with differing abilities (power resources and degree of authoritative state support) to act in their own interest (Korpi, 2006). These explanations establish, in their different ways, the cultural - political, economic and social - logic of the skill system; contextualising its relationship to other aspects of the political economy, and therefore setting national skill development and utilisation trajectories apart from one another in relation to the institutional configurations and power relations that characterise the broader regime.

Although these theories that seek to offer a political economy of skill, and as such explain skill governance in different national contexts, differ significantly in their analytical focus and approach, they share the conclusion that the UK/England developed conditions – in the context of asymmetrical voluntarism - that support the prevalence of ‘low skills equilibrium’ (Finegold & Soskice, 1988). The term ‘low skills equilibrium’ was coined to express a pattern of iterative interaction between the ET system and national economic performance, that explains the self-reinforcing consequence of firms establishing a historical comparative advantage in low cost, low value product market and production strategies, and the implications of such a prevalent production and employment regime for the ways in which ET systems - particularly VET systems - have developed, are organised and regulated, and continue to produce a low-skills workforce in the context of low demand for high skills. The argument of this chapter however, is that neither can account for nor explain the New Labour Skills Strategy for England.

Before commencing the review of these different theoretical approaches to explaining the governance of skills in the UK/England and problematising their ability to account for the paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy, the chapter will first contextualise the national case – skill governance in England - by defining the ethos and tradition of voluntarism.

## ***2.2 Contextualising Skill Governance in England: the Ethos of Voluntarism***

Any attempt to contextualise skill governance in UK/England must commence with the statement that voluntarism defines the prevailing ethos and tradition of workplace skills development (Evans, 1992; Page & Hillage, 2006; Clarke & Winch, 2007; see also Introduction). At its most basic voluntarism denotes the absence of state involvement in skills decisions taken at the workplace, and the establishment of such investments as a private (meaning market) concerns to be negotiated by the employer and employee.

The liberal state notion that training should be left to industry has a long and tenacious history in the UK/England (Finegold & Soskice, 1988; Aston & Green; 1996; King, 1997; Thelen, 2004). Briefly interrupted by a period of top-down imposed tripartite arrangements for planning and coordinating skills - initiated by the 1964 Industrial Training Act, which established the Industrial Training Boards (ITBs); later overseen and coordinated by the establishment of the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) in 1973; and which generated funding through the collection of a highly contested compulsory training levy (Evans, 1992; Payne, 2008) - but not interrupted for long or with much lasting significance. In the end Britain's brief and tentative venture into (quasi-) corporatist economic planning can be considered as both an exceptional period in the history of voluntarist workplace skills development, and as not particularly exceptional. It represented a hollow attempt at tripartite coordination in comparison with many other European countries (particularly Germany), and suffered from an absence of genuine and active commitment from employers to build and maintain a skills consensus and support associated training policy (King, 1997).

It is argued that, since the abolition of the MSC, successive governments have lacked the mandate, mechanisms and motivations to perform manpower planning policy in any meaningful way (Finegold & Soskice, 1988; King, 1997). Furthermore the weakening of Trade Unions - due in some large part to the sustained attack on the organised labour movement that accompanied an ascendant New Right ideology in the UK/England (King, 1993; King, 1997; Keep, 2006; Payne, 2008) - has reduced the representation of employee voice in voluntarist arrangements. Research by Rainbird *et al* (2003), seeking to identify mechanisms that facilitate the engagement of employees and employee representation in decisions about training at the workplace, found developed institutions of employee voice to be rare across British industry (*ibid*:8). As a consequence employers have attained an exclusive position of privilege in skills decision-making, and voluntarism has largely come to mean leaving employers alone with regard to how they develop and utilise skills (Hoque *et al*, 2005; Page & Hillage, 2006).

Given the apparent tenacity of asymmetrical voluntarism (King, 1997; Gleeson & Keep, 2004), in the UK/England the central questions that guide this chapter are:

- How can voluntarism in the UK/England be accounted for and explained (how is voluntarism ordered and organised, and with what effects for skill formation)?
- How can the seemingly paradoxical New Labour Skills Strategy – both a demand-led strategy and a state strategy to lead demand in the context of voluntarism – be accounted for and explained?

Drawing on different theoretical perspectives and institutional analysis the chapter continues by considering voluntarism as the outcome of functional institutional complementarity, and in doing so will particularly consider the contribution of the Varieties of Capitalism (VoC) approach (Estevez-Abe *et al*, 2001; Mares, 2001; Hall & Soskice, 2001) to the classifying of types of political economy and associated skills regimes; and as the consequence of the exercise of power in politics and policy that has resulted in a privilege afforded to the interests of employers in education and training policy. Whilst both offer an explanation for asymmetrical voluntarism and the existence of



low skills equilibrium, it is argued that neither can adequately account for the New Labour Skills Strategy. Specifically neither can account for the paradox that skills policy in England comprises both a demand-led strategy, and a state strategy to lead demand in the context of the voluntarism of private skills decisions.

### ***2.3 Varieties of Capitalist Production and Employment Regimes***

In pursuing the objectives of this chapter – to account for and explain skill governance in UK/England - it is worth remembering not to fall into the trap of imagining that any organisation, outside of the education and training sector, exists for the sole or principle purpose of producing and utilising skills (Gleeson & Keep, 2004:45). In capitalist economies business motivations to train and use skills are determined by their primary aim - which is normally profit-making – and as such skills are a derived demand; valued only in relation to the capability and productivity of the employed labour force required for profitable production (Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Page & Hillage, 2006). The type and level of workforce skill demanded will therefore be related to the product market and production strategies of businesses. The dynamics that underpin asymmetrical voluntarism are therefore not so much related to how skills – as such - are governed, but rather to how business practices and processes are governed and with what implications for the production and utilisation of skills.

Comparative research into the diversity of capitalist economic coordination has shown that product market and production strategies of businesses vary from country to country. Indeed there is an extensive body of new institutionalism and economic sociology literature that seeks to explain, often with strikingly similar conclusions (Thelen, 2004), the iterative relationship between dominant production and employment regimes (with different workplace skills requirements, and therefore influencing different patterns of social and cultural skills formation), and the distinct institutional arrangements and systemic logic that constitutes and maintains the political economy or national model of

capitalism, (for a fuller overview of these literatures see Rubery & Grimshaw, 2003; Thelen, 2004; Jackson & Deeg, 2006).

### **2.3.1 A Historical and Sociological Analysis**

Thelen (2004) situates her historical and comparative analysis of the complex evolution of the political economy of skills at the intersection of the early development of training regimes (craft apprenticeships) and forms of labour market relations (see also Aston & Green, 1996<sup>6</sup>; King, 1997; Clarke & Winch, 2007). For Thelen (2004) the particular way in which these institutions developed with or without substantial state involvement has conditioned path-dependent national differences in the nature of the 'skilled' labour market, and the mechanisms (either collaborative or competitive) of solving labour market failures in relation to the creation and utilisation of skills. In other words, institutionally distinct national production and employment regimes can be considered a consequence of historical legacies, recreated via 'positive feedback effects' - a phenomenon by which institutions once established reproduce themselves and constrain alternative forms of institutional development (Thelen, 2004:27) - and politically sustained by the on-going explicit or implicit commitment and compliance of the relevant parties; capital, labour, and the political elite (Ashton & Green, 1996:114).

Taking a less historical and more sociological approach to their analysis, Hollingsworth & Boyer (1997:2) identify these specific national differences as defining distinctive 'social systems of production'. They argue that these social systems of production are maintained by a broad range of relatively coherent, often tightly coupled, and therefore mutually reinforcing complementary institutional arrangements. More specifically they argue that

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<sup>6</sup> Ashton & Green (1996:104-115) also offer a detailed historical-theoretical analysis of the evolution of institutions of skill formation that takes into account: 1) the historical process of nation state formation and, following Durkheim, considers the role of education in nation-building (Durkheim, 2006); 2) the processes of industrialisation and the accessibility of skills during different phases of development, (what becomes relevant then is the timing of the development of industry and the development of a national system of education, see also Clarke & Winch, 2007); and finally, 3) the extent to which the state intervened, and is therefore able to continue to intervene, in industrial relations or 'class conflict'.

these social systems of production emerge from the complex coalescing and integration of the institutional logics that govern the collaborative or conflictual industrial relations system and forms of work organisation; the system of training for both workers and managers; inter-firm, supply chain, and firm-customer relationships (specifically the degree of trust and cooperation involved); financial institutions and their *modus operandi* (particularly the nature of the relationship between banks and industry); the form and function of the state (manifest in government policies and practices and including non-intervention); and the broader idiosyncratic values, rules and norms of society.

What Hollingsworth and Boyer's (1997) account emphasises is the social embeddedness of 'whole system' institutional relationships, and the constraining and conditioning force of the structural patterns of interaction they produce. However, their analysis is less focused on understanding why these particular institutional configurations – social systems of production - came to be arranged in the way that they are, and on what critical relationships they centre and therefore either persist or are challenged.

For scholars of skill governance, more recent comparative analysis of diverse forms of capitalist economic coordination, equally interested in institutional complementarities, has a particular contribution to make as it explicitly places firms and firm strategies at the centre of the analysis. Without claiming to be a theory of institutional origin (but drawing conclusions that are broadly reconcilable with theories that do make such claims, see Thelen, 2004; Hall & Thelen, 2009) this newer 'Varieties of Capitalism' (VoC) literature explains the role of employers in the continuity of specific institutional configurations of the political economy.

In particular this literature offers an account of circumstances in which employers support, shape, and sustain responsible unionism, and state policies that maintain systems of social protection promoting collaborative, high-trust and high skill workplace relations, or not, as necessary to their product market and production strategies and the competitiveness of

these strategies in international markets<sup>7</sup> (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Estevez-Abe *et al*, 2001; Mares, 2001; Höpner, 2005a). As such the VoC literature provides an account of the nuances of institutional configuration that underpin high skills and low skills economies, that provides a justification and credible cause to problematise, as others have done (see Introduction), the prediction of regime convergence on 'one-size-fits-all' higher skills production and employment models in the context of a global knowledge-based economy (Hall & Soskice, 2001).

### **2.3.2 A Firm-Centred Analysis: The VoC Approach**

The central premise of this VoC literature (Hall & Soskice, 2001), is that the institutional arrangements of capitalist economies determine, and are determined by, the strategic and interactive mechanisms favoured by firms (as pivotal entrepreneurial actors) to build the relationships they require in order to overcome a number of specific problems that they collectively face, and which they cannot resolve without some form of coordination with critical 'others' (internally with their workforce, and externally with other firms, customers, shareholders, governments etc., Hall & Soskice, 2001:6). The VoC approach therefore offers a micro-level analysis (Blyth, 2003; Jackson & Deeg, 2006) of social systems of production, by turning the gaze of macro-level analysis of the political economy deeper inwards to posit the structural cause and effect of firm strategies. In doing so VoC scholars identify the institutional dimensions of the political economy in terms of five interrelated 'spheres' – industrial relations, vocational education and training, inter-firm relationships, corporate governance, and employee relations - in which firms face coordination problems and seek solutions (Hall & Soskice, 2001:6-7; see also Blyth, 2003).

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<sup>7</sup> According to (Höpner, 2005a:340) this firm-centric analysis offers an alternative to the 'varieties of welfare' literature which has been predominantly concerned with 'politics against markets' (see Esping-Anderson, 1985; Korpi, 1978).

One unique aspect of their approach is to consider institutions – such as the ET system and state policy in relation to ET - as ‘resources’, (and not just restraints), that firms have strategic preferences for and use to their advantage (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Hall & Thelen, 2009). Furthermore, their logic contends that since the success of the firm is dependent upon the degree to which it can effectively exploit wider institutional supports that enable coordination to resolve its problems, it is the success of firms that reinforces particular modes of coordination. As such, the distinctive mechanisms for coordination which can be adopted by firms and utilised to support their product market and production strategies become embedded in the institutional shape of the political economy; reproduced through repetition and the relative constancy of expectation and outcome (Hall & Soskice, 2001:9).

Again, what is critical is that institutional solutions to coordination problems found in one sphere should have a complementary relationship with institutional solutions to coordination problems in other spheres. Boyer (in Crouch *et al*, 2005:367) defines institutional complementarity as “a configuration in which the viability of an institutional form is strongly or entirely conditioned by the existence of several other institutional forms, such that their conjunction offers greater resilience and better performance compared with alternative configurations”. For Hall & Soskice (2001:18), the emergence of institutional ‘complementarity’ is a strong probability, and it is this complementarity that accounts for stability and continuity of the distinctive institutional configurations that determine different, but successful, national models or ‘varieties of capitalism’. Furthermore, as per the logic of the argument, where successful institutional configurations become embedded, it is expected that actors will rationally adopt strategies that continue to capitalise on them (Hall & Soskice, 2001:15), such that the institutional arrangements for coordination tend to settle into stable equilibrium that reproduce particular comparative advantages for economic actors.

For the purpose of comparative analysis, the VoC literature distinguishes between two ideal-types - or varieties of capitalism - that emerge from their analysis: Liberal Market

Economies (LMEs); and Coordinated Market Economies (CMEs). In LMEs the prime mechanisms of coordination mediating the relationships between actors are competitive markets, price signals, and the maximisation of short-term returns to financial capital (Hall & Soskice, 2001:33). The state form is defined as 'liberal' as it takes a non-interventionist approach to coordination; except for providing the legislative framework that formally locates decision-making power (voluntarism) with the market (Jackson & Deeg, 2006; Schmidt, 2007), and in certain circumstances, providing hierarchical forms of conflict resolution to mitigate against market failures (Williamson, 1985). In contrast coordination within CMEs is dependent upon long-term finance, more collaborative and cooperative non-market relationships mediated by negotiation between actors, and facilitated by a more active 'enabling' state (Schmidt, 2007:5).

Although this is to some extent an empirically simplistic and contested distinction (Blyth, 2003; Schmidt, 2007)<sup>8</sup>, it offers broad (if crude) constructs of institutional complementarity within which to locate particular coordination strategies of firms and therefore particular production and employment regimes. Furthermore, despite the criticism that VoC scholars oversimplify the distinction between different models of capitalism, it should be noted that other comparative capitalism scholars arrive at broadly the same, if more nuanced, distinctions between types of capitalist economy, specifically distinguishing between the degree of market coordination, actor cooperation, and nature of state regulation (Schmidt, 2007); classify and cluster countries into broadly the same typologies; and apply broadly the same descriptive labels to the country clusters they identify (Jackson & Deeg, 2006).

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<sup>8</sup> Subsequent research and analysis has challenged this binary distinction between 'varieties' of capitalist political economies as oversimplified and failing to properly account for countries (including France and Italy) that don't fit the model (see Schmidt, 2007). Equally Blyth (2003) has questioned the degree to which the ideal-typical cases - particularly Germany and the USA - fit their description, and actually coordinate, (whether successfully or not), in accordance with and as a result of the institutionalised mechanisms assumed by VoC scholars. For example Blyth (2003) points to the impact criminal justice policy has had on employment trends in the USA, and the extent to which the introduction of 'just-in-time' production techniques has paradoxically augmented the power of labour in Germany whilst fundamentally weakening its claims to be a CME.

In summary, the approaches to understanding distinctive national production and employment regimes (which apply more or less historical/sociological or rational choice/functionalist perspectives to their study of institutions) offer compelling accounts of the iterative relationship between the structures of the political economy, state policy, and firm strategy. However, the VoC approach offers an explicitly micro-level explanation of the reproduction of institutional configurations of economic coordination, by placing the firm at the heart of the analysis.

This focus on firms is valuable as it explicitly seeks to enable a more robust and detailed explanation of micro-level actor preferences (aspirations and behaviours) for particular configurations of institutional support, including state policies, that solve coordination problems in particular ways and determine, among other things, skill formation. Indeed, the VoC approach in general, and in particular the contribution by Estevez-Abe *et al* (2001), offers an analysis that moves beyond describing the broader context of firm strategies, and towards a theory - drawing on institutional complementarities - that informs and predicts skill governance (the ordering and organising of doing skills), and therefore skill formation in LMEs and CMEs. The VoC approach provides an account of circumstances in which employers develop, or not, preferences for cooperative, high trust labour market relations, including support for particular social policies (producing types of social systems of protection such as employment, unemployment and wage protection), that are observed to be more able to support conditions for high skills formation (see also Ashton & Green, 1996; Brown, 1999; Brown *et al*, 2001). As such, Estevez-Abe *et al* (2001) offer an explanation of how asymmetrical voluntarism in the UK/England can be accounted for.

### **2.3.3 Explaining Skills Governance in England: The VoC Approach**

As discussed above, the primary distinction between LMEs and CMEs in the VoC approach is the extent to which the coordination strategies of firms, adopted in relation to the complementary institutional configurations of the political economy, rely on competitive market mechanisms or more collaborative (non-market) relationships. As Hall & Soskice

(2001) note, collaborative coordination enables particular types of successful firm strategies, predicated on high trust labour market relations, that market mechanisms of coordination cannot. However, the success of collaborative coordination for all rationally self-interested parties hinges on the degree to which all actors can reduce their uncertainty about the behaviours of all others. This uncertainty reduction requires mechanisms that enable actors to make “credible commitments” to each other (Hall & Soskice, 2001:10; Thelen, 2004:17); mechanisms that can ‘embody’ and ‘embed’ relations of trust and cooperation in the institutional architecture (Brown, 1999; Brown *et al*, 2001:33).

These credible commitment mechanisms include state policies and institutions that facilitate and govern deliberation among actors as a result of the open exchange of information; monitor behaviours; and where necessary impose sanctions for disobedience and defection. The formality of these mechanisms – particularly monitoring and sanction - structure the terms of strategic interaction and effectively lock actors in to particular active behaviours, given the punishing consequences and costs of non-compliance (Hall & Thelen, 2009). In relation to skill formation, for example, Thelen (2004:17-19) discusses the need for such mechanisms by which employers and employees can offer each other credible commitments (often with formal punishments, enforced by the state, for breaching these commitments) in order to reduce the risks, and share the costs, involved in firm or industry specific skills training for both parties. This is particularly the case in relation to the sort of high level, high quality, and longer-term training associated with traditional occupational apprenticeships.

The general point that Thelen (2004) makes – that skill formation is dependent on the extent to which actors can be assured of the actions of others, and likewise offer assurances of their own – is echoed in the contribution by Estevez-Abe *et al* (2001) to the VoC literature. Focusing on theorising skills formation in different types of capitalist economies, Estevez-Abe *et al* (2001) seek to explain the institutional complementarities that incentivise, and insure against risks associated with the attainment of skills necessary



to support and reproduce the distinctive competitive product market and production strategies of firms in LMEs and CMEs.

Clearly, whatever their product market and production strategies may be, firms require a supply of 'suitably' skilled workers. The argument of Estevez-Abe *et al* (2001) posits that since, by themselves, firms are unable to guarantee that (potential) workers will engage in the development of suitable skills, they seek and exploit appropriate mechanisms of coordination to underwrite and influence workers' investments. Identifying dominant national product market and production strategies that tend to utilise (although not exclusively) firm-specific, industry-specific, or general skills (strategies that are prefigured by the degree of competitive or collaborative economic coordination), their analysis explains why both (potential) employees and employers have established preferences for or against institutionalised employment, unemployment and wage protection, as crucial mechanisms by which credible commitments can be made. Preferences pivot on the extent to which skills are adaptable and transferable – 'portable'<sup>9</sup> - between firms and industries within the economy (Estevez-Abe *et al*, 2001:148).

Essentially, their argument is that (potential) workers require significant assurance of employment and wage protection to insure their investment in firm-specific skills (low portability), and unemployment and wage protection/replacement to insure their investment in industry-specific skills (medium portability). As a result, employers that seek to utilise firm-specific or industry-specific skills (and wish to protect any investment they make in training by preserving these skill-sets during times of economic downturn) will also develop preferences for these welfare enhancing institutionalised forms of social protection and wage-bargaining (see also Mares, 2001). Furthermore, the institutionalisation of these social forms of insurance complements the institutionalisation of internal (within the firm) or occupational (usually sectoral) VET systems, which in turn function (in different ways) to reduce skills poaching and further reduce the risks to

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<sup>9</sup> The portability of skills is related to their degree of asset specificity. The argument is that firm and industry specific skills are valuable (increase productivity) only to that firm or industry, whereas general skills are valuable (increase productivity) in potentially any employment environment.

employers of investment in, and utilisation of, specific skills (Rubery & Grimshaw, 2003; Crouch *et al*, 2004). Estevez-Abe *et al* (2001:145) argue that coordination (via institutions of social protection and the VET system) becomes institutionalised because on their own individual firms cannot make sufficiently credible promises to (potential) workers that they can protect the risks associated with choosing to invest in a given skill trajectory.

In contrast, in circumstances where businesses have developed preferences for general skills – i.e. highly competitive, market-coordinated economic conditions where businesses generally require ‘switchable’ production assets (Hall & Soskice, 2001:17), that can be easily adapted (workers with high level generic skills), or discarded (workers with low level generic skills whose employment terms are casual and flexible)<sup>10</sup>, in light of changing markets - workers rely on the high portability of their skills to underwrite their initial, and any on-going, investment in education and training. As a result, neither they nor their employers are assumed to have any need for social protection, or indeed any other state policies and institutionalised mechanisms through which actors can make credible commitments to each other. In fact, it is argued that these institutions become an unnecessary cost; provide a perverting disincentive for workers to invest in general skills; and impede the free movement of the labour force that both workers and businesses benefit from in the rational pursuit of higher returns (Estevez-Abe *et al*, 2001; Hall & Soskice, 2001).

Estevez-Abe *et al* (2001:146) refer to the confluence and complementarity between firm product market and production strategies, employee skills trajectories, and systems of social protection, as the ‘welfare production regime’ and – as described above - clearly distinguish the welfare production regimes of LMEs from different versions of CMEs. By employing the analytical device of ‘welfare production regimes’ Estevez-Abe *et al* (2001) again bring state policy (of the non-interventionist and interventionist variety respectively)

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<sup>10</sup> Although they take a different approach to explaining the institutional political economy of skill formation in the UK/England, Brown *et al* (2001:191-195) provide an analysis of the “flexible labour market” in Britain which also describes firms’ use of small numbers of adaptable ‘core’ workers (with high level generic skills that can be built on with ‘need to know’ firm-specific training), and larger numbers of disposable ‘causal’ workers (often, but not exclusively low skilled).

into the mix of factors that determine the institutional shape of the regime. In common with the VoC approach in general, they emphasise tight and complementary coupling between institutional factors, and the embedding of institutional arrangements overtime. They therefore posit that actor interests become 'locked-in' and reproduced as a result of developing strategic strengths in relation to the particular structures of the capitalist political economy, which in turn gives firms a certain comparative advantage in international markets (including international markets for labour). Specifically, their analysis suggests that the absence of welfare enhancing state policy in relation to (adequate) systems of social protection in LMEs, such as the UK/England – and the effect for skill formation - offers firms strategic strengths utilising high level general skills (broad undergraduate and postgraduate university education) in 'radical product innovation' strategies, and utilising low level general skills in 'standardised Fordist mass production' (Estevez-Abe *et al*, 2001: 149).

Clearly, such an analysis of the foundations of skills formation in LMEs predicts polarised national labour markets (Brown *et al*, 2001; Crouch *et al*, 2004), with the preservation of a dominant (although not exclusive) low skills equilibrium (Finegold & Soskice, 1988) in significant regions, industries, sectors, or workplaces within the UK economy (Wilson & Hogarth, 2003). As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, low skills equilibrium is explained as a self-reinforcing consequence of firms establishing a comparative advantage in low cost, low value product market and production strategies, and the consequence of such a prevalent production and employment regime for the ways in which weak, market coordinated and voluntarist VET systems<sup>11</sup> have developed and continue to produce a low-skills workforce, in the context of low demand for high skills (Finegold & Soskice, 1988).

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<sup>11</sup> In the context of employer voluntarism the UK/England is analysed as having both weak occupational (that is national or sectoral programmes of training and accreditation) and internal (that is firm designed and delivered programmes of training either accredited or not). Furthermore these weaknesses in the VET system are analysed as intensifying (Rubery & Grimshaw, 2003). Unlike internal or occupational VET systems, market-coordinated VET systems cannot alleviate firms' risks of poaching and as a result reliance is placed on the individual (or the state) to bear the cost of training (Brown *et al*, 2001:193).

What exacerbates this low skills equilibrium (in the context of voluntarism) situation further, is that in highly competitive and dynamic economic conditions - conditions that deny collaborative relationships between actors, underwritten by credible commitment mechanisms - firms that do train face risks associated with the poaching of skilled workers by free riding firms (Finegold & Soskice, 1988; Crouch *et al*, 2004; Hoque *et al*, 2005). Since firms cannot accommodate the risks associated with training and then losing their workforce (particularly given finance requirement for short-term profit timescales in LMEs) they tend to downgrade their skills aspirations, and reinforce their preferences for low skill product market and production strategies. Such strategies render it more unlikely that they will generate product innovations from within their workforce (Brown *et al*, 2001), further cementing their position in the low specification; low value-added markets (Wilson & Hogarth, 2003).

Although this may be a perfectly rational (meaning profitable, at least in the short term) business strategy, producing stable conditions (as implied by the term 'equilibrium'), the consequences for longer-term productivity, social justice and social prosperity are certainly undesirable (Gleeson & Keep, 2004). Low skills equilibrium traps significant proportions of the working population in low-paid, insecure and unrewarding employment (Crouch *et al*, 2004) and creates wide income disparities associated with the inequalities of 'academic background' (Estevez-Abe *et al*, 2001:147). Furthermore, this model perpetually widens these inequalities because those with existing low skills are demonstrably far less likely to receive further employer-sponsored education and training opportunities (Page & Hillage, 2006; Knell *et al*, 2007; UKCES, 2009).

#### **2.3.4 Explaining New Labour Skills Strategy? Limits of the VoC Approach**

This section has reviewed institutional accounts of skill governance that explain voluntarism as the functional outcome of a particular variety of capitalism. One in which the broader institutional configurations of the political economy – including a lack of active/enabling state policy and provision in the spheres of industrial relations and VET –

have led firms to develop, and as a result preference, competitive strategies based on utilising low-level general skills in low value added production. Furthermore, the section has shown how these accounts explain change to skill governance as constrained by the tight institutional coupling that constitutes the regime logic.

In other words, these theories argue that skills are produced and used in complement to the product market and production strategies available to, and therefore preferred by, firms; which are in turn related to and constructive of the social context and societal capacity for skill formation; and both skill formation and the productive strategies of firms are determined by and determine types of state policies. Given that the essential nature/logic of each of these factors effecting skill governance reinforces the essential nature/logic of the others, and given that the overall institutional configuration of the regime produces particular advantages for actors (firms and their employees), change to how skill is governed – ordered and organised - is typically considered both difficult and unwanted.

The VoC approach, specifically the contribution of Estevez-Abe *et al* (2001), has gained a great deal of currency as an institutional account, and explanation of skill governance in different national contexts. However, as was becoming increasingly apparent in the above review, its inherent recidivism to rational functionalism puts it on shaky ground trying to stabilise the inherent problems of low skills equilibrium associated with LMEs (such as UK/England) for both individual firms and workers, and for states. As a result, whilst it offers justification and credible cause to problematise the prediction of regime convergence on 'one-size-fits-all' higher skills production and employment models, it also, and by implication, cannot adequately account for why there are claims of a strong consensus regarding the need to overcome the problem of low skills in the context of global competition; a consensus on which the New Labour Skills Strategy for England builds. Indeed, as a theory of skill governance in LMEs it cannot account for and explain the thread of state-led ambition to raise demand for skills that travels through the New Labour Skills Strategy alongside a commitment to demand-led voluntarism.

Given the limitations of the VoC approach to aiding understanding of the New Labour Skills Strategy, the chapter now turns to review alternative approaches that seek to explain skill governance in the context of voluntarism. These alternative approaches begin by further developing the critique of the explanatory merit of the VoC account to skill governance.

## **2.4 Power, Politics and Policy of Skill Governance**

Although the VoC approach makes a significant contribution to institutional approaches to analysing and explaining skill governance and the resulting low skills equilibrium in England, there are a number of problematic elements of this theory. Specifically, despite being an actor-centred analysis, there is a distinct lack of consideration of both the force of ideas, particularly with regard to the role of education and training in the social development and division of labour (Clarke & Winch, 2007; Brown *et al*, 2001), and the conditions that enable the exercise of power to promote the privilege of some ideas over others. This section draws on alternative approaches to understanding skill governance and the conditions for skills formation in the UK/England, which expose critical tensions between actors (employers and employees), and evaluates the relative power they possess to progress their skills aspirations. In doing so an alternative analytical approach emerges by which the English case can be explained. This approach, it is argued, puts the politics back into the study of the political economy.

### **2.4.1 Putting Politics Back In**

Critical commentary has highlighted that as a result of adopting a rational choice approach to theorising institution building there is a tendency within the VoC literature (specifically the contribution of Estevez-Abe *et al*, 2001) toward naive functionalism (Pierson, 2000; Howell, 2003; Schmidt, 2007; Lauder *et al*, 2008). The VoC approach has a propensity to derive regime coherence from institutional complementarity and institutional

complementarity from mere compatibility<sup>12</sup>, because it assigns a disproportionate degree of influence over institutional purpose and function to the resolution of problems faced by one group of actors; namely firms.

This functionalism has been subjected to vigorous challenge. For example, Pierson (2000) warns that the functionalist reading of the relationship between types of welfare state provision and dominant production and employment regimes has a tendency to vastly overstate itself. Although he notes that firm-centred analysis makes an important theoretical contribution to understanding diverse forms of capitalist economic coordination and the role of systems of social protection, he is concerned that this contribution should be wary of taking a good point so far that the development and maintenance of welfare states appear to be first and foremost a business strategy and project (*ibid*: 795). Equally Howell (2003) is critical of the extent to which VoC has rewritten and deflated radical political projects - contingent on particular times and particular capacities of actors – such that they appear as merely the outcome of firms attempting to solve coordination problems.

Criticism of the inability of the VoC logic to account for conflicts over institutional form - the charge that they take the 'politics' out of the study of 'political economy' (Howell, 2003; also Korpi, 2006; Schmidt, 2007; Lauder *et al*, 2008) and therefore under acknowledge the potential for institutional change - has led to attempts to clarify and enhance the theoretical approach from within, in order to find ways of dealing with the dynamic tensions implicit in actor interaction. Without getting too embroiled in the debates over the mechanics of institution building, it is worth saying how VoC scholars

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<sup>12</sup> There is a wide ranging debate (largely between proponents of different approaches to institutional analysis) seeking to clarify the contentious and contested concept of complementarity; specifically the need to distinguish complementarity from compatibility and coherence. All imply, to some degree, institutional stability. The issue is perhaps the source and nature of this stability. The crux of this debate rests on the degree to which the VoC approach identifies zero-sum institutional relationships that are not performance enhancing but are equally not fundamentally destabilising (compatible institutional arrangements) and misrecognises this as positive sum institutional complementarity (based on common governance logics, or coherence of purpose). For a fuller account of the debate see for example Crouch *et al* (2005), Hall & Thelen (2005) and Höpner (2005a; 2005b).

have attempted to fashion a 'politics of rational choice' which can continue to explain, among other things, the skills aspirations and behaviours of actors, but which can also serve to explain the possibility (but not the probability) of change.

Considering the process of institution building slightly differently Hall & Thelen (2005) highlight the problem of securing social (distributive) justice. They note that even where institutions are deemed Pareto-improving, the relative benefits and the share of the risks going to different groups of actors are not equal. In these circumstances, and given that actors are self-interested, they will seek means by which to improve their position. This process of jostling for gains is, they contend, intensely entrepreneurial and political, and involves the exercise of power by the relevant parties in pursuit of their preferences. It is however, for them, still ultimately a "politics of institutional stability" (Hall & Thelen, 2009:12). Potential turbulence is perpetually mediated by the rationally conceived opportunity cost of destabilisation (particularly where there is high institutional interdependence), and the relative advantage of compromise through which all actors consent to the resultant distribution of benefits and share of risks. In the end, VoC theory argues, it must be the case that all parties - at least all insiders, or at very least sufficient numbers of insiders - benefit from the existence of a particular institutional arrangement in order for that institutional arrangement to remain stable (Hall, in Crouch *et al*, 2005)

Looking at the VoC approach to theorising skill formation through the lens of the 'politics of rational choice', we can see the tendency to imply that the politics of skill governance and skill formation takes place via a process of reasoned negotiations with (relatively) equal contribution from all interested parties, and the ultimate identification of the preferences of actors by the outcome of decision-making. (Indeed the analysis of Estevez-Abe *et al* (2001) which seeks to explain the institutional complementarities that predict skills preferences, is empirically derived entirely from outcome measures<sup>13</sup>). As a result, in relation to explaining skills formation in the UK/England, it must be again somewhat irrationally deduced that despite a seeming consensus of opinion about the need to

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<sup>13</sup> Such as: indicators of labour market regulation; unemployment protection generosity and degree of 'activation'; employment tenure; skill profile; and incidents of vocational training.



develop high(er) skills in the context of a dynamic and global knowledge-based economy, both firms and (potential) workers find they are satisfied with the terms of production and employment competitiveness that emerge from and (re)produce low-skills and the inequalities of academic background. Clearly, the theoretical and empirical limitations of the VoC perspective therefore centre on the degree to which the preferences of actors can be wholly deduced from, or allied with, outcomes; and the degree to which portability between experiences of low skill, low wage work for workers in LMEs can be taken as an expression of negotiated compromise and consensus rather than disempowerment.

In short, what is still missing from the VoC analysis of skill governance is any consideration of the relative, contingent and highly political ability of different actors with different and competing interests (Brown, 1999; Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Korpi, 2006) to effectively act in their own interest? In other words, there is no account of actors differing abilities to make or affect choices about how skills are governed and with what consequences for skill formation and the availability of either high or low-skilled routes to profitability, employability, and competitiveness; choices which are as desirable to some as they are contested by others, and are therefore “the stuff of politics” (Aston & Green, 1996:176). Choices which become more viable when they are supported by a partisan state with a political and policy role in class conflict beyond neutral arbiter (Schmidt, 2007). A role to discursively and materially determine the social position of skills actors in relation to skill governance (Brown, 1999); the “social purpose” of skill (Brown *et al*, 2001:3); the value of labour (Clarke & Winch, 2007); and the ideological and substantive goals of education and training (Gleeson & Keep, 2004). What is missing, as Avis (1998:258) reminds us, is that “There is a struggle here over the development of labour power and the direction this takes that is informed by the balance of force between capital and labour, which itself is mediated by state policies” (see also Lauder *et al*, 2008).

The failing of functionalist theories to account for struggle and the role of state policy (intervention or non-intervention) as mediating struggle, is persuasively illuminated by contrasting the rather ahistorical VoC account of the UK/England as an LME, and the

analysis by Coates (2000), which marks a contrast between the institutional configurations (and their effects) of post-war Britain (collective bargaining/universal welfare state) and the successful outcome of employer struggles for institutional reform supported by a neoliberal political agenda from the mid-1970s (see also Howell, 2003; Schmidt, 2007)<sup>14</sup>. In particular the neoliberal project to effect a 'new settlement' (Avis et al, 1996; Avis, 1998; Brown *et al*, 2001) with regard to the relationship between education and the economy that has placed the onus on individuals (as learners) to make themselves market compatible via skills (Avis *et al*, 1996; Coffield, 1999; Keep, 1999; Brown *et al*, 2001; Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Ball, 2008a). A project bolstered by a particular and flawed reading of human capital theory (Avis, 1998; Coffield, 1999; Brown *et al*, 2001), that for Brown (1999:238) has achieved the "drying out of social facets of skill formation".

In summary, alternative theories seeking to explain skill governance in the UK/England – the existence and perseverance, the order and organisation of voluntarism – argue against functionalist accounts to highlight struggle based on the relative and contingent power resources of different groups of actors (with different ideas about and interests in skills) and their ability to mobilise these power resources at different times and in different (state-mediated) contexts. One literature in particular, to which this chapter now turns, has theorised and specified the power resources of groups, and the terms under which they are able to mobilise and wield them in relation to their ideas and interests in education and training.

#### **2.4.2 The Power Resources Approach**

Korpi (2006), in response to the growing employer-centred VoC literature, argues against the perspective that skill governance - or rather the governance of business practices and processes and the implications for the production and utilisation of skills (i.e. labour market regulation and the nature of social protection) - is an outcome of mutual

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<sup>14</sup> For an fuller overview of the historical evolution of different forms and modes of state regulation of training policy in the UK see King (1997)

preferences and consensus. Instead, he highlights conflict and struggle between different actors with disparate interests and preferences. Although his grouping of actors (employers, employees and the self-employed) by socio-economic class may need to be reconsidered in light of the changing nature of work and workplaces<sup>15</sup>; by distinguishing between actors in terms of the different risks that they face, the individual resources they possess to cope with risk, and therefore the level of vested interest they have in either market-oriented or welfare-enhancing institutions, he provides a useful alternative 'actor-centred' reading of different capitalist forms of economic coordination that addresses the VoC recidivism to functionalism. For Korpi (2006) it is the relationship between the resources actors possess, and their ability to wield these resources in pursuit of their interests and preferences, which determines the relative power position of actors, their ability to influence skills policies and outcomes, and that therefore determines the governance of skill formation.

Put simply employers and employees are understood to possess different "power resources" (Korpi, 2006:172) by which to advance their interests; employers control economic assets whilst employees possess human capital (here meaning labour power). What matters, in terms of influence over the institutional design of skill governance, is the relative ability and success of the actor groups to concentrate and mobilize their power resources, whilst simultaneously counteracting and curtailing the ability of others to do the same. The critical focus of analysis is therefore the circumstances under which the different power resources can gain an advantage; specifically given that whilst capital has a tendency to accumulate, employees require mechanisms to collectivise - such as Trade Unions and representation by Social Democratic government (left power) - in order to realise the effectiveness of their human capital.

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<sup>15</sup> Korpi (2006:174) defines class as "categories of individuals who share relatively similar positions, or situations, in labor markets and in employment relations." However, the distinctions by class that he makes between employers, employees and the self-employed, is being complicated given new forms of post-Fordist work organisation, for example by the distinct circumstances of 'workers' operating in the extremely high-skills segments of the global labour market whom Reich (1991) terms "symbolic analysts" (see also Pierson, 2000).

This point returns us to Thelen's (2004) historical comparative analysis of the emergence of training regimes and labour market regulations in the context of more or less active and substantial state involvement – liberal or corporate forms of regulation – and the effect of state involvement in establishing the power of key actors (also Aston & Green, 1996; Coates, 2000; Gleeson & Keep, 2004). Again, the VoC approach 'proper' misses the significance of this point as a consequence of not being a theory of institutional origin, or of the power that institutions confer (Schmidt, 2007).

Another significant point of divergence between VoC, and PRA perspectives of labour market relations is that whilst VoC scholars have tended to see actor interests as situationally derived (in so much as they will vary according to the exogenous situation), the PRA perceives actor interests to conform to class-based circumstances (in so much as they will remain the same in accordance with endogenous circumstance)<sup>16</sup>. In other words the PRA implies that regardless of the institutional configuration which determines the nature of labour market relations, within the relatively homologous class groupings of employers and employees the members will share similar interests which subsequently determine their first-order preferences.

As a result Korpi (2006) criticises the VoC contention that employers are, in any given situation, concerned with social citizenship rights, even as a means to achieve certain skills trajectories, and equally disputes the assertion that employees with generic skills in a production regime that preferences generic skills will perceive their investment amply insured by the possibility of being able to move easily between jobs and will not seek welfare-enhancing institutions. He maintains that employees are susceptible to a broader range of life-course risks than simply the extent to which their initial outlay on education and training will be adequately remunerated. For this reason employees will always have a first-order preference for redistributive social citizenship rights; including those they achieve via a meaningful labour market conceptualisation of being 'skilled' (Brown *et al*,

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<sup>16</sup> Korpi (2006) notes that internally these class groupings are quite heterogeneous however they can be meaningfully grouped together for the purposes of analysing their interests and preferences as inter-category variance is perceptibly lower than the variance between the categories.

2001; Clarke & Winch, 2007) and associated security both within and outwith employment. Again, what matters, in terms of influence over the institutional design of skill governance, is the relative ability and success of the different actor groups to concentrate and mobilize their power resources, whilst simultaneously counteracting and curtailing the ability of others to do the same.

In short, what taking a power resources approach shows is that organized capitalism can be considered as a highly politicized configuration (Höpner, 2005b), by which “*reciprocal reinforcement*” (Crouch, C in Crouch *et al*, 2005) between institutions, as distinct from complementarity, embeds specific regime logics within an institutional hierarchy. In other words political support for a specific institutional form provides that institutional form with an asymmetrical degree of influence by which to impose a dominant logic onto the broader institutional architecture, and thus set the general tone and mode of socio-economic regulation (Coates, 2000; Höpner, 2005b). For Thelen (2004:32) institutional development is “a contest among actors to establish the rules which structure outcomes to those equilibria most favourable for them”.

### **2.4.3 Explaining Skill Governance in England: a Politics of Skills Approach**

In terms of the governance of skill in England it is argued that employers have been, and remain powerful (Wellington, 1994; Avis *et al*, 1996; King, 1997; Brown, 1999; Gleeson & Keep, 2002; Keep, 2004; Keep, 2005), with government playing a highly supportive role - operating as a ‘policy monopolist’ (Crouch, C in Crouch *et al*, 2005) - in maintaining that power (Höpner, 2005b; Streeck, W in Crouch *et al*, 2005; Amable, B in Crouch *et al*, 2005). Indeed, Gleeson & Keep (2004) highlight that employers have attained the right to a disproportionate degree of influence over the purpose and function of education and training institutions (see also King, 1997). With government acting as facilitator and regulator of relations between education and the economy in the interests of markets (Gleeson & Keep, 2004:50).

King (1997) argues that intellectually the dominance of employers' interests in training programmes has achieved credibility as a result of persistent claims that the focal purpose of skills is enhanced economic growth and prosperity (see Introduction), and that the market/managerial prerogative offers the most efficient means of facilitating skills improvement. Since regulating employer preferences (aspirations and behaviours) regarding skills is off the policy agenda (Brown *et al*, 2001; Lloyd & Payne, 2002; Keep, 2002; Keep, 2005) the underlying assumption is that skills will be best provided via market forces. In other words the labour market, in which employers are purchasers of the labour product, if left to its own devices will naturally signal demand for economically appropriate levels of skills to meet needs. Therefore employers simply need to be listened to (Gleeson & Keep, 2004).

The ramifications of this disproportionate influence are that employer ideas<sup>17</sup> about the value of skill (and therefore the value of labour) in relation to their economic imperatives determine skill governance, and the social context and capacity for skill formation. For example, politics of skills informed approaches argue it is possible to discern from employers preferences for skills – broadly either general skills paid for by the individual/the state, or uncertified specific skills which are non-transferable and masked from competitors<sup>18</sup> (Keep & Gleeson, 2004) - and their power to act in defence of their interests, a rationale for the shape of the institutions of education and training in England. Specifically it is possible to discern from these preferences an explanation for a weak VET system in which the role of the state is reduced to principal investor; and employer voluntarism (legitimised as the deregulation of demand for skills) and low skills equilibrium persists. Significantly, such outcomes are considered to be in direct contrast and conflict to the skills interests and preferences of (potential) employees (Korpi, 2006),

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<sup>17</sup> It is acknowledged that determining the preferences of an internally heterogeneous group of actors is intensely problematic (Huddleston & Keep, 1999; Gleeson & Keep, 2004). However some broad assumptions can be made by accepting Korpi's (2006) distinction that inter-group variation is less than between group variation

<sup>18</sup> Issues of certification and visibility of firm provided and firm specific training in voluntarist systems may account for the discrepancies of perspective between the VoC approach that perceives firms in LMEs (such as the UK, and particularly England) to preference generic skills, and the observations of others (including, Gleeson & Keep, 2004 and Clarke, 2007) that consider much of the post-compulsory VET that takes place in England to be firm-specific and uncertified.

who seek to maximise the positional benefit they are able to realise from the attainment of certified skill whilst minimising/insuring the risk of any personal investment (Gleeson & Keep, 2004)<sup>19</sup>.

Furthermore, and related to this struggle over the value of skill accreditation and certification, another manifestation of the asymmetric power relations between employers and employees can be discerned from how skills are thought about and rendered significant in social relations. Namely that in the context of a politically supported variety of capitalism (Schmidt, 2007) that promotes the interests of capital via unfettered labour-market deregulation (Brown *et al*, 2001) - particularly the absence of regulation by skill (such as licences to practices) - the concept of skilled employment is not unanimously defined or substantially meaningful (Keep, 2005; Clarke & Winch, 2007)<sup>20</sup>. Again, such a devaluing of the concept of 'skill' and being 'skilled' reinforces low skills equilibrium.

#### **2.4.3 Explaining the New Labour Skills Strategy? The Limits of the PRA**

This section has reviewed accounts of skill governance that have been broadly taken together to offer a 'politics of skills' approach; in particular addressing the contribution of the PRA to understanding skill governance presented by Walter Korpi (2006). The purpose of this section has been to show how putting issues of power and politics at the centre of theorising the governance of skills, and therefore skill formation, offers an alternative reading and explanation of the UK/English case; low skills equilibrium in the context of voluntarism. In particular, and unlike functionalist theories, these accounts can – to use a well-worn expression – 'bring the state back in'. Or more precisely bring back in a role for

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<sup>19</sup> See also Rainbird *et al* 2003; Wallis *et al*, 2005; Lloyd & Payne, 2006 for discussions of the conflict between employer and (potential) employee interests in VET provision.

<sup>20</sup> Keep (2005) identifies that in many developed countries skills attainment at level 3, (or what is termed, in international comparison parlance, 'intermediate skills'), are a prerequisite for entry into large sections of the labour market. Specifically in Germany, (along with much of Europe, Canada, and the USA albeit to a lesser degree), a 'statutory licence to practice' regulates many occupations. This licence is obtained as a result of acquiring a predetermined level of qualification within the relevant vocational training programme.

the state, state actors and actions, in the governance of skills, which renders these theories better able to account for conflict over governing logics and practices, and the possibility of change. These accounts focus on the relative and contingent power of actors to influence skill governance according to their interests. They take state action to represent both the site and the outcome of fierce tensions and struggles (Aston & Green, 1996) over these interests; ideas about the social purpose of skill, the value of labour, and the goals of education and training.

However, as a consequence of such a conceptualisation of both divergent interests and state action, 'politics of skills' informed theories equally struggle to explain claims of a strong consensus regarding the need to overcome the problem of low skills in the context of global competition; a consensus on which the New Labour Skills Strategy for England builds. Indeed such claims were empirically challenged (see Introduction; Aston & Green, 1996; Keep & Mayhew, 1999; Lauder, 1999; Lloyd & Payne, 2002). In addition by perceiving state action as deeply partisan, 'politics of skills' accounts struggle to reach conclusions about the governance of skill and skill formation that can account for both demand-led *and* demand-leading aspects of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England (as discussed in the Introduction).

For politics of skills informed approaches to theorising the governance of skill a demand-led strategy can be explained as 'business-as-usual' neo-liberal state-sponsored voluntarism. However, leading demand would require a radically different strategy that strongly intervened to regulate employers training decisions, relocating the institutions of the state to act as power resources in the interests of labour. In the end then, the thread of state-ambition to raise demand for skills that travels through the New Labour Skills Strategy is incongruous to both possible (but, given 'reciprocal reinforcement' between institutions of the regime, not equally probable) theories of how skills are/or could be governed. It seems that 'politics of skills' approaches, whilst having the advantage of being able to 'bring the state back in' and better explain conflict over, and changes to, governing



logics and practices, are no better able than VoC to understand and explain the paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England.

## ***2.5 Conclusion: Towards an Alternative Conceptualisation of State Work***

This chapter contextualised skill governance in England as defined by the ethos and tradition of voluntarism, and reviewed two prevalent theoretical approaches through which it is possible to account for and explain skills governance, and therefore the social context and societal capacity for skill formation. The central questions that guided this chapter were:

- How can voluntarism in the UK/England be accounted for and explained (how is voluntarism ordered and organised, and with what effects for skill formation)?
- How can the seemingly paradoxical New Labour Skills Strategy – both a demand-led strategy and a state strategy to lead demand in the context of voluntarism – be accounted for and explained?

Reviewing these theoretical approaches in light of these questions found that both can explain the existence and perseverance of asymmetrical voluntarism and both arrive at the conclusion that, in the context of asymmetrical voluntarism, the UK/England has developed conditions that produce low skills equilibrium (Finegold & Soskice, 1988). However, as this chapter has shown, with reference to their own conceptual and analytical frameworks, neither can explain an apparent consensus for higher skills - a consensus on which the New Labour Skill Strategy builds – and neither can address the paradox of a *'demand-led'* strategy, wherein *demand is to be led by the state*, in the *context of voluntarism*.

As has been shown, functionalist accounts of skill governance (reviewed in section 2.3) explain asymmetrical voluntarism and associated low skills equilibrium as the outcome of a particular variety of capitalism. One in which the broad institutional configurations of the political economy – such as a lack of active/enabling state policy and provision in the

spheres of industrial relations and VET – have led firms to develop, and as a result preference, competitive strategies based on utilising low-level general skills in low value added production. Skills are governed, as other parts of the regime are, by the constraints of tight and embedded institutional coupling. In other words the way in which skills are produced and used - the product market and production strategies of firms - and the types of state policies, are so mutually reinforcing and have produced particular advantages for actors (firms and their employees), that change is deemed both difficult and unwanted. Given this explanation of how skill is governed in Liberal Market Economies, and with what effects for the ordering and organising of social relations, the New Labour Skills Strategy – with its thread of state-led ambition to lead and raise demand for skills - appears incongruous and unexplainable through this theoretical lens.

On the other hand, 'politics of skills' approaches (reviewed in section 2.4) explain asymmetrical voluntarism and associated low skills equilibrium as the outcome of inherent conflict over skill, between actors with differing abilities (power resources such as authoritative state support) to act in their own interest; conflict associated with struggles over labour market relations (the terms of production and employment); and as therefore linked to the social value and reproduction of labour. These approaches argue that in the UK/England employers - supported by a neo-liberal state favouring the perseverance of managerial prerogative over skills decision - occupy a privileged and powerful position in determining the shape and trajectory of skills policy. Such a privileging of employers presumes and predicts a demand-led strategy for skills. But, just as with VoC, the coexisting thread of state-led ambition to lead and raise demand appears incongruous and unexplainable through this theoretical lens

In short, this chapter has argued that neither theory of the governance of skill in the context of voluntarism can account for and adequately explain the New Labour Skills Strategy. Specifically neither can help make sense of the paradox of a '*demand-led*' strategy, wherein *demand is to be led by the state*, in the *context of voluntarism* (outlined in Introduction). Whilst the 'politics of skills' informed approach arguably offers a more

useful contribution to understanding skill governance in the UK/England as it allows for conflict and struggle better able to account for the ambiguity of paradox, this thesis argues the need for an alternative conceptualisation of 'state work'. One better able to explain policy and policy debate in more complex discursive relation to partisan interests. The next chapter (Chapter 3) provides the conceptual approach this thesis takes to the analysis of New Labours Skills Strategy that exposes struggles over discursive meaning-making to (re)create governable subject positions and subjectivities.

### 3. Conceptualising State Work in Governing Skills

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with developing the conceptual approach for this study. An approach developed in response to the limitations of the accounts reviewed in the previous chapter, and through which I analyse skills policy and policy debates in England under New Labour in order to explain and understand how skills were governed – ordered and organised – in England at that time. The introduction to this thesis has shown that skills policy and policy debate in England under New Labour was once again concerned with the economic and social ‘problem of low skills’. Furthermore, and as discussed, there was an observed coalescing of political debates about education and training around a consensus regarding the importance for businesses and worker-citizens - increasingly operating in conditions of heightened global product market and labour market competition - of pursuing higher skills strategies for innovative knowledge-based production and employability (see for example Crouch *et al*, 2004).

However, the introduction also discussed the grounds on which empirical analysis and evaluation of skills policy in England has been highly critical of attempts by successive New Labour Governments to operationalise and institutionalise a high(er) skills strategy, and deliver higher skills outcomes. For many skills policy scholars and commentators the identified paradox – of both a *demand-led* and *demand-leading* strategy in the *context of voluntarism* – amounted to little more than policy failure, and at worst could be construed as an empty gesture or a smoke and mirrors trick. A policy ultimately based on a fundamental misapprehension, or inability/unwillingness to intervene in any significant way to affect the private (meaning market) decisions of employers with regard to workforce development (Brown, 1999; Lauder, 1999; Keep & Mayhew, 1999; Brown *et al*, 2001; Lloyd & Payne, 2002; Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Coffield, 2006; Payne, 2008; Keep *et al*, 2008).

That said, and in response to this state of the art in skills policy scholarship and commentary, this thesis questions whether such analysis and evaluation of policy failure (largely based on reading policy intentions back in something of a straight-line from policy outcomes) problematically obscures more subtle and explanatory accounts of the existence of paradox. Downplaying the implications of it for how skills delivery was attempted to be done and experienced.

The distinctive contribution of this thesis to skills policy debates in England is the application of an alternative conceptual approach to the analysis of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England. An approach that exposes discursive struggles over policy meaning and purpose - which I argue is the analytical task at the heart of critical governance studies - and the implications for policy in practice. I build my conceptual framework by starting with a critique of two different accounts of the 'limited state', that suggest government, in the context of heightened economic and social complexity, has lost exclusive power to determine the meaning, purpose, and management of policy agendas to relatively independent self-organising networks (Rhodes, 1997; Kooiman, 20003). In contrast this thesis highlights the significance of the state's role in steering governance arrangements from a distance through managerialism and metagovernance to shape and direct the meanings that frame governing.

Having established the role of the state in steering governance arrangements, I take a step back in order to address the question of how we can understand the normative dimension of state steering activity. The core of this chapter is then devoted to exposing meaning-making (associated with governmental rationalities) as state work through the discursive selection and retention of particular economic and social imaginaries, which give inflection and substance to policy context and content. I draw on a combination of approaches that have a principle concern with meaning-making and meaning reproduction: predominantly 'cultural political economy' and critical governance studies. Utilising these approaches I argue the importance of discursive meaning-making for the political ordering of the social world and therefore the significance of interpreting the

discursive meaning that policy inscribes on the objects and subjects that it seeks to govern. In particular, the creation of governable subject positions which policy seeks to steer subjects towards. Beyond this however, I also argue that it is important to consider the fallibility of meaning-making as discursive and material practice. I highlight both the ambiguity and contestability of state projects and policies.

Having presented the conceptual approach for my study the chapter concludes by reiterating the research questions. The focus of the research on discursive meaning-making through policy and policy debate - its ambiguity and contestation, and the effects for skills delivery - inspires the epistemological and methodological approach to interpretative policy analysis (IPA) (Yanow, 2000; Fischer, 2003; Yanow, 2007) which is presented - along with the specifics of the research design and research process - in Chapter 4.

### ***3.2 The changing role of the state in governing***

This thesis is interested in the governance of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England. Following Newman (2001:11), I treat governance as an “analytical concept”. The study of which “explores changes in political practices and their implications for political rules of the game” (Kjær, 2004:10; also Newman, 2005; Newman, 2007). In other words being interested in governance is to be interested in the modes and mechanisms by which governing is done. As both forms of political regulation of social subjects (Carmel & Papadopoulos, 2003:32) and distributional devices that determine who does what, who gets what, and how (under what conditions and by what processes). As such treating governance as an analytical concept directs concern towards the forms of power as political authority that are conferred to governors, in relation to objects and subjects to be governed, and with what effects (outcomes), without obscuring the potential for modes and mechanisms of governing, as with all forms of power, to be contested. I therefore perceive changing modes and mechanisms of governance as expressions of changing relations of power and political attempts to (re)order social relations.

Occupying a considerable space in debates about contemporary governance is the 'limited state' account of recent changes to the modes and mechanisms by which governing is done (Rhodes, 1997; Kooiman, 2003). An apparent proliferation of networked forms of coordination in complex societies is taken as the empirical starting point and litmus test for these accounts. However, drawing on critical governance studies, I argue 'limited state' perspectives offer an impoverished conceptualisation of the political power associated with the steering functions of government.

### **3.2.1 The Limited State: from government to governance**

In one, loosely connected, body of work - within which two different but prominent perspectives are offered by Rod Rhodes and Jan Kooiman - the term governance is used in a 'narrow' sense to denote a new phenomenon and object of analysis. A new mode of 'network' (or partnership) coordination involving both state and non-state actors (sometime distinguished as public and private actors) distinct from both the hierarchy of states and the anarchy of market exchange (Jessop, 1998), and which tends to be optimistically perceived as able to offer the potential to overcome both state and market failure, (Jessop, 1998; Jessop, 2000b; Newman, 2001)<sup>21</sup>.

That said scholars in this tradition appear firstly and predominantly concerned with the problems and failings of states, specifically bureau-professional hierarchy. For Rhodes (1996) *governance* as decentred, horizontal self-organisation between independent actors through networks (or 'heterarchy' – see Jessop, 1998; Jessop, 2000b; Kooiman, 2000) is given analytical definition as a mode and mechanism for governing society distinct from *government*. Furthermore, Rhodes (1996) analysis of the circumstances giving rise to governance starts by demarcating the unitary authority and freedom of the state to govern in changed conditions; exposing the degree to which it has been internally and externally "hollowed-out" (Rhodes, 1996). The well-rehearsed argument is that the state (particularly in the context of the UK) has been externally hollowed-out as a consequence

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<sup>21</sup> For a perspective on the risks and probability of governance failure see Jessop (1998; 2000b; 2003).

of its inability to exercise sovereign and central control over the national economy and society as significant powers have shifted to economic and political institutions beyond the national borders, and internally hollowed-out as a consequence of political projects (specifically market-oriented reforms associated with 'New Public Management') that have dismantled and fragmented the public sector; brought new actors into governance projects and processes; and created a "differentiated polity" (Rhodes, 1997:7, see also Pierre and Peters, 2000; Stoker, 2000; Marinetto, 2003). As a result governments are considered to have become limited players in the coordination of the social world; operating under conditions of reduced capacity to 'steer' the activities of autonomous self-organising networks, which necessarily involves them in greater degrees of interactivity with, and co-dependence on, non-state actors (Rhodes, 1996; Rhodes, 2000)

In addition, the implication of the hollowed-out state thesis - that states can no longer govern alone - has been given credence by diverse claims that it shouldn't seek to; that the bureaucratic state has become overloaded, and that bureaucracy cannot pay sufficient attention to societal complexity and calls for a politics of difference (Kooiman, 1993; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Pierre and Peters, 2000; Kooiman; 2003; Kjær, 2004; Osborne, 2010). For Osborne (2010), it is the concern with complexity and plurality that differentiates 'New Public Governance' through interdependent networked relationships from 'New Public Management' associated with the ideological belief that public service coordination should mimic marketplace coordination.

For Kooiman (1993; 2000; 2003; 2010), in societies that are diverse (made up of disparate actors), complex (in terms of the intrinsic nature of social systems), and dynamic (intersected with changing tensions between actors, organisations, institutions etc.), governance requires interaction and interactivity. The engagement of state and non-state actors in cooperation, coproduction, and co-regulation (Kooiman, 1993) is necessary to produce solutions to diverse, complex, and dynamic societal challenges that cannot be determined by one actor alone (Kooiman, 2000:142). Furthermore, for Kooiman (2000; 2003) the solving of societal challenges is a societal concern shared by social actors in



ways which blur boundaries between public and private interests and responsibilities in the context of mutually recognised interdependence. In such contexts the state adopts a steering role to coordinate and facilitate the sites of interaction. The process by which actors then elucidate, compare, and negotiate opinions and options towards consensual shared solutions in the open space of the network involves the integrated “management of meaning” (Kooiman, 2003:35). By conceptualising meaning management in such a way Kooiman’s model of levels of societal governance, through and within networks and partnerships, explicitly implies reflexive relations of power between social actors - within structures and involved in the shaping and maintaining of those structures - and in terms of on-going judgements regarding the legitimacy of the overall system to be governed (Kooiman, 2000; Kooiman, 2003).

Taken together therefore, and despite their differences, the verdict offered by these perspectives of the ‘limited state’ is that, in the context of heightened economic and social complexity, a significant degree of governmental power and political authority has been relocated; transferred from *government* to self-organising, reflexive *governance* networks, confining the state’s role to steering and facilitating rather than directing political decision-making. These explanations of change have, however, been problematised by critical approaches to the study of governance (in the ‘broad’ sense), which suggest they account for a different but not a reduced role of the state in governing (Pierre & Peters, 2000; Pierre, 2000; Newman, 2001).

### **3.2.2 The steering role of the state: Managerialism and Metagovernance**

The first critical claim to make of the ‘limited state’ perspective is that decisions regarding appropriate modes and mechanisms of governance (whether bureaucracies, markets or networks) are, in the first instance, both political and symbolical, and largely taken by states (Jessop, 1998). Bevir & Rhodes (2003a:63) identify different “narratives of governance” without or, more accurately, beyond government; normatively associated with different political traditions, ideologies and projects. Specifically, they identify the

Thatcherist Conservatives defence of market or quasi-market mechanisms as underpinned by a neoliberal belief in minimal state (*cf.* 'politics of skills' scholars), but New Labour's promotion of networks as underpinned by ideals of trust in individual capacity to self-govern in partnership with an enabling state (see also Newman, 2001; Bevir, 2003; Bevir & Rhodes, 2003b; Bevir & Rhodes, 2003c).

Furthermore, we can draw attention to the failure of 'limited state' accounts to adequately theorise and address the significance of the power to 'steer' in governing; the power to derive the need for action and determine and drive the direction that action will take (Peters, 2000; Newman, 2001). For example 'limited state' perspectives tend to under account for state steering through 'managerialism'. Clarke & Newman (1997) associate managerialism with the emergence of a remade form of the state. A new political settlement between the state and citizens that is redefining, in important ways for this study and the attempt by New Labour to lead demand through supply, the relationship between public policy and provision and the boundaries between public and private spheres or spaces.

Marinetto (2003:601) makes the empirical claim that different networks or partnerships, involved in public policy and public service delivery, experience different degrees of close control and regulation through 'steering instruments' that remain the preserve of the central executive, including: mechanisms that direct financial and non-financial resources; statutory requirements and bureaucratic procedures; and performance criteria and targets. These steering instruments enact state work; imposing the will and political authority of government through the management of managers. Through these forms of 'managerialism' governments work to constrain the limits of opinions and options available for negotiation, not just by public, private, 'third sector', or hybrid service providers, but also their 'customers'. Through these forms of managerialism governments work to discipline 'partners', shaping their behaviours and actions towards certain visions and objectives (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Ball, 2008b).

Even in more complex, 'loose' network arrangements (for example between systems of economic governance, or the coordination of economic governance logics with the logics of socio-political governance systems), where central executives have a more detached role, Jessop (1998; 2000b) identifies governments as involved in "de-centred, context-mediated inter-systemic steering". For Jessop (1998; 2000b), this engages states in symbolic mediation of systems logics to lessen the perception of differences between them and build consensus. This is done through strategies of 'noise reduction', which involves facilitating shared understandings through the organisation of dialogue, and 'negative' coordination, which engages actors in considering the potential adverse repercussions of their actions on other actors and/or systems and therefore exercises their self-restraint (Jessop, 1998:33). By engaging in noise reduction and negative coordination, governments define and seek to direct the rules, roles, visions, imperatives and horizons within which systems and their disparate logics of governance come to interact. In other words, governments are involved in 'metagovernance' (Jessop, 1998; Jessop, 2000b; Jessop, 2002); in establishing and managing the context of governance.

Identifying governments as involved in metagovernance draws acute attention to the role of states in shaping the frameworks of meaning that underpin governance arrangements and modifying the self-perception of social actors; both in terms of their interests and capabilities, and in terms of their subject position in the political ordering of social relations. Conceptualising the role of the state in this way provides an important challenge to 'limited state' accounts of change, which tend not to problematise the power of implicit meanings that contextualises governance arrangements, and the asymmetries of power involved in the cultural (re)production of meanings that then iteratively (re)construct meaning-making terms of reference.

### **3.2.3 Summary: looking beyond the limited state**

This section has outlined debates regarding contemporary changes to how governance, as regulation and distribution, is done. It has contrast accounts of the 'limited state' in the

context of complex societies, with alternate accounts that the state's role has changed to steering governance arrangements through managerialism and metagovernance. Highlighting the managerial and metagoverning role of the state illuminates the significance of the role of government in steering governance, but raises the question of how we can understand the normative dimension of steering activity. To address this question the next section is devoted to conceptualising and exposing discursive meaning-making as state work through public policy.

### ***3.3 Meaning-making: a conceptual approach***

*"Labels, like rumours, can take on a life of their own. [...] Once sufficiently established they can govern reality" (Kumar, 1992:45).*

When Kumar (1992; 1995) warns of the power of labels to govern reality he is referring to the way in which intellectuals – with particular relevance here, 'policy intellectuals' (Ball, 2008a) – develop and utilise theoretical constructs in an attempt to analyse and explain the world, and the phenomena by which these constructs develop a self-reinforcing life of their own. He examples the terms: 'post-industrial society' (the 'information society' or 'informational capitalism'); 'post-Fordism'; and 'post-modernism', as labels of economic and socio-political change, and as descriptors of grand new epochs. As we have seen (in Chapter 1), skills policies and debates in the UK are littered with references to such labels of change. In addition to those listed by Kumar (1992; 1995) and employed to describe new or emerging economic and social conditions, we could add: the (neoliberal) post-welfare society; the global knowledge-based economy; and the high-skills economy (see for example Brown, 1999; Lloyd & Payne, 2003; Tomlinson, 2005).

Kumar (1992; 1995) is concerned with the validity of terms; the extent to which they resonate with, and depict 'reality', and therefore with the extent to which their claims of particular change can be substantiated with reference to the actual existence of what they intend to describe. However, this thesis highlights how labels applied to skills policies and

policy debates can also be thought of as attempting to be transformative; productive of what they intend to describe. In other words labels, as discourse, can claim truths (Clarke & Cochrane, 1998; Clarke, 2004a; Ball, 2007; Ball, 2008a). As Clarke & Cochrane (1998:26) note “how we name things affects how we behave towards them. The name, or label, carries with it expectations”. Labels can be utilised as meaningful devices to narrate a way the world is, or could and should be. Intrinsic to them is a particular depiction and articulation of current problems and foreseeable challenges, as well as future solutions and realisable opportunities (Ball, 2006:26). They are advocated by those predisposed to think positively about these particular futures and who seek to make them possible; who endeavour to rally support (or silence opposition) for the primacy and preference of their agenda. Borrowing from Clarke (2004a:30) we can see these labels as doing “political work”.

The role of labels in governing reality highlights “governance as political communication” (Bang, 2003b:7) through which binding, or seeking to be binding, decisions and actions are interactively articulated and negotiated by political actors. However, it is stressed that this focus on governance as political communication does not inevitably lead back to the perspective that the state is fundamentally limited. Rather it reminds us of the significance of the steering role of government. Which highlights that order is not always sought by the barking of authoritative commands to settle political struggles, but is effectively pursued through efforts to discursively produce intersubjective meaning - associated with socially constructed imperatives - and by silencing, subordinating, or absorbing the expression and mobilisation of alternative viewpoints about problems, and their solutions (Newman, 2001; Bang, 2003a; Clarke, 2004a; Jessop, 2009).

This section of my conceptual framework will discuss approaches that conceptualise and expose discursive meaning-making as state work through public policy and policy debate. Specifically, I consider the significance of discursive meaning for determining the objects of governance, as well as the production of governable subjects and subjectivities and the political ordering of social relations. I discuss these approaches to firstly highlight the

limitations of the conceptual framing of existing skills policy analysis that primarily concentrates on evaluation of policy tools and outcomes; specifically the degree to which policy is misaligned with, or misapprehends the (rational) interests of economic actors. Secondly, to provide a challenge to narrow accounts of limited states, and therefore less government, in the forming of collectively binding decisions (see presentation above in section 3.2). Finally, therefore, my central aim is to highlight the significance of discursive meaning—making to the context and content of policy and policy debates. Specifically, I develop a conceptual approach to understanding how, and under what conditions, public policy (of specific relevance to this thesis, skills policy) meaning is made and remade. This conceptual approach will also inform an interpretive policy analysis methodology (Chapter 4)

I draw on somewhat eclectic approaches which make the ‘cultural turn’ in studies of political economy and society, and I address them here in a somewhat linear way. However, in making a ‘cultural turn’ these approaches have in common an ontological commitment to taking culture seriously. That is, not rendering meaning production and reproduction through meaningful practice as the epiphenomenal consequence of particular institutional arrangements of the political economy, but foundational to, and productive of, institutional possibilities and impossibilities, without reducing to radical contingency (Gottweis, 2003; Clarke, 2004; Jessop, 2009; Sum, 2009).

In particular I draw on the ‘cultural political economy’ (hereafter CPE)<sup>22</sup> approach which emphasises the role of semiosis (intersubjective meaning-making) in reducing, or more accurately structuring or binding complexity, through the strategic selection of particular economic (and social) imaginaries that specify particular objects and subjects of governance, and the subsequent attempts to retain and embed these as hegemonic accounts of the world. In common with scholars within the CPE approach, I argue that not all imaginaries have an equal chance of being selected and retained/embedded (Jessop, 2009); narratives of how the world could or should be - and their narrators as story-tellers

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<sup>22</sup> Developed by scholars at Lancaster University within the Cultural Political Economy Research Centre, including: Bob Jessop; Ngai-Ling Sum; Norman Fairclough; and Andrew Sayer

from the position of 'viewpoint characters' - struggle for the privilege to claim their accounts as meaningful, and have unequal ability to legitimise these accounts. Furthermore, imaginaries once embedded are reproduced in discursive and material practice by social actors reinforcing their dominance (Jessop, 2009).

However, CPE alone contributes only a part of my conceptual approach. Given that for CPE scholars the primary level of analysis is the political economy, their focus tends to offer broad accounts of changing or stabilising capitalist social formations (institutional arrangements in periodic flux between unstable equilibrium or crisis, Jessop, 2002), and they retain a core preoccupation with material outcomes (albeit as both produced by and as producing discourse) that consigns actors and their agency to the margins of their analysis. I find this level of analysis useful in situating the New Labour Skills Strategy, for as Ball (2007:5) comments "education is itself now in almost permanent 'crisis' as it has taken centre stage in the complex relations between the state and the 'imagined economy'". However, given my interest in discursive meaning-making *and* meaning contestation through policy and policy debate, I also synthesise and complement this approach with other critical governance studies that focus on language and discourse to expose both the privilege and fallibility of meaning in public policy and policy debate. These approaches are interested in policy as both symbolic – and as such attempting to win and hold on to support (Ball 2007; Ball, 2008a) - and policy as sites of ambiguity and contestation (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Clarke, 2004b; Newman & Clarke, 2009).

Therefore, having discussed meaning-making as an exercise in complexity reduction and the conditions of relative unequal chances for certain imaginaries to be selected and retained, I will finish this chapter by critique the CPE approach for their overemphasis on relative ideational unity of meaning as the outcome of discursive struggles, and their overemphasis on the structuring consequences of embedded (hegemonic) meanings. I will argue that state projects can be multifaceted, muddled, and contested. All of which disrupts the coherence of economic and social imaginaries, the objects of governance they signify, and the subject positions and subjectivities they seek to create.

### 3.3.1 Struggles over meaning-making: selecting economic (and social) imaginaries

In thinking about the political ordering of social relations through intersubjective meaning-making and its interaction with material structures, CPE offers a particular and distinctive analytical approach to making the 'cultural turn' in studies of political economy and critical policy analysis (Jessop, 2009)<sup>23</sup>. The CPE approach focuses on institutional and institutionalised dynamics of the political economy in ways that draws attention to the causal effectiveness of semiosis (intersubjective meaning-making); its evolutionary role in the *construal* (particular interpretation of ideas and concepts, and therefore the forming of ways of understanding) and the *construction* of extra-semiotic, or material dimensions of the social world and social relations (Jessop, 2008; Jessop, 2009; see also Gottweis, 2003 on 'semiotic-materialism' and Clarke, 2004b:38 on the relationship between 'polysemy', 'articulation', and 'cultural formations').

For Jessop (2007a; 2009), semiosis is critical to the necessity of 'real world' complexity reduction, and the strategic selection and retention of particular economic (and social) imaginaries. Jessop (2009) argues that complexity reduction is necessary in order for actors to make sense of and operate in the world. However, complexity reduction should not be confused, in a straightforward way, with simplification. The methodological objective of the CPE approach is to apply critical semiotic analysis to highlight *how* potentially boundless and chaotic economic and social complexity is meaningfully reduced by actors to *what* structured and therefore bounded interpretations and constructions of economic and social complexity associated with particular imaginaries. For example, associated with the specific imagined complexities of a post-Fordist knowledge-based economy (Jessop, 2002; 2008); 'discourses of competitiveness' (Sum, 2009); or discourses

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<sup>23</sup> Specifically, CPE scholars seek to carve out a discrete epistemological space for their approach, which is broadly 'post-structuralist', (or more accurately synthesises the pre-structuralist approaches of Gramsci and post-structuralist approaches of Foucault and Foucauldian scholars), and critical of both realist orthodox analysis of the political economy (which leads towards rational choice institutionalism and economic determinism), and the radical contingency of social constructivism, which writes-out the conditioning influence of structure from accounts of the social reality and social capacity of agents (Jessop & Sum, 2006b; Jessop & Oosterlynck, 2008; Jessop 2009). They therefore define their approach as overcoming economism versus culturalism and structuralism versus voluntarism (Jessop & Sum, 2006b).



of globalisation (Watson & Hay, 2003). Therefore, imaginaries are explained from the perspective of the CPE approach (Jessop & Oosterlynck, 2008; Jessop, 2008; Jessop, 2009; Sum, 2009), in partial relation to 'real world' or 'actually existing' complexity (Jessop & Sum, 2006) as particular and privileged relatively coherent sub-sets of meaningful logics, principles, and priorities according to which social relations could be structured, and which seek to become 'fixed' as objects of governance (Jessop, 2002).

However, whilst imaginaries may be various, unrestrained, immeasurable, and changing - as actors constantly re-envision and redefine ways of understanding the world; the objects and subjects/subjectivities to be governed; and the strategies, projects and modes of governance - only some are selected. Those that come to be selected achieve wider discursive resonance (including with the personal and subjective autobiographical narratives of certain individuals and groups, Jessop, 2002); become materially consequential such that they have lived effects; and are (temporarily) retained through their discursive and institutional reproduction in ways which achieve popular support and can destabilise opposition (Jessop & Sum, 2006). For CPE scholars these selected imaginaries can, at least for a time, become dominant hegemonic accounts of the world (Jessop, 2008; Sum, 2009).

This identified relationship between construal and construction in complexity reduction and the (re)production (albeit temporarily) of hegemonic accounts of the world, leads us to consider the conditions that enable unequal chances for particular economic and social imaginaries to be selected and retained (Jessop, 2002; see also Jessop & Oosterlynck, 2008; Jessop, 2009). For Jessop, there are two such conditions, which, whilst not without their criticisms, offer a useful starting point for exploring discursive meaning-making as state work in practice. Firstly, given a primary interest in critical political economy (specifically the analysis of the anatomy of capitalism as an 'integral' economy, Jessop & Sum, 2006a; Jessop, 2007a) Jessop observes that imaginaries achieve greatest resonance, and come to structure the macro-economic semiotic and extra-semiotic order, where they are suitable to the social regulation needs of capital (or specific capitals) accumulation and

reproduction. In particular, he argues that these imaginaries come to be retained where they affect an always unstable 'spatio-temporal fix' (Jessop, 2002:48; Jessop, 2008:17) able, albeit temporarily, to reconcile the inherent contradictions and crisis tendencies of capitalism. Secondly, (but related to the first) imaginaries have unequal chances to be selected and retained as a consequence of their status in relation to existing embedded discursive and extra-discursive hegemonic accounts of the social world and social relations, that have achieved wider resonance (Jessop and Sum, 2006b:166; Jessop & Oosterlynck, 2008) and are reproduced in practice. This point links me to policy as discursive practice (Clarke, 2004b; Ball, 2007; Ball, 2008a).

Whilst undoubtedly offering an overly structurally determined and determining account of meaning selection and retention, these conditions under which certain economic and social imaginaries attain greater chances of being selected and retained have implications for the meaning-making context and therefore objects and subjects of contemporary skills policy and policy debates in England; the focus of this thesis. They are discussed below before being critiqued (in section 3.4) with regard to their residual overemphasis on structure and 'relative ideational unity' as an outcome of discursive structuration. An overemphasis on structure that under theorises agency, and the potential for actors to unpick, disrupt, and change projects.

### **3.3.2 Macro-economic meaning-making**

This sub-section discusses the first of the conditions under which certain meaningful economic and social imaginaries have unequal chances to be selected and retained. In other words it discusses the role of semiosis in complexity reduction at the level of the macro political-economy (or regime), as the discursive-strategic selection of imaginaries – such as the 'knowledge-based economy', or 'post-welfare society' - suitable to the social regulation needs of (specific) capitals accumulation and reproduction. Furthermore, by considering the selection and retention of economic and social imaginaries that structure the macro political-economy we expose those 'paradigms' that, for CPE scholars, are both

'constitutive' and 'performative' in shaping and embedded policy meanings and policy trajectories (Jessop, 2008:19).

The remaking of the British state has been a central focus of politics and political analysis for the last four decades (Clarke & Newman, 1997:1). Much of this analysis has been centred on the perspective that, 'something happened' to the welfare state (Clarke *et al*, 1994:1). It has been reconceptualised and restructured (see also Ainley, 1997; Jessop, 2002; Bobbitt, 2002; Ainley, 2004; Cerny & Evans, 2004; Cerny, 2010a). The theories of change to state rationales and functions reviewed here offer the argument that what is emerging (has emerged) in terms of state form can be understood as expressions of changing intersubjectively meaningful imaginaries, and associated changing relations of power, which constitute the political (re)ordering of social relations. Furthermore, their selection and retention is, in part, an expression of discursive meaning-making as state work in policy and political debate.

Whilst recognising diversity within accounts of the changing nature of the British state, and the divergent standpoints from which these accounts are presented, it is possible to identify analysis of change as clustering around two focal points: changes to welfare and the social policy role of the state; and changes to the economy and the economic policy role of the state (Jessop, 2002). More specifically changes have occurred in the relationships between the state, the economy, and society (Clarke & Newman, 1997). Scholars from political economy and political sociology offer various and persuasive models for describing and classifying change. In place of the national Keynesian welfare state Cerny (1997, 2010a) offers us the 'Competition State'; Bobbitt (2002) offers us the 'Market-State'; and Jessop (2002) the shift towards the ideal-typical Schumpeterian workfare post-national regime (SWPR).

In 'The Future of the Capitalist State' (Jessop, 2002), and elsewhere (Jessop, 1999; Jessop, 2000a), Jessop provides an account of contemporary changes to the form and function of the state based on the articulation of discursive-strategic (imagined and selected) shifts

between analytical 'ideal-type' imaginaries. In doing so he provides a framework for analysis of the empirically changed macro-economic semiotic and extra-semiotic order, which reconceptualises the relevant objects and subjects of governance, giving new meaning to policy making trajectories. Specifically, he identifies the imagined and (temporarily) embedded Keynesian welfare national state (KWNS) as experiencing major - multiple and variable - discursively mediated crises<sup>24</sup>, and as therefore becoming increasingly untenable as a system of economic and social governance. Similarly, Clarke *et al* (1994:1) note that in the UK, the 1980s bore witness to the emergence of an orthodoxy claiming a 'terminal crisis' of the post-war Keynesian welfare state<sup>25</sup>. As a result the KWNS is analysed as having given way (in degrees) to a new semiotic and extra-semiotic order; an imaginary which Jessop (2002) terms the Schumpeterian workfare post-national regime (SWPR), or Schumpeterian competition state (see also Cerny, 1997; Cerny; 2010a).

Of particular relevance to understanding the macro-economic meaning-making context of skills policy and policy debates in the UK/England, is how the imaginatively narrated distinction between the KWNS and the SWPR or 'competition state' (Cerny, 1997; Cerny, 2010a), re-construes and reconstructs the 'structurally coupled' economic and social policy roles of the state. That is the 'structural coupling' of the accumulation regime and the regulation regime, (Jessop, 2002:3; Ball, 2007) and the associated imagined "proper role of the state" (Clarke & Newman, 1997:1).

Briefly stated, the economic role of the state is imagined as required to relocate away from a *Keynesian* concern with demand management - the active commitment of nation states to secure the conditions necessary for the Fordist growth dynamic by ensuring that mass consumption cleared (exponentially increasing) mass production within a (relatively) closed or walled national economy, (Ainley, 1997; Brown & Lauder, 2001; Jessop, 2002) -

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<sup>24</sup> Associated with the stagflationary tendencies of Atlantic Fordism; technological advancements; the internationalisation of (parts of) the economy and economic activity; and social movement calls for attention to 'the politics of difference'. What Ball, (2007:4) identifies as "conjunction of crises".

<sup>25</sup> Jessop (2002) distinguishes between narratives of crisis *in* - requiring incremental 'path-dependent' change *to* - or crisis *of* - requiring more radical 'path-breaking' or 'path-shaping' departures *from* (as in the UK) - the KWNS.

towards a concern with *Schumpeterian* supply-side interventions to promote perpetual 'knowledge-based' productivity and flexible adaptability, for the purpose of sustaining a competitiveness growth dynamic in a (relatively) open global economy (Brown & Lauder, 1996; Brown & Lauder, 2001; Jessop, 2002; Ball, 2007; Cerny, 2010a). In relation, the social policy role of the state is imagined as required to reorient away from a concern with *welfare* towards a concern with *workfare* (Jessop, 2002; Bobbit, 2002).

It is noted that Jessop (2002) perceives the social policy role of the state in rather narrow terms in relation to the (re)production of labour power. Taken as a whole state social policies have much broader, different and/or additional, intentions and aspirations; for example the (re)production of active and responsible citizens; expert-patients; empowered public service consumers/customers; and highly ambiguous but seemingly Do-It-Yourself but Do-It-Our-Way 'Big Societies' (see for example Vidler & Clarke, 2005; Newman & Clarke, 2009a). However, given that this thesis is concerned with skills policies and policy debates in relation to workforce/workplace development, a more narrow definition of the social policy role of the state is compatible with the object and scope of analysis.

The *welfare* state, as a particular imaginary, organised on principles of solidarity and social inclusion (for those culturally and politically accepted for inclusion, Clarke & Newman, 1997:3-4), offered a commitment to economic opportunity and security; full male employment in conditions of regulated responsible unionism, and the institutionalisation of variable degrees of decommodifying economic and social rights to full citizens (Esping-Anderson, 1990; Brown & Lauder, 2001; Jessop, 2002). With the ascendancy of neo-liberal ideology (particularly with reference to the UK, see Ainley, 1997; Brown & Lauder, 2001) a dominant political rhetoric (offering a semiotic account of the way the world is imagined) identified the social wage and the collection of taxes in order for governments, acting in

the 'public' interest, to meet various calls for insurance and redistribution as having abundant negative effects (Clarke, 2004a)<sup>26</sup>.

For Cerny (2010a), the combination of a dominant neo-liberal ideology urging 'economic modernisation' (Avis *et al*, 1996 Newman, 2001), and intensifying processes of globalisation, far from exclusively limiting the power of the state has fundamentally redefined the state's role in providing population security. He argues that the new 'competition state' functions, in different ways and on different scales from the 'welfare state'; in a seeming paradox to ensure national competitive advantage and economic growth by retreating from the defence of the sociological nation (Cerny & Evans, 2004). Instead of (economically) defending the nation (or defending the nation, meaning people, from the economy, meaning worst excesses of the market) the state works to ensure the integration and inclusion of domestic businesses and worker-citizens inside the terms of transnational competition to secure the benefits of globalisation within its territory. In short, the governmental rationality of the state has shifted from the hitherto *raison d'État*, or 'reason of the state' - the taken-for-granted legitimisation of the state as derived from the mission to improve the welfare of the population (Bobbitt, 2002; Cerny, 2010b), giving way instead to a *raison du Monde*, or 'reason of the world' associated with the market forces of neo-liberal globalisation (Cerny, 2010a). Indeed, put in formidable terms, Cerny (1997:258) identifies an emergent state role as "the enforcer of decisions and/or outcomes which emerge from world markets".

It is with the selection and retention of this Schumpeterian competition state (and post-welfare society, Tomlinson, 2005) imaginary that education and training has come to be seen as utterly subordinated to particular economic imperatives (Jessop, 2002; Lauder *et al*, 2006; Ball, 2008a; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), situated in the complex relations between the state and the 'imagined economy'" Ball (2007:5). A position for education and training

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<sup>26</sup> These included demographic change, unemployment and welfare dependency; the overload, ungovernability and fiscal crisis of the state; burdening the cost of production in the context of heightened pressures on domestically-based businesses to remain competitive in global marketplaces; and disincentivising flows of inward investment given the potential for mobile capital to 'regime shop' (Ball, 2007).

that is also impacted by the competition state (or “Market State”, Bobbitt, 2002) promotion of the moral imperative on citizens to work, and work well (in secure independence from the state), by becoming skilled and by continually up-skilling and re-skilling (Avis *et al*, 1996; Bobbitt, 2002; Ainley, 2004; Tomlinson, 2005) throughout their working lifetime.

### **3.3.3 Meaning-making and reproduction through policy and practice**

Having described the role of semiosis in the construal and construction of certain meaningful economic and social imaginaries that come to determine the objects and subjects of governance at the level of the macro-economy, this sub-section will consider the second of the conditions by which imaginaries come to have relatively unequal chances to be selected and retained. That is where they support already existing embedded discursive and extra-discursive hegemonic accounts of the social world and the political ordering and organisation of social relations, and are reinforced through policy. In short, this sub-section is about policy as discursive meaningful practice which seeks to reinforce ways of construing and constructing the social world and social relations.

As noted above, Jessop (2009) highlights the consequential effect of established meaning-making systems - the associated material constructs and their path-dependencies - for policy-making. Where selected imaginaries are retained and materially embedded as hegemonic accounts of the world their way of understanding the world in turn acts as a meaning-making reference points for actors in the on-going iterative relationship between semiotic construal and construction of the social world and social relations (Jessop, 2009; Sum, 2009). As Jessop (2009:338) states “construals may also contribute to the construction of the natural and social world insofar as they guide a critical mass of self-confirming actions premised on their validity”. However, being more interested in the structural outcomes of semiosis (specifically complexity reduction and the evolutionary mechanisms of variation, selection and retention Jessop, 2009; Jessop & Oosterlynck, 2008) Jessop tends to under theorise and, therefore, under account for the role of actors

and their actions in meaning-making; its production and reproduction. (He also makes a rather obscure and problematic distinction between 'actors' and 'observers', see Jessop, 2009:337)<sup>27</sup>.

In avoiding overly structural explanations of how meaning is made, this thesis synthesises Clarke's observation that we have to read the social world and social relations (culture) as actively constructed and reproduced by the practices of social actors, and which (re)makes what is meaningful to these social actors (Clarke, 2004b:39). However, this synthesis is not to propose (or even open a door to) the reduction of meaning-making to radical contingency, or the idea that actors can speak *any* eventuality into being (Jessop, 2004). Illuminating actors acting, in particular struggling over policy meanings, recognises that these actions and struggles are contained within the constraining – possible and plausible – parameters of the meaningful discursive frame (Ball, 2006:49; Ball, 2007). This is something of a self-evident, even circular, point when we return to the role of discourse, in particular 'policy as discourse' (Ball, 2006:48; Ball, 2008a:7) as attempting to condition, direct and produce the meaningfully responsible action of actors (Clarke, 2004:33).

Policy is thus bounded political communication as discursive practice, which, as Ball (2008a:7) reminds us, requires seeing policy as both text and process. Not just one-off statements or directives, but a reinforced, re-inflected and reworked interactive momentum of discursively mediated ideas, decisions and actions (built into agendas, programmes, initiatives, and so on). With this definition of policy as discursive practice in mind, we have to be attentive to the relationship between meanings and material effects

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<sup>27</sup> Although not the central focus of this thesis, the distinction Jessop draws between 'actors' and 'observers' speaks to a body of research work concerned with the dynamics that shape the relative ability of *some* social actors to participate more than others in the selection of imaginaries of the social world due to their position in relation to dominant discourses (Gottweis, 2003:254). For example: in education 'reform' Ball (2008a; 2008b) highlights the influential role of policy intellectuals, who fit with and validate new policy discourses; Jessop (2008) examples the influential role of the OECD in promoting the imaginary of the knowledge-based economy (see OECD, 1996); Sum's work on competitiveness as a 'knowledge- brand' highlights the influential role of policy consultants in discursive networks; and Cerny (2010b:30) highlights the expansion of competing interests in competition states, and the particularly powerful influence of a 'transnational elite'.



(the semiotic and the extra-semiotic dimensions of policy). The relationship between “what is enacted as well as what is intended” (Ball, 1994:10)

This thesis therefore understands policy as discursive practice to include the attempted enactment of meaning through the articulation and formation of particular modes and mechanisms of governance (hierarchies, markets, networks or partnerships) as both regulatory and distributional devices; by which I mean premised on ideas that seek to legitimise the political authority to determine who does what, who gets what, and how. This point reinforces the contention that modes and mechanisms of governance should be considered as neither inherently neutral nor pragmatic, but as performing, and remaking, what is deemed meaningful within selected and retained imaginaries (Newman, 2007). This point is made explicit in the work of Carmel & Papadopoulos (2003) and Carmel *et al* (2007) where they draw attention to the iteration between the ‘formal and operational’ dimensions of governance. That is the relationship between the meaningful discursive logics, rationales and principles of public policies (what is to be governed), and the meaningful modes and mechanisms that organise how, and with what effects, it is governed. In their words “forms of governance involve the institutional crystallisation of particular discourses” (Carmel & Papadopoulos, 2003:33). The distinction but interconnectedness between the formal and operational dimensions of governance that Carmel & Papadopoulos (2003) illuminates exposes the reproduction (and the re-inflection) of meaning-making through practice.

Ways of understanding the world, manifest in policy discourse and reproduced in practice, influence (for a given time and space) the boundaries of plausibility, possibility and credibility; manufacturing and framing a putative ‘common-sense’ which closes down opportunities for alternative understanding (Clarke, 2004b; Ball, 2007). For example, Carmel & Harlock (2008) highlight how policy discourse and practice determines and delimits the ‘terrain’ of normatively prescribed subjects and objects of governance; imaginatively narrating subject positions and subjectivities, and seeking to affect these through policy technologies.

Policy discourses are therefore determining and constitutive forms of relational power (Lukes, 1974; Clarke & Newman, 1997). Policies 'speak' their subjects – making new subjects and subject positions (for example worker-citizen, Clarke, 2005b) - and inviting them to take up the image articulated (Ball, 2006:48; Ball, 2007; Newman, 2007). Policies create contrasts between authoritative and subordinate voices and actions, and therefore places from which to speak or answer, and act or perform (Clarke, 2004b; Ball, 2006; Ball, 2008); seeking to relegate “voices on the outside of normal” (Ball, 2007:2) to the ‘unsayable’ margins of the debate in order to maintain the coherence of the conversation between insiders. In short, policy as discursive practice seeks to perform meanings. As Ball (1998:124) states “policies are both systems of values and symbolic systems; ways of representing, accounting for and legitimating political decisions. Policies are articulated both to achieve material effects and to manufacture support for those effects.”

Understanding policy as discursive practice offers a useful analytical entry point for this thesis in the endeavour to reconceptualising state work in the governance of skills. However, whilst policy may seek to discursively win support for and achieve certain material effects, it is important to be mindful of the fallibility of meaning-making efforts and policy as discursive practice on two counts. Firstly, that state projects are coherent and seek the straightforward (re)production of objects and subjects of governance; and secondly, that state projects can be contested, disrupted and derailed.

### ***3.4 Ambiguity and contestation: disintegrating discursive meaning-making***

So far in this chapter I have been concerned to outline discursive meaning-making as state work in public policy and policy debates, as the normative dimension of state steering in governance. In doing so, I have in part developed the conceptual approach to my analysis of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England. However, to finalise, this section will challenge the implicit assumptions of both relative ideational unity, and straightforward (re)production of social actors, as outcomes of discursive meaning-making in policy and policy debate. I will draw on critical governance studies and cultural analysis to highlight

complexity, incompleteness and contradiction in state projects (ambiguity), as well as to highlight the possibilities for contestation, resistance, and subversion of policy discourses, practices and processes.

### **3.4.1 Muddled meanings: policy ambiguities**

For Clarke (2004b) analysing shifts between macro political-economic imaginaries, that seek to (re)articulate and structure particular formations of the social world and social relations, can be at best considered an exercise bound by the extent of incomplete change. Bold proclamations of the end of the welfare state have, for example, been met by counter-claims of partial transformation, resilience and persistence (Clarke, 2004b). Even within narrow definitions of social policy as concerned with the reproduction of labour power, debates about the 'proper role of the state' are multifaceted; involving many and differentiated ideas, principles and rationalities, and which may be context or circumstance dependent. Even given the forceful assault of neo-liberal ideologies on the senses, that has "squeezed – in material and symbolic ways - the spaces that we inhabit" (Clarke, 2004b:6), and reframed the objects and subjects of governance, misaligned ('old') perceptions of welfare state functions retain popular and therefore political currency. As such, Ball (2007:5) observes aspects of the Schumpeterian competition state imaginary as layering over, as opposed to dismantling, the logics and principles associated with welfare states, in ways which he describes as involving trial and error 'fumbings' and 'muddling through' as opposed to a systematic colonisation.

This is not necessarily merely indicative of an evolutionary rather than revolutionary pace and process of change. Rather, Clarke (2004b:2) demonstrates that "[welfare] states might be more than one thing at once [...] they may be experiencing multiple and contradictory pressures for change". This draws attention away from linear progressions altogether, and refocuses on the complex conjuncture of multiple narratives of the state and state projects, and the unstable power relations between them (Clarke, 2004b:5). As Newman

(2005), highlights the new paradigm of (economic and social) modernisation may appear to have a coherent rhetoric but this masks the incoherence of its rationalities.

Dominant economic competitiveness discourses intersect uncomfortably with secondary discourses of work-life balance, rights to request flexible working, or time off to train (one skills policy tool discussed in the empirical chapters of this thesis). For Fairclough (2000:44), this speaks to a Third Way agenda of 'reconciliation'. It speaks to the "impossibility of alternatives" (Newman, 2001:45); or conflicts, or antagonisms, within or between governing projects. It speaks to there being more than one type of state. Always and at the same time the modernisers; the social democrats; the enablers; the investors; the entrepreneurs; the evaluators (Fairclough; 2000; Newman, 2001). A state with more than one type of imagined subject (Clarke, 2005). A state, in relation to skills policy, engaged in attempts to reconcile between what Avis (1998:261) identifies as "remnants of earlier radical movements" - a residual commitment to post-Keynesian management of economic and social security - and multiple additional convictions. Specifically regarding the need for higher skills to underpin a prosperous and fair high-skills economy and society; and a political and cultural wariness and distrust of the merits of intervening – compelling and regulating – inside the 'black box' of the firm (Keep, 2002)

In explaining (parts of) the New Labour project (and contemporary policy-making the UK/England more broadly) as defined by 'ambiguity' and the reconciliation of multiple, coexisting and conflicting, discourses and agendas, Clarke & Newman (2009) offer the concepts of "articulation" and "assemblage" to aid analysis of political and policy puzzles. They apply these concepts to explain ambiguity surrounding discourse of 'the public' as both in decline and as prolific. In short they use the concept of articulation to highlight how words, as resources for making meanings, are mobilised and recruited in different ways; brought together and linked, to speak a persuadable project in a certain way. In particular, they draw attention to the dynamic fluidity of these words; the ways in which they can be appropriated to certain agendas and fixed in different compositions of meaning. How they can be disconnected and reconnected from and into political-cultural

projects, in order to attempt the forging of different versions of common-sense (Newman, 2007). Most significantly the concept of articulation offers analytical insight into this process of locating and connecting words in arrangements that, in *that* pattern, represent legitimised 'truth claims', which highlights meaning-making as on-going and arduous state work. Work which involves ensuring alternative articulations are subverted or silenced, and closed down; work that is not always successful.

Closely linked and building on the concept of articulation, is the concept of assemblage as state work to make meanings. Assemblage is explained by Newman & Clarke (2009) as the way in which institutionalising state projects involves coordinating and aligning often diverse ideas, images, actors, institutions, technologies, techniques and tools for governing, and bring these together to forge an apparently coherent whole. The concept of assemblage brings into sharp analytical relief the notion of state work and state policy as construction and production of meanings, practices and processes of governing. More significantly the concept allows the complexities and intricacies of this construction and production to be examined. In contrast to the 'politics of skills' approaches to explaining states as functioning in relatively straightforward relation to partisan interests, Newman & Clarke (2009) highlight political projects as involving the fragile alliance of "ill-suited elements" that requires constant maintenance work. This conceptual approach is useful in the context of studying the governance of skills as it offers ways of, for example, capturing both the building of economic agents in line with imaginaries of the global knowledge-based economy and post-welfare society, but which can narrate these economic agents in ways which reconcile and harmonise them as also social subjects, offered opportunities for better social functioning and flourishing; to borrow from Clarke (2005) as worker-citizens at one and the same time "activated, empowered, responsabilized, abandoned" in the construction of political projects.

### **3.4.2 Undoing discourses: contestation, resistance, subversion**

Paying attention to the complexity and intricacies of state projects to construct and produce meanings, practices and processes of governing - built on the articulation and assemblages of 'ill-suited element' used to portray and narrate coherence, but which requires on-going maintenance work - highlights the inherent fragility of state work (Newman & Clarke, 2009; Newman, 2007). Indeed, Clarke (2004b:38) draws attention to the ever present potential for any state policies as cultural formations to be discursively contested and undone, as people "modify, disrupt or negate the intended processes and outcomes of public policy" (Barnes & Prior, 2009:3). However, this contesting and undoing of policy meanings and practice should be remembered as also amounting to a complex, intricate and multifarious process, as opposed to being read from the way in which social actors are expected to be shaped by large-scale forces and trends (Clarke & Newman, 1997:xi) and their collision with group or individual interests.

Drawing on her collaborative work on 'creating citizen-consumers', Newman (2007) highlights the complexities and intricacies of struggles that took place over the coupling of the subject positions of 'citizen-consumer'. Specifically, struggles over the meanings of these conflicting subject positions between policy-makers, publics and public services staff, and that took place around policy to reform (modernise) public services. She highlights the need to complicate how 'resistance' to forms of governance happens. In the research project that she reports she notes that resistance occurred in many ways. Firstly, as subjects were able to 'ignore' policy; declining to take up the subject positions that had been constructed for them. Secondly, she also notes how subjects found ways to disrupt the articulation and assemblage of the project; ways of breaking discursive and material chains of aligned ideas, images, meanings, subject positions, practices, processes, and techniques of governing, re-appropriating and redirected parts of the project towards other ends (also Newman & Clarke, 2009b). In both Newman's (2007) report of the 'citizen-consumer' project, and Newman & Clarke's (2009b) report of two stories of 'subversive citizens', what becomes apparent is that there is a relationship between the

complexity and intricacies with which the 'governance project' (in the case of this thesis the state project for governing skills in England) is constructed and produced (articulated and assembled by drawing together 'ill-suited elements' portrayed as a coherent whole), and the complexity and intricacy of the 'resistance'. The ability of subjects to either ignore policy; fail to reconcile the tensions of policy; or to use the fragile lines of incoherence to re-appropriate and re-direct policy meanings, practices and processes.

### ***3.5 Conclusion***

This chapter has presented the conceptual approach for this study which theorises state work as the construction of meanings, practices, and process for governing skills in England under New Labour. It began by critically reviewing accounts that the role of the state in governing has become limited; hollowed-out both externally and internally by the combined forces of globalisation and localisation, and as a result of the fragmenting of the polity by quasi-market reforms associated with 'New Public Management' and subsequent 'New Public Governance' calls for a 'politics of difference'. In response the chapter argues that such a reading of the 'limited state' ignores the powerful role states retain in managing and steering; 'metagoverning'. The power to shape the framework of meanings that underpin governance arrangements, derive the need for action and drive the direction that action will take.

Having established a role for the state in steering governance arrangements the chapter then considered the question of how to understand the normative dimension of state steering activity. It presented a justification for taking state work as meaning-making seriously. Drawing on two approaches to theorising meaning-making and meaning reproduction (CPE and critical governance studies), I explored and explained both the role of semiosis in construing and constructing the objects and subjects of governance that offers arguably a better way of understanding the institutional and institutionalised dynamics of the political economy; and the way in which meanings are (re)produced in policy as discursive practice.

The chapter closes by recognising that both approaches reviewed allude to the inherent fallibility of discursive meaning-making as state work in public policy. Drawing predominantly on the work of John Clarke and Janet Newman, I discuss the application for my thesis of the concepts of 'articulation' and 'assemblage' that they offer as aids to the analysis of political and policy puzzles. I also consider how thinking about governance projects as fragile, complex and intricate, exposes forms of 'resistance' as equally fragile, complex and intricate. This consideration has implications for my subsequent methodological decisions. Specifically, it informed my decision to capture the meaning-making activity of employer, employee/learner, and skills delivery representatives, alongside policy-makers, in the original empirical analysis.

In summary then, I built my conceptual approach around theorising state work as the construction of meanings, practices, and process for governing skills in England under New Labour, which seeks to account for the complexities and intricacies inherent to state projects, and that renders them subject to contestation and resistance. Having established the conceptual approach for this thesis, and given the ontological commitment this implies to understanding and explaining the strategic and selective (normative) realm of meaning-making and meaning reproduction, the next chapter will outline my methodological approach informed by interpretive policy analysis (IPA) (Yanow, 2000; Fischer, 2003; Yanow, 2007).



## **4. Research Methodology and Analytical Approach**

### ***4.1 Introduction***

This chapter will outline the methodological and analytical approach adopted in this thesis in order to empirically investigate how the governance – ordering and organising – of skills policy under New Labour can be explained and understood? The chapter will begin by outlining the ontological foundation and methodological commitment to interpretive policy analysis (IPA), an approach that facilitates an interest in the meanings vested in policy and policy debate, and the closely intertwined and iterative relationship between meanings and the purposeful practices and processes of governing. It then details the research design, and research approach, starting with the identification of the main actor groups for inclusion in the study, and then considering sources of data to be drawn on (documents and interviews). The chapter then specifies the research process, by recalling methods of sampling, data access, and data analysis used in this study. Throughout the chapter ethical issues and my role as a researcher will be critically reflected on.

### ***Ontological and Epistemological Commitments: Interpretive Policy Analysis***

Given the conceptual approach to studying policy meanings that I propose in Chapter 3, this thesis adopts an ontologically constructivist position, and an interpretive approach to policy analysis. I employ interpretive policy analysis (IPA) as it offers a methodological framework which reflects both this thesis' interest in understanding policy and its commitment to a conceptual focus on interpreting meanings and meaning-making. I follow IPA scholars in making the claim that the role of policy analysis is to engage reflexively in the process of accessing the normative meanings vested in policies. IPA calls for "the use of interpretive and discursive techniques to demonstrate that politics and policy are grounded in subjective factors" (Fischer, 2007:101). Such that, as Yanow (2000:11) highlights "the central question then for interpretative policy analysts is, how is the policy issue being framed by the various parties in the debate". This perspective weds

the research design to qualitative methods (Bryman, 2008) of analysis (see section 4.3), and a particular interest in narratives as tools to accessing the ways in which actors make sense of, and coherence out of, complex policy agendas (Yanow, 2000; Yanow, 2007). The remainder of this chapter will describe in more detail how this IPA strategy has underpinned the research design and approach.

## ***4.2 Research Design***

This section of the methodology explains the research design. Given that the research interest is the meanings vested in policy by key strategy actors, I start by explaining how I mapped the relevant actors. Determining the actor groups and reflecting on issues that were raised in relation to determine strategic and elite actor representatives. I also offer an account of my approach to both documents and interviews as data, based on my IPA-informed research perspective.

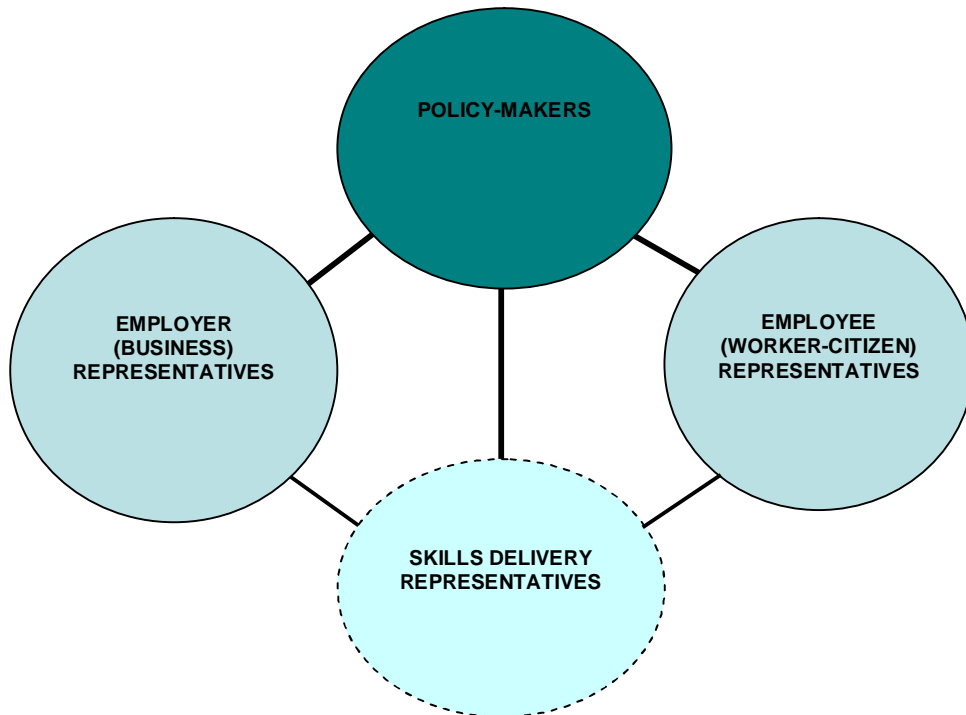
### **4.2.1 Mapping the Strategic and Elite Actors**

Given the research question for this study, and the methodological approach adopted by which to address it, the unit of analysis for my research was the voice of key strategic actor groups. Intuitively the key strategic actor groups involved in the governance of skills policy under New Labour were categorised as policy-makers (politicians with a portfolio responsibility for skills policy and senior civil servants within key government departments); strategic representatives of employers (businesses); strategic representatives of employees (worker-citizens/learners); and strategic representatives of skills delivery. Figure 4.1 below shows, in broad terms, the mapping of the strategic actor groups and the lines of relationship between them.

However, whilst in the context of my research question and research approach broadly categorising the key strategic actor groups involved in the governance of skills policy in

England under New Labour appeared, in the first instance, as a straight-forward exercise, two issues faced during this phase of the research design process warrant attention and further explanation here.

**Figure 4.1: Mapping the Actor Groups**



### ***Defining strategic and elite actors***

Firstly, these broad categorisations, whilst intuitively arrived at, tell very little about the actual population of these groups or, more importantly, what is meant here by 'strategic' actors.

Further to identifying the distinct skills actor group I conducted a detailed mapping exercise to identify the specific and relevant organisations within these populations and the key personnel I wished to contact within these organisations (details of how selecting and accessing the research participants was done is discussed further in section 4.4). In

mapping both I was guided by the interplay between my definition of, and requirement to access, organisations that were 'strategic' and interview participants considered 'elite' actors.

In recent years contributions to the body of methodological literature on 'interviewing-up' has expanded, in a valiant attempt to fill the knowledge void left behind by a wealth of sociological guidance overwhelmingly concerned with the best way to gaze down (Neal & McLaughlin, 2009; Smith, 2006; Welch et al, 2002). Two of the main contributions of this body of literature are firstly, to present perspectives on what is meant by an 'elite' actor – how are they distinguished and defined as such? There is some lack of agreement on this subject. Secondly, what is the nature – power dynamic - of the researcher/researched relationship? If the sociologist is looking up, are they then by default being looked down on? Again, there is some considerable disagreement on this point. Although it is not the aim to explicitly contribute to either debate here, I drew on this work to determine the definition of 'elite' actor I used to mean 'strategic' and 'expert' actor, and which I employed to broadly determine how I understood the participants of this research, and their status in the project. Furthermore, I reflect throughout this chapter (as relevant) on my experience of the research dynamic when interviewing-up. I broadly align with those that problematise the straightforward notion that power flows top down, as I encountered several instances of elite actor vulnerability (Smith, 2006)

For the purposes of my research I sought to identify key personnel within relevant organisations that I defined as offering an 'elite' voice on skills policy as a consequence of having some 'strategic' and 'authoritative' power to speak and act in relation to policy-making. In other words, I defined elite actors as those operating in close proximity to policymaking, and who could be perceived as offering a critical and expert testimony<sup>28</sup> (Desmond, 2004; Lilleker, 2003; Leech, 2002). Furthermore I defined the actors (other

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<sup>28</sup> It is noted that the term elite applied to the practice of qualitative interviewing also refers to the status afforded to the interviewee by the interviewer (Leech, 2002b). In the sense that during the interview process (including pre-interview communications) I afforded the interviewee the position of expert within the policy field. I also apply this definition, however I use the term 'elite' to denote not just my perception of the interviewee, but the position they hold within the New Labour Skills Strategy

than policy-makers) I sought as 'strategic' and therefore 'elite' as a consequence of their ascribed role in the skills policy to represent a wider actor group in promotion or defence of the interests of that group (Flick, 2000).

### ***Acknowledging issues with the implied homogeneity of actor populations***

The second issue faced in the actor group mapping phase of the research design, was that the 'clean' borders suggested between strategic actor groups were found to be somewhat less robust than expected; as was the relative homogeneity of the populations they enclosed. Border fluidity and population diversity was found to be most acute within the grouping of skills delivery actors (shown by dotted line around this group in Figure 4.1 above). 'Skills delivery' is a diverse field, and the strategic organisations that represent the sector have many and varied remits:

- As strategic bodies, to advise on skills issues
- To manage or represent other parts of the skills delivery infrastructure
- To deliver (albeit it in a strategic capacity) parts of the system

However, it was not only the assumption of homogeneity within the population of strategic skills delivery actors that needed to be treated with caution, even within the more clearly defined 'interest' groupings of employer and employee representatives there was a great deal of organisational distinctness (in terms of membership composition, and remit and strategic focus in relation to the skills agenda during the New Labour administrations). Recognising, and avoiding any tendency to obscure, the complexities involved in broadly distinguishing the strategic actor groups was critical to all stages in the research process. However, in two important and related respects the complexities of strategic actor group diversity were mitigated in this research design. Firstly, given the broad focus of the research question the intricacies of intergroup variation were less critical to the aims of the study. Secondly and again given the broad focus of the research question, despite the diversity of their roles and some variations between them, my analysis (faithful, data-led and reflective) of their accounts with regard to the research

question(s) of this thesis has found within group variation to be less than between group variation <sup>29</sup>.

#### **4.2.2 Research Methodology: Documents and Interviews as Sources of Data**

Having identified the key strategic actors involved in the governance of skill, I decided to use a combination of two qualitative methods - documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews - to identify and capture the meanings, and more precisely the relationships between meanings, practices and processes for 'doing skills' that these key strategic actors attributed to the New Labour Skills Strategy for England. In other words, combining these methods enabled a detailed investigation and examination of the ways in which actors constructed the logic for skills (the 'formal' dimension of policy that determines what is to be governed in terms of principles, priorities, purposes and intended outcomes), and the operational dimension or 'mode' (practices and processes) of doing policy. Before detailing how the research was carried out, this section will outline the approach taken to documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews, therefore providing the methodological justification for these approaches to data generation within a commitment to interpretive epistemology and analysis.

Documentary analysis was used to establish the normatively inflected perspectives and meanings of key strategic actors involved in the governance of skills in England (under New Labour), and in relation to the high(er) skills project at the time, as they were formally reported and openly published in text. In addition documentary analysis was used to help identify themes for further exploration in interview (this is discussed in more detail in section 4.4). Semi-structured interviews were used to probe beyond openly reported perspectives and meanings, to explore a deeper level of meaning-making and meaning attribution, particularly focusing on tensions and contradictions regarding

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<sup>29</sup> I borrow this turn of phrase from Korpi (2006), whose 'interest-based' analysis (in his case of class grouping perspectives of welfare enhancing services) is also broadly focused enough to consider intergroup variation to be less than between group variation.

project and policy meanings, and the meaning, practice/process relationship in how skills governance was narrated in documents.

### ***Approaching Documents as Data***

Documents, for the purpose of this research, are defined as purposive containers of text such that they become the physical embodiment of text (Scott, 1990). There are many types of documents. However, utilising Scott's (1990) categorisation of document types, the most relevant for this research were publicly accessible 'open-published' documents (Scott, 1990). As a source of data such documents are often particularly credited for being easy to access. Although certainly true (the vast majority of the documents I used for the purposes of this research were readily available on the internet) their high degree of accessibility is important and relevant to research for other more substantive and qualitative reasons.

Paying attention to how accessible a document is draws attention to the conditions under which such documents are produced, and therefore to the purposes of the documents in terms of both the intended communication and the assumed or anticipated audience (Bryman, 2008). For this study, the particular relevance of publically accessible open-published documents rests explicitly with how and why they are created.

Whilst a positivist-informed searches for the objectivity of 'truth' warn of the problems with reading and treating documents of this kind as 'neutral artefacts'; a 'true' account of the social world. A point which particularly troubles some political scientist concerned with elite actors abilities to distort, or conceal 'truths' (Dorussen *et al*, 2005; Berry, 2002; Goldstein, 2002; Richards & Smith, 2002). Given the ontological commitment of this thesis to the ways in which meaning are produced and remade (chapter 3), I approach documents as part of the meaning-making and communicating work of strategic actors engaged in producing the normative underpinning of the governance of skill. I treat documents as representing some account or reflection of a constructed reality as it is perceived, and as it is intended to be communicated, by the actor groups as authors (May,

2001; Bryman, 2008), inseparable from the social context in which they are produced, and the assumed/intended relationships between author and reader.

Indeed, this thesis treats documents as a significant and valued source of data precisely because of what they intend to accomplish: the perspectives they seek to crystallise; the persuadable audience for whom they are written; the communication of an impression held by the author, and the reinforcement of the semiotically construed and constructed nature of reality, in part via the alternatives which are omitted and rendered closed (Hodder, 2000; May, 2001; Atkinson & Coffey, 2004; Bryman, 2008). As such what becomes important is the way in which documents attempt to 'make' a normative sense out of some subjective and constructed interpretation of 'reality' (Watson, 1997).

Considered in this way documents are important in terms of their role in supporting the exercise of power over the political ordering of social relations (May, 2001). As Hodder (2000) observes, words do something beyond the saying of them. The written word enables the concretisation and control of language and meaning. Text becomes an expression of authority over the context; an attempt to produce and justify a truth, which in turn provides the legitimacy to act in certain ways, and to the exclusion of others (May, 2001). Taking this point further, Young (1990) observes the production of documents by specific groups of actors as seeking to "...continually foster the desire for consensual world views...and the obscuring of differences" (Young, 1990:164-165)

As instruments by which to attempt to wield power and control over a social reality documents offer a rich source of insight into the perspectives of actors. However in the interpretative analysis of documents an important and defining feature of such forms of meaningful communication needs to be borne in mind. Documents, and the text they contain, are in essence preserved and enduring. Therefore, to some extent it can be assumed that in the writing the authors gave particular concern to the degree of scrutiny to which they may be subjected, and thus may seek to obscure or down play tensions and contradictions (Bryman, 2008). This is of paramount importance when considering the



intention of actors as authors in promoting the reader towards certain interpretations, whilst curtailing the potential emergence of contrary perspectives. A point which gives enhanced significance to the complementing of document analysis with semi-structured interviews.

### ***Approaching Semi-Structured Interviews***

If documents allow an interpretation of actors reality as they perceive it and as they seek to influence others, then interviews provide an opportunity to generate conversation about how actors construct their realities. These conversations provide a depth that cannot be so readily extracted from the written word, and to a greater extent enable actors to give answer on their own terms, and include issues of complex disagreement, tension or contradiction (May, 2001). Indeed interviews offer a complement to the analysis of 'open-published' documents because they provide access to those perspectives which are in comparison closed, or at least not publicly known (Lilleker, 2003:208).

The approach I adopted to interviewing actors can broadly be classified as semi-structured in the sense that whilst I devised a thematic guide (appendix 1) to direct the conversation to cover a range of topics of interest to my research and to enable me to answer my research questions, I also wanted to engage in dialogue with those to whom I was speaking, and probe beneath their answers (May 2001). Interviews were conducted in order to glean greater depth of insight and understanding regarding the meanings strategic actors brought to the high(er) skills project, and vested in skills governance practices and processes. Importantly a semi-structured approach, as opposed to an unstructured approach, enabled, within its flexibility, the possibility to analyse broad comparability between interviews and actor groups (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003).

However, some of the questions asked (typically at the beginning of the interview process) were more of an unstructured nature, particularly where I was keen to glean from the actors' the frame of reference they applied to the meaning of the New Labour Skills

Strategy without inference drawn from the phrasing of an explicit question. To achieve this I asked “grand tour questions” (Spradley, 1979) such as ‘can you describe your role within the Skills Strategy?’, or ‘what is the activity of your organisation with regard to the Skills Strategy?’ Given the brevity of the interviews, questions of this nature were useful in attempting to overcome interviewee apprehension about any preconceived notions I may carry, as they signalled the primacy I afforded to the interviewee’s point of view and perspective. Overcoming interviewee apprehension was critical to building rapport and trust with those I spoke to (May, 2001; Leech, 2002a; Fontana & Fry, 2003). Since my research drew on the perspectives of strategic ‘elites’, as actors within the governance of skills, rapport and trust were essential in creating an interview relationship that subsequently enabled me to get beyond what can be considered ‘official’ responses, (or the painting of an idealised world which offers the interviewee a politically safe option), to a representation of social reality as it was perceived by them.

### ***4.3 The Research Process***

#### **4.3.1 Selecting and Accessing the Research Samples**

##### ***Selecting the Documentary Sample***

As stated above this thesis took an interpretive approach to exploring the governance of skills policy in England under New Labour, which took as its unit of analysis the voice of the key strategic actor groups involved. These key strategic actor groups included policy-makers; representatives of employers; representatives of employees; and representatives of skills delivery. I therefore sought documents authored by these actors (in particular policy-makers, employer and employee representatives) regarding their perspectives of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England.

Scott (1990) highlights the importance of considering documentary authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. I used contemporary documents published

by the actors, understood to be authentic in the sense that they were genuine and the origin was known, and credible at least in the sense they had not be distorted since original publication (either by translation or secondary interpretation). In addition, they were representative in the sense that they were typical types of documents (for example, government white paper, commissioned reports and consultation documents, and the responses to these by employer and employee representatives). This attention to authenticity, credibility, and representativeness does not negate the contention that such documents are implicitly biased. However, as has already been discussed, the interest in these documents for my research was the very biased nature of them; the biases that they reveal, and what this informs about the meaning ascribed to the governance of skills in England under New Labour.

In selecting the documents of relevance and interest to my research I began by compiling an "index" (Scott, 1990:27) of key government publications. The government's 'official' agenda for skills in England was contained within a flexible, and to an extent virtual, construct known as the 'Skills Strategy', and defined by government as encompassing their reform in this policy area since the launch of the 2003 White Paper: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills. However, the suite of documents that comprised policy-makers' written communication regarding the meanings, practices and process of governing skills in England during the New Labour period of government (and up until completion of fieldwork in 2009) was more extensive. In particular including some important agenda setting reports published before 2003 and that informed the Skills Strategy White Paper. The documents identified as relevant for analysis in this research, as an outcome of the indexing exercise, are outlined in Table 4.1 below. Other relevant documentary sources used included various Ministerial speeches; press releases from relevant government departments; and strategic analysis produced by strategic representatives of skills delivery, including the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

Having identified as rigorously as possible the relevant corpus of government publications, I proceeded to identify, and "index", the documents regarding the governance of skills in

**Table 4.1: Index of core documents: the New Labour 'Skills Strategy' (for England)**

<b>Title of Document</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Type of Document</b>	<b>Date</b>
In Demand: Adult Skills in the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century	PIU	Report	2001
In Demand: Adult Skills in the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century – part 2	Strategy Unit	Report	2002
Developing Workforce Skills: Piloting a new approach	HM Treasury	Report	2002
21 <sup>st</sup> Century Skills: Realising Our Potential – Individuals, Employers, Nation	DfES	White Paper	2003
Getting on in business, getting on in work – part 1	DfES	White Paper	2005
Getting on in business, getting on in work – part 2	DfES	White Paper	2005
Getting on in business, getting on in work – part 3	DfES	White Paper	2005
Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances	DfES	White Paper	2006
Leitch Review of Skills - Skills in the UK: The long term challenge	Leitch ( <i>HM Treasury</i> )	Commissioned Report: Interim Report	2005
Leitch Review of Skills - Prosperity for all in the global economy: world class skills	Leitch ( <i>HM Treasury</i> )	Commissioned Report: Final Report	2006
World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England	DIUS	White Paper	2007
Time to Train: Consulting on a new right to request time to train for employees in England	DIUS	Consultation Document	2008
Shaping the future: a new adult advancement and careers service for England	DIUS	Prospectus	2008
Raising Expectations: Enabling the system to deliver	DCSF & DIUS	Consultation Document	2008
Train to Gain: A plan for growth – November 2007-July 2011	LSC	Report	2007
Empowering Employers: Building Employer Influence - Relicensing Sector Skills Councils	UKCES	Guidance Document	2008
Empowering SSCs: Employer driven skills reform across the UK - A Relicensing Framework for Sector Skills Councils	UKCES	Guidance Document	2008

England associated with other strategic skills actors groups (particularly strategic representatives of employers and employees). This was to an extent a rather more sporadic exercise. I started by reference back to government policy documents to identify the strategic representatives of skills actor groups, constituted in policy as able to speak and act in relation to strategy as a result of an ascribed status as 'partners' in the high(er) skills project.

As a result I began the compilation of non-state strategic skills actor documents with those produced by the Confederation of British Industries (CBI) and Trade Union Congress (TUC); accessing these documents by consulting their websites and press offices to identify those most relevant for this study. From this I widened my search by reference to the strategic organisations I identified as making up the broad populations of strategic actor groups, and by snowballing from documentary references (and interviews) to other organisations; again consulting websites and press offices to identify relevant documents.

Aware that such a search may turn up an exorbitant and unmanageable quantity of data I initially sought specific responses to government consultations or direct replies to 'Skills Strategy' documents. From the initial result I widened my search to included supplementary publications which specifically addressed the issues of relevance to the research questions; particularly actors' perspectives of skills, their interest in skills, and the role they consider themselves to play in directing and delivering the high(er) skills agenda. The final identified suite of relevant strategic non-state actor documents for analysis in this research are outlined in Table 4.2 (employer representatives) and Table 4.3 (employee representatives) below.

**Table 4.2: Index of core documents: Employer Representatives**

<b>Title of Document</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Type of Document</b>	<b>Date</b>
Shaping up for the future: the business vision for education and skills	CBI	Report	2007
CBI response to Education & Skills Select Committee call for evidence: post 16 – skills training	CBI	Policy Response	2007
News Release: government must recognise the training and investment by firms in their staff	CBI	Press Release	2007
FSB Research into Sector Skills Councils	FSB	Report	2009
FSB Research into Train to Gain	FSB	Report	2009
Putting the economy back on track: Skills and Training	FSB	Report	2008
Response from the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) to the consultation by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) on the Further Education White Paper	FSB	Policy Response	2006
Learning to Change: why the UK skills system must do better	EEF	Report	2006
Skills for Productivity: Can the UK deliver?	EEF	Report	2006
Vocational qualifications: current issues, Government responsibilities and employer opportunities'	IoD	Report	2006
Consultation response - Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances	IoD	Policy Response	2006
Consultation response - Investing in Skills: Taking forward the Skills Strategy	IoD	Policy Response	2004
UK Skills: Making the Grade	BCC	Report	2007
Building a Skilled Nation: The business perspective on education and skills	BCC	Report	2006
Parliamentary Briefing: World Class Skills for 2020	LCC	Briefing Document	2007

**Table 4.3: Index of core documents: Employee Representatives**

<b>Title of Document</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Type of Document</b>	<b>Date</b>
Counting the Cost: The NIACE Survey on Adult Participation in Learning 2008	NIACE	Report	2008
How adults like to learn: A NIACE briefing on learning and skills development outside of the workplace	NIACE	Report	2008
Unions and Partnerships: Union Learning Representatives and the Government's Skills Strategy	TUC	Report	2009
Briefing Document: National Employers Skills Survey 2007	TUC	Briefing Document	2008
Briefing Document: Skills – Government Funding Plans	TUC	Briefing Document	2007
Skills Pledge: a TUC briefing	TUC	Briefing Document	2007
TUC response to Delivering World Class Skills in a Demand Led System	TUC	Policy Response	2007
Time to tackle the training divide	TUC	Report	2007
Further Education White Paper: TUC response to Further Education White Paper – Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances	TUC	Policy Response	2007
Skills White Paper: TUC response to Skills White Paper – Skills: Getting on in Business; Getting on at Work	TUC	Policy Response	2005

### ***Selecting the Interview Sample***

Again, since I adopt an interpretive approach to analysis of the governance of skills under New Labour interested in the meanings of the high(er) skills project vested in actor accounts of skill policy, and the relationship between meanings, practices and processes of governing, I sought interviews with representatives of the key strategic actor groups involved in skill policy in England at that time. Determining the representatives of the strategic actor groups was carried out through a population mapping exercise (see section 4.3.1) which was to some extent intuitive but also informed by the definition of 'strategic' actors as operating close to policymaking and as representative of the wider actor group interests. I was also careful not to obscure the distinctions between organisations within the populations and the distinctiveness of intergroup variations.

Again, starting from the identification of the key government departments with responsibility for skill policy - initially the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and later the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) – and by consulting the key publications of these departments, I determined the 'official' (ascribed in policy) partnership. From this point I built up a map of *involved* actors demarcated within the broad populations, by employing a range of techniques. These techniques included references made to additional organisations in the documents I had collated (this was to some extent an iterative process as documents led me to actors and actors led me to documents); references made to additional organisations in previous academic research in the field of skills policy in the UK/England; and references made to additional organisations during interviews with other actors. This is a method of sampling known as 'snowballing' (my use of snowballing will be dealt with in terms of approach and limitations below). Although I didn't seek, nor would claim, a definitively complete inclusion of all potential actors (such an exhaustive mapping and coverage of the policy field in terms of included actors was not the aim or requirement of this research), it was important to ensure that I achieved a high calibre and robust representation of the most



relevant strategic actors. As a result the process of constructing the actor map continued throughout, and was informed by the data gathering phase of this research study.

The method that I adopted in determining my interview schedule can therefore be defined as a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is a “fit for purpose” (May, 2001) strategy employed where the interviewer has specific requirements from their sample, such that they demonstrate the required “features or characteristics” (Ritchie *et al*, 2003:78) that enable the exploration of the research question. For my study I sought research participants with a particular strategic/elite role in representing a set of perspectives about the governance of skills in England. More specifically then my approach can be seen as employing “critical cases sampling” (Patton, 2002, cited in Ritchie *et al*, 2003:80) in the sense that the participants case can be seen as having a pivotal relevance, which is critical to understanding the research subject.

At the beginning of the data collection phase of the research study I put together an aspirational interview schedule, or “sampling frame” (Bryman, 2008; Goldstein, 2002), which represented the critical cases I wished to include in generating an understanding of the governance of skills in England. This list included more cases than I knew I would be able to feasibly include within the time and resource parameters of my study, however I anticipated difficulties in being able to gain access to all cases and it was important at that initial stage to assess the plausibility of the study in light of a reasonable non-response rate. In addition I decided to supplement my purposive sampling approach with some snowball sampling.

Snowballing (also referred to as ‘chain sampling’) is a method of generating a data sample by asking one interview participant to identify potential additional interview participants, that they know of, and who meet the requirements for the study (exhibit the same relevant “features or characteristics”). The use of snowball sampling within my research design offered many advantages but also presented potential concerns of which I was mindful. One crucial advantage was the ability to learn about, and include, relevant actors

about whom I had no previous knowledge, but who offered a critical testimony. A second advantage was in avoiding the potentially destabilising effect of a high non-response rate. Indeed in one case, where following my initial 'cold' enquiries a crucial actor had responded as unable to participate due to the prioritisation of work commitments, I subsequently managed to secure the interview via another contact I had made. As this example indicates I experienced that in certain circumstances the actors I succeeded in gaining access to acted as 'gatekeepers' for others. This was particularly the case where I had interviewed, and snowballed from, senior and strategic policy makers. I found that this phenomenon was indicative, to some degree, of the power relationship between the actors involved in the governance of this policy field<sup>30</sup>. I also found that some actor groups became less apprehensive of me, and my research intentions, in knowing that I had already met with an ally; or more determined to meet with me in knowing that I had already met with an adversary.

However, whilst I found snowball sampling to be an effective strategy for gaining access to valued cases, I was aware of, and sought to limit, the weaknesses of this approach. Particularly the degree to which an over reliance on snowballing one interview from another may limit necessary diversity (Ritchie *et al*, 2003). When discussing the application of snowballing strategies Goldstein (2002:671) warns "Researchers need to be careful about straying from their target sample or using connections to get only one set of interviews."

As a result I employed snowball sampling in complement to purposive sampling, and continually referred to my initial sampling frame when making decisions about pursuing interview leads. It is however worth noting here that in a number of circumstances I found that interview participants, without prompt from me, offered suggestions of individuals and organisations for me to contact with which they had articulated explicitly divergent interests and opinions. Often they would say things like *"I suppose I shouldn't suggest this but you should contact [name] if you want to hear the other side"* (PM4), or: *"Of course*

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<sup>30</sup> I deal with some concerns I have about the negative implications of this phenomenon in the section regarding research ethics below.

*[name] disagrees with this entirely. You should contact them actually I am sure it would be useful to get a different opinion.”(EER3).*

Experiences of this kind have been documented by other researchers undertaking ‘elite’ interviewing. In one example Berry (2002) outlines circumstances in which he encountered interviewees speaking at length about the weaknesses of their case, whilst highlighting the virtues of alternative perspectives. My encounters deviated from his in the sense that whilst I encountered respondents acknowledging differences of opinion, on occasions I perceived that some sought to apologise for, or contextualise, the subjectivity of their opinions and arguments. I noted that in particular actors representing employee/learners, and actors representing VET providers, were more apt to apologise for subjectivity; saying *“But then I would say that wouldn’t I”* (SD5), or *“Of course I see things differently”* (EER1). On the other hand senior strategic policy makers, (perhaps given their extensive political experience), were more likely to openly acknowledge (but ring fence) divergent opinion.

#### **4.3.2 Accessing the Interview Sample**

Having constructed my sampling frame I next considered the appropriate strategy for gaining access to the cases I had selected. Since my research study required me to gain the perspectives of incumbent actors in the policy field for the most part accessing contact details was a matter of consulting published lists of organisations, and narrowing down to the relevant individual by reference to organisational charts. In addition, and as I have already noted, I sought to overcome the limitations of this method via the complementary use of snowball sampling.

In order to make initial contact I devised a template letter of introduction (appendix 2). Much of the existing literature regarding interviewing ‘elites’ suggests that a written request for participation in the research study is the best technique for establishing initial contact (Lilleker, 2003; Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Goldstein, 2002). In the sense that

this letter of introduction served to negotiate access, and gain the informed consent of the participants, I considered that it needed to explicitly include succinct information about the objectives of my study; an explanation of their importance to the research; an accurate assessment of what I required from them (including a specified time commitment, and my intention to travel to a location convenient to them); the topics that I proposed to cover; clarity regarding how I intent to use and disseminate findings; what I hope to be able to reciprocally offer them (in terms of a research summary, research reports, and key findings); and finally my willingness to accommodate flexibility within my proposed data gathering method (Lewis, 2003; Lilleker, 2002). I also explained my desire to record the interview in order to facilitate a conversational style, and to minimise inaccuracy or loss of data (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002). However, I equally offered them the option to decline to be recorded.

In terms of drafting the letter of introduction, I decided against a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, and instead tailored critical aspects of my letter to their organisation; particularly why I sought their involvement and my use of language. Whilst being committed to ethical openness (Woliver, 2002), and accepting the credibility that potential participants attach to an academically sound project undertaken in a professional manner (Lilleker, 2003), I needed to ensure that I couched my study in terms that would resonate with those I contacted. I therefore researched my potential participants, and their organisations (partially as an exercise in selecting and analysing documentary evidence), and sought to employ as appropriate the language they use both in my written communications and during the interview (Lewis, 2003)<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> As an example I felt that my use of the term 'actors' would be misconstrued and create confusion. I therefore substituted the term 'actors', (which I use to denote those granted some ability to express a perspective on, and influence, skills governance), with 'stakeholders'. A term common in the contemporary political lexicon, but which I distinguish from 'actors' as including all those with an interest, or degree of risk, associated with the policy area, but not necessarily an ability to act in defence of that interest or risk. To make this point more explicitly an individual employee/learner or an individual employer would be considered a 'stakeholder' in VET, but they are not usually, on their own, able to act within the policy environment. This distinction is however not implied in the popular use of the term 'stakeholder' I therefore felt able to use 'stakeholder' during my fieldwork, substituting for 'actor' in my analysis and writing.

This initial written approach had some considerable success, however, as I indicated above, on occasion I received no response, or the contact declined to be interviewed. In these circumstances I supplemented my initial approach with a range of follow-up strategies as appropriate. These strategies included further written communications addressing (to the best of my ability) the barriers to participation they had elucidated, or, where I had received no response, a telephone conversation. Indeed, I often found I had more success where I was able to speak directly to my intended interview participant to explain and arrange our meeting. In addition to persistence, I also successfully employed the strategy of patience. In some circumstances I chose to temporarily postpone further communications with the intention of seeking an alternative access route, such as personal contact via another interview participant, or if snowballing was unsuccessful I sought out public/professional conferences at which my contact, or another member of their organisation, would be attending. Networking at conferences proved a particularly successful strategy in gaining access to senior strategic policy-makers, to whom access via more conventional routes is often barred by first-point-of-contact 'gatekeepers'.

The final schedule of elite interviews undertaken is shown below in Table 4.4, and relates to the mapping of strategic actor groups involved in the governance of skill in England under New Labour as shown in Figure 4.2.

**Table 4.4: Elite Interview Schedule**

<b>Policy-Makers</b>	<b>Employer Reps</b>	<b>Employee Reps</b>	<b>Skills Delivery</b>
Member of House of Commons (MP)	Confederation of British Industries (CBI)	Trade Union Congress (TUC)	Association of Colleges (AoC)
Member of House of Lords	Employer Representative (Board Member) on Regional LSC	Trade Union Congress (TUC)	UK Commission for Employment & Skills (UKCES)/Skills for Business Network (SfB)
Senior Civil Servant (DIUS)	Institute of Directors (IoD)	Unionlearn	UK Commission for Employment & Skills (UKCES)
Senior Civil Servant (BIS)	Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)	National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE)	Alliance of Sector Skills Councils (ASSC)
	Engineering Employers Federation (EEF)	National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE)	Lifelong Learning UK (Sector Skills Council for the Lifelong Learning Sector)
	Chambers of Commerce		Council for Administration (CfA)
			Learning and Skills Council (LSC)
			Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA)
			Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA)
			City & Guilds
			Sixth Form Colleges Forum (SFCF)

Figure 4.2 Final Mapping of Strategic Actor Groups

	EMPLOYERS	STATE	LEARNERS	
POLICY MAKERS		House of Commons DfES/DIUS/BIS	House of Lords (Select Committees)	POLICY MAKERS
WORKPLACE PARTNERS	Confederation of British Industry (CBI) Institute of Directors (IOD) Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) Sectoral Employers Organisations and Trade Associations Representatives on Regional LSC	National Learning & Skills Council (LSC) Qualifications & Curriculum Authority (QCA) UK Skills	Trades Union Congress (TUC) Unionlearn National Institute of Adult & Continuing Education (NIACE)	WORKPLACE PARTNERS
POLICY DELIVERERS	UK Commission for Employment & Skills (UKCES) Alliance of Sector Skills Councils (ASSC) Council for Administration (CFA) Lifelong Learning UK	FE SYSTEM National Learning & Skills Council (LSC) Qualification & Curriculum Authority (QCA) Association of Colleges (AoC) Qualification Awarding Bodies UK Skills	Sixth Forum Colleges Forum (SFCF)	POLICY DELIVERERS

### 4.3.3 The Importance of Ethics in Elite Interviewing

The ethical implications of this study were an important aspect of the research design, data gathering, data analysis, and reporting stages. Whilst there are ethical concerns associated with any qualitative inquiry (Lewis, 2003), there are a number of specific issues of particular relevance to 'elite' interviewing and the way in which data gathered is reported. I was particularly concerned with ensuring that I sought interviewees' informed and voluntary consent on the grounds of incomplete anonymity and confidentiality.

Informed consent relates to the ability of the research participant to 'freely' and 'voluntarily' agree to take part in the research activity (Lewis, 2003; May, 2001; Silverman, 2001). As Lewis (2003) attests consent can only be given freely and voluntarily where the interviewee feels under no obligation to participate in the research, and is fully apprised of the purpose of the study; how the data will be used, and what degree of attribution will be applied to them, with reference to what they convey. This final point makes clear the link between informed consent and the issue of anonymity and confidentiality in qualitative research inquiries.

Anonymity is concerned with ensuring that the identity of the research participant is not revealed to any third party outside of the research team<sup>32</sup> (Lewis, 2003). Confidentiality refers to avoiding the potential for reported data to be directly or indirectly attributed back to the individual participant without specific consent. In relation to my study there existed a number of difficulties regarding anonymity and confidentiality which resulted in me seeking consent under the conditions of incomplete anonymity and confidentiality. Firstly, where snowball sampling occurred, anonymity of participation was unavoidably compromised but in all cases contained within the three-link chain. Secondly, given the research objective to explore the role of actors in the governance of skills, I felt it necessary to be able to reveal the research sample (in terms of the organisations I included within each actor population), and

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<sup>32</sup> In my research study I deemed the research team to include myself and my two supervisors. I therefore made clear to my research participants that I was working with the supervision of Mr Peter Cressey and Dr Theo Papadopoulos, who would also be privy to details regarding the research sample and the content of data gathered.



attribute the data collected to the broad actor groups as defined. In other words whilst I had no intention of using individual's names or job titles, I wanted to be able to make reference to the organisation as being included in my sample, and I wished to attribute the data they gave me to the actor group they represented: either policy-makers (PM); employer representatives (ERR); employee representatives (EER); or representatives of skills delivery (SD).

The requirement within my research design to identify the representation of my sample, and attribute data to an actor group, presented me with significant ethical concerns that made achieving informed consent of paramount importance. In order to establish that participants were fully informed I firstly ensured they received my letter of introduction regardless of how they were contacted. In all cases I re-sent a copy of the letter of introduction along with confirmation of our arranged meeting. I also repeated the information contained within the letter of introduction at the beginning of the interview, offered to provide further clarification about any points that were unclear or raised concern, and finally ascertained that they remained happy to proceed<sup>33</sup>.

My pre-interview statement explicitly explained the importance I ascribed to being able to reference their organisation within my research sample, and to attribute their perspectives as representative of an actor group within my findings. However, I reassured them that I would not use their names or job titles at any point, and would omit organisational name and contextual details, which may indirectly identify them, from the way my findings are reported. The way I deal with contextual detail within the reporting of findings is of significant importance given that I have interviewed 'elites' in the policy field, and 'elites' are, by definition, a relatively small and easily identifiable group. In addition some of the organisations I have included in my study are very small, and as such have only one or two individuals operating at a strategic level. I identified these participants as vulnerable elites in this research relationship (Smith, 2006). Again without careful consideration regarding the way data is reported

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<sup>33</sup> All participants agreed to be recorded, and I ensured that the tape recorder was on to capture this important introduction to the interview, and their agreement to participate.

they become relatively easily identifiable; as one respondent put it *"If you mention my organisation everyone will know it was me you spoke to. Who else would it be?"* (SD<sup>34</sup>)

In order to minimise the risk to participants associated with incomplete anonymity and confidentiality, I strictly applied the journalistic rules (familiar to my research participants) associated with the terms "off the record", "on background" (or "not for attribution") and "on the record" (see Lilleker, 2003; Goldstein, 2002:671). In addition I offered to send a full transcript of the interview in order to provide them with the opportunity to, on reflection, highlight any issues that should be treated sensitively, or sections of text that should not be directly quoted. I also offered to send them, for their comment, an advance report of my findings. I made these offers not simply to minimise their risk of participation, but also because I believe that it is ethically important to acknowledge the partnership between us, and the contribution of interviewee to the research exercise. Indeed, without the interviewee there would be no research (Woliver 2002). Finally, and perhaps most importantly I offered all participants the right to elect not to continue with the interview if they were in any way concerned about the degree of incomplete anonymity and confidentiality.

It is worth noting here that none of the contacts or interviews pursued were compromised or lost as a result of incomplete anonymity and confidentiality. Indeed, was my experience that at the beginning of the interview process participants largely dismissed the need for rigorous concern regarding anonymity and confidentiality. However, in a number of cases the research participant took up the offer of a full transcript at the end of the interview. I interpreted this to reflect the fact that whilst the participants of my study were confident of their perspectives and their ability to justify them, the topics we discuss were contested, and sensitivities increasingly emerged during the course of the interview, as trust and rapport was established within our relationship. I observed that in some circumstances the sense that they had perhaps revealed too much created apprehension. Offering them a chance to review the transcript of the interview was one way to at least partially alleviate this apprehension, by enabling the interviewee to retain ownership and control over the

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<sup>34</sup> Skills delivery representative number omitted here for obvious reasons

use of the data. It should be noted that whilst 40% of interview participants requested a copy of the transcript, none were changed or censored in any way.

One final point to note regarding the particular ethical considerations of this study is the issue of ensuring voluntary participation when using snowball sampling. I was concerned about the degree to which some individuals felt obliged to consent as a result of being referred, or suggested, by a previous participant; particularly in cases where their organisation had a financial dependency on central government, and they had been referred to me by a senior strategic policy maker. I attempted to overcome this issue by breaking the three-link chain after initial contact had been made, and subsequently offering the referred party the unconditional opportunity to decline to participate.

#### **4.3.4 Data Analysis**

With this research being interested in accessing meanings vested in policy, documents and interviews with strategic actors described above have been scrutinised with a systematic interpretive approach. I draw on a specific branch of IPA which has been particularly concerned with exploring narratives underlying policies. According to Yanow (2000: 57f) narratives operate “as conveyors of meaning [...] for the purposes of argument or claims-making” in the storytelling of policymakers and other actors involved in policymaking processes. I extracted narratives from my raw data through a process of coding and interpretive analytical steps.

As I outlined in the introduction, this thesis began from an identification of a paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England. This paradox was identified in the initial reading of documents (indexed above) related to the New Labour Skills Strategy for England. The first stage of coding therefore was to identify from within the documents instances of narrative associated with either demand-led or demand-leading strategies. In a second step, I then identified the different roles and functions that were ascribed to both employers and employees in both cases of strategy. Moving on to a third step in which these roles and functions were further refined to identify where strategy afforded either rights or responsibilities to workplace actors. Finally,

the process of coding documents identified the differential claims made about the role of the state, and the state in relation to the skills providers and types of provision in each strategy.

This nuanced mapping of the narratives and claims entailed in the policy documents was used to tease out the scaffold on which highly diverse meanings are built within policy, and lines of tension hence occur. This mapping informed the topic guide developed for interviews with elite actors (see appendix 1). For example, I built a section of the topic guide around the different rights and responsibilities of employers and employees in the strategy, which allowed interviewees to specify details and develop these themes of policy.

Following the interviews, transcript coding then began again from the top level, categorising narratives by instances of demand-led or demand-leading strategy context. In a second step, analysis then looked for the common and divergent themes (initially within actor groups) that were used to substantiate the parameters of the strategies, and the way in which relations between actors were ordered. Again commonly occurring themes included rights and responsibilities; roles and functions (including those ascribed to other actors); and wider contextualising factors actors drew on as forming the logic for strategy. This analysis exposed the highly diverse ways in which employers, employees and skill providers responded to and used policy narratives coming from the state, thus informing the way in which the empirical chapters of this thesis are presented.

#### ***4.4 Conclusion***

This chapter has outlined the methodological and analytical approach adopted in this thesis. The chapter began by outlining the ontological foundation and methodological commitment to interpretive policy analysis (IPA). It then detailed the research design, and research approach, starting with the mapping of the main actor groups for inclusion in the study, and then presented the approach taken in this study to documents and interviews as sources of data. The chapter then elaborated the research process, explaining the methods of sampling, data access, and data analysis

used in this study. Ethical issues and my role as a researcher were critically considered. The thesis now proceeds to present the findings and analysis of the research.

## 5. Constructing and Narrating the Logic for Skills: Progress in Partnership

### 5.1. Introduction

This thesis addresses the question how can the governance – ordering and organising – of skills policy under New Labour be explained and understood? To begin this task, the chapter that follows presents an in-depth interpretive analysis of the key policy documents (that formed the New Labour Skills Strategy for England – see Chapter 4, Table 4.1) and the interviews conducted with senior politicians and civil servants (see Chapter 4, Table 4.4), in order to detail how the narratives of policy-makers’ - up until completion of fieldwork in 2009 - sought to establish the ‘logic’ for skills and give meaning to a high(er) skills project in England<sup>35</sup> (SRQ1).

Drawing on the conceptual approach to policy analysis outlined in Chapter 3 that informs my interpretative methodology (developed in Chapter 4), this chapter will show how policy-makers sought to build the case for the New Labour Skills Strategy, and in doing so meaningfully defined the parameters of the strategy. As such, the chapter is concerned with identifying and analysing what Carmel & Papadopoulos (2003:32) term the ‘formal’ dimension of skills policy; ‘what is to be governed’. Specifically it is concerned, with identifying and exposing the role of semiosis (intersubjective meaning-making) in the construal and construction (Jessop, 2009) of the principles, priorities, purposes, and intended outcomes - associated with a particularly imagined economic and social ‘reality’ - that oriented the Skills Strategy and gave symbolic and substantive expression to what policy-makers were selectively and discursively seeking to bind and fix as the normative object of governance.

The chapter begins by detailing how policy-makers framed and narrated the ‘problem’ of complexity associated with a particular interpretation of dynamic production and employment uncertainty in a global post-Fordist knowledge-based economy - confirming the global ‘high skills’ rhetoric thesis discussed in Chapter 1 (Brown &

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<sup>35</sup> As I stated in the Introduction skills policy is a devolved issue, therefore many of the policy documents I refer to, and the discussions I had with policy-makers in the interviews conducted, relate only to England.

Lauder, 1996; Aston & Green, 1996; Brown, 1999; Brown & Lauder, 2001; Crouch et al, 2004; Gleeson & Keep, 2004) - and framed and narrated the 'solution' as skills-led 'flexibility' and 'adaptability' to perpetual change. This section concludes that high(er) skills were offered by policy-makers as a critical means of unblocking and unlocking 'progress' and betterment (see section 5.2).

The chapter then goes on, (in section 5.3), to explore how policy-makers framed and narrated skills as mediating and reconciling the interests and agendas of multiple actors, specifically: businesses; worker-citizens; and the state. This section first describes how skills were positioned as cohering national state-led economic and social agendas; as vital to delivering the ambitions for 'UK plc.' and 'UK social'. I argue that policy-makers constructed a fundamental interdependence between the economic and social gains from high(er) skills, associated primarily with the perceived relationship between 'better' more productive workers for business and 'better' more rewarding work for citizens, but also with a perceived synergy between 'skills for employment' and 'skills for life'. The section secondly exposes the ways in which policy-makers presented high(er) skills as a matter of both public and private concern. I identify policy-makers as 'speaking out' and 'speaking about' shared and coherent benefits; equivalising the aspirations of the state in the interest of the collective nation and the aspirations of individual business and worker-citizen. Finally, the section demonstrates how policy-makers presented the pursuit of high(er) skills as an issue of strong workplace consensus; particularly between 'enlightened' employers and 'motivated' worker-citizens. The section concludes by highlighting how coherence of multiple interests and agendas is used to justify a 'skills partnership' between government, representatives of business and representatives of worker-citizens.

The chapter ends with a discussion of the findings and analysis presented. In summary, the chapter argues that the logic for skills was based on mitigating complexity (associated with the uncertainties of the production and employment environment), and mediating coherence (between interests of multiple actors). This logic gave meaning to a skills project associated with 'progress in partnership'. The ways in which policy then orders, organises and acts – the 'operational dimension' or

“mode of doing policy” (Carmel & Papadopoulos, 2003:32) - in relation to imagined progress and partnership will be discussed in the subsequent two chapters.

## ***5.2 Narrating the logic for high(er) skills: the powerful discourse of complexity***

Speaking at the Guardian Further Education and Skills Summit (20-21 June, 2007), Bill Rammell MP - then Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education – opened his address with the following saying, to express the experience of economic survival in the global economy

*“Every morning in Africa a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning a lion wakes up. It knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death. It doesn't matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle. When the sun comes up you better start running.” (Anon)<sup>36</sup>*

This saying (and its apparent applicability in the setting in which it was delivered) succinctly captures what this section explains: the particular way in which policy-makers interpreted and articulated economic dynamism in order to give meaning to and ‘fix’ the selectively imagined - structured and bounded - *complex* environment of businesses and worker-citizens. Critical to this image of complexity is the depiction of production and employment competitiveness as exclusively associated with the skills-led ability to stay alive by running faster in the ‘knowledge-based’/knowledge-weaponised economy and ‘post-welfare’ society.

The narratives of policy-makers’ described the dynamic uncertainty experienced by businesses in both the domestic and global economy as associated with on-going technologically-driven innovations and advancements that continuously alter the basis of productivity, and therefore profitability. That uncertainty was framed in terms of ‘out pacing’ the competition, and excelling at the ‘cutting edge’ of perpetually changing and changeable conditions for economic success (the ‘high skills rhetoric’ –

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<sup>36</sup> Bill Rammell MP attributes his awareness of this saying to a Multinational Corporation (MNC) with a production facility in China, where, he claims, a copy of this saying is pinned up on the factory floor (Rammell, 2007).



see Chapter 1), created an imperative for businesses to pursue strategies reliant on more and better skills that enable greater 'flexibility' and 'adaptability' to progress.

Equally, worker-citizens were described as experiencing an uncertain labour market; the dynamism of which could best be navigated by attention to the development of more and better skills. For worker-citizens high(er) skills were presented as supporting employability in two regards. Firstly, by enabling them to adapt and innovate at the workplace thus contributing to the basis of business productivity and prosperity - in line with a particular and flawed reading of human capital theory (Avis, 1998; Coffield, 1999; Brown *et al*, 2001) the skills of worker-citizens were increasingly explained as driving the production and employment regime - and secondly by enabling them to adapt and align to alternative sources of employment should the business fail. In this way skills were seen to provide worker-citizens with employability security, which was deemed the most credible form of welfare. Again, the imperative was therefore to pursue more and better skills to enable greater 'flexibility' and 'adaptability' to progress.

What is significant about this 'flexibility and adaptability to progress' line of policy narrative, applied to both businesses and worker-citizens, is that it is incongruent with the explanations and predictions of both VoC (as a functionalist theory) and PRA (as an example of a broader theoretical approach I have termed 'the politics of skills') for skill governance in the UK/England (see Chapter 2). Although the VoC approach would expect and predict flexibility and adaptability skills (at higher and lower levels) as an outcome of skill governance in LMEs, we here see these terms given as the object of governance and objective of policy, and applied to a state narrative seeking to shape the economy/society. Although the PRA would expect and predict state work to shape either the aspiration/behaviour of businesses or worker-citizens, we should expect both more decisive and more partisan (non)intervention/regulation. Given the limitations of existing theories of skill governance to account for New Labour's high(er) skills project, this section will approach analysis from an alternative conceptual and methodological direction to explain policy logic as state work to produce intersubjective meanings.

## 5.2.1 Skills implications of a dynamic and complex business environment

### *Selecting and framing the problem: narrating the uncertain business environment*

Policy discourse depicted the increasing relevance of higher levels of skills in relation to an economic imaginary framed by two putatively existing and mutually reinforcing phenomena. Firstly, policy-makers' narratives sought to define and preference the (emerging) "*post-industrial knowledge-based economy*" (PM3), as requiring a production and employment regime distinct from 'industrial Fordism'. This selective and biased account of economic 'reality' was presented as initiated and accelerated by on-going technological advancements - considered to have created possibilities for new consumer products, (specialised and bespoke goods and services) and new production processes - and was perceived as the critical source of enhanced business profitability and competitiveness. Secondly, and related to the advancement of new production technologies and techniques, the UK economy was imagined as challenged by the experience of globalisation and processes of increasing global competition. Globalisation was (and is) a privileged policy paradigm; proclaimed as both unavoidable, (Watson & Hay, 2003) and as offering UK businesses potential opportunities for growth in new markets. However, these are opportunities which must be realised in circumstances of intense rivalry and uncertainty (Leitch, 2006:3; DIUS, 2008b:4).

Digitalisation, automation, outsourcing, and off-shoring, as well as falling transport costs, were presented as having disembedded business operations from geographic restrictions, and as extending the market for skills beyond national borders (PIU, 2001:22). In this context the arrival of the newly industrialising countries (NICs) - described as "*economic powerhouses*" (PM4) - as increasingly important players in the global economy, was considered to have positioned the advanced industrial countries (AICs) at a significant dual disadvantage. Not only were NICs depicted as able to offer cheaper options for those businesses 'regime shopping' on the basis of lowest production cost - a situation which was presented as effectively barring countries like the UK, and the businesses located there, from competing on the basis of low-skills and low-wages (DfES, 2003:11) - but they were also reported as simultaneously

seeking to shift their economic activity towards higher skilled, higher value-added production.

New Labour skills policy documents were littered with statistics highlighting the relationship between the economic productivity and skills performance of countries (see in particular HM Treasury, 2002; Leitch, 2005; Leitch, 2006): mostly presented in the form of league tables; talked about and operating as benchmarking devices; and further serving as forecasting models that contrasted the outcome of different future skills performance scenarios. Such as failure to plan ahead and win the next round or match in the skills game (PM4).

*“China will be the largest economy in the world by 2040; it will outstrip the United States in the size of its economy. Britain will slip back perhaps to 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> in the league table. [but] we’re not just simply going to be able to say well we will stand apart from the nations that produce widgets, we’re going to have to say those nations that produce widgets are going to create the wealth to develop their next stream of intellectual capital. Where do we fit in there; if we are struggling at one level, and we’ve given up the other?” (PM2)*

*“Without [a more highly-skilled workforce] businesses will become increasingly vulnerable to global competition, finding it difficult to take advantage of new markets and increasingly difficult to retain their current markets.” (Leitch, 2006:61)*

The overwhelming conclusion for the UK/England that these statistics presented was that failing to at least “catch up” and “keep pace” (PM4) with comparative skills levels would risk loss of pole position, and deteriorating potential in the high skills reliant product market and production strategies; the only strategies that remain viable. The disastrous consequences of failure to improve skills was strenuously and repeatedly stated by policy-makers as a “clear and present danger”, framing the “here and now” (PM3) of the renewed focus on skills.

*“In our rapidly-changing world, having a highly skilled workforce isn’t an optional extra; it’s an economic necessity.” (DIUS, 2007a:4)*

*“Without increased skills, we would condemn ourselves to a lingering decline in competitiveness, diminishing economic growth and a bleaker future for all. The case for action is compelling and urgent.” (Leitch, 2006:1)*

In short, UK businesses were described as operating in an economic environment characterised by an increase in the number of games in play and an increasing number of players in the games. Where the chances to play an advantage had been critically reduced to strategies dependent on higher skills (Brown, 2007). Past failings to improve skills levels were lamented, and the implications of a comparatively low baseline position utilised by policy-makers to underline the urgency to act in accordance with a new skills mission (Leitch, 2005:4; Leitch, 2006:10). No alternative was offered; the consequence of inaction, and the subsequent failure to excel in the unceasing “skills race” (Brown, 2008), presented as devastating.

### ***Selecting and framing the solution: skills as flexibility and adaptability to progress***

In order to fully exploit the potential and avoid the threats inherent to the imagined highly competitive global knowledge-based economy, businesses were described as needing to seek product innovation and productivity gains realised through the application of high(er) skilled individuals to technologically-advanced enterprise (Leitch, 2006:32). In particular, businesses were depicted as needing to develop and utilise higher skilled workers because they are better capable of not only implementing new processes and operating in a new production environment, but also have the ‘flexibility’ necessary to initiate innovative product market and production strategies and continuously ‘adapt’ to new value-adding technologies and techniques as they inevitably emerge (PIU, 2001:22; HM Treasury, 2002:2; Leitch, 2006:33; DIUS, 2007a:6).

*“Economic and industrial change increasingly demands a workforce that is flexible and adaptable. For business, retraining and redeploying employees to support more efficient and effective operations, and integrating new technologies, will be crucial to remaining competitive.” (PIU, 2001:56)*

The importance of flexibility and adaptability to change, not as an outcome of skill governance (Estevez-Abe *et al*, 2001; Hall & Soskice, 2001) but as the object of skill

governance, was a recurring theme in the way policy-makers narrated the logic for higher skills. Considered particularly critical as the pace of change that businesses were experiencing was described as unavoidably rapid, relentless (Strategy Unit, 2002:2; Leitch, 2006:52), and replete with uncertainty such that: *“no one can predict with any accuracy future occupational needs”* (Leitch, 2006:13). Given that the emergent conditions of economic success were presented as unpredictable and indefinite, businesses were depicted as operating in an environment in which the only concrete functional prerequisite for survival and prosperity that could be known was the capacity, via the skill-led flexibility and adaptability of the workforce, to expediently, and continuously seek out developments and advancements.

*“We need to look at where there is a perceived [skills] need. Not for an individual technology or an individual piece of research, because we don’t know where that’s going to come from, but in terms of how you actually apply your resources, and how you develop a workforce which is coming through to deliver on [...]the technologies which will sweep the world. We don’t know which ones will win. We don’t know which will be successful. (PM2)*

The implication was that in a context of uncertainty, businesses need for constant flexibility and adaptability could best be achieved with an approach to skills that was also constantly flexible and adaptable to the need to cope with perpetual change. By comparison, the alternative for businesses was again cast as beyond doubt. Attempting to continue with a low-skills operating base, and ignoring or undervaluing the need to utilise skills, was presented as exposing the business to certain stagnation and decay, and as the *“route to inevitable failure”* (PM3).

### **5.2.2 Skills implications of a dynamic labour market**

#### ***Selecting and framing the problem: narrating labour market uncertainty***

The depiction of a fundamental business requirement for more and better skills was presented as having obvious correspondingly significant implications for worker-citizens. Also, referencing putative changes and challenges in the imaginatively

narrated domestic and global economy, policy-makers interpreted and articulated labour market uncertainty in very particular ways. Ways which structured the nature and form of experienced complexity associated with securing employment and progressing in work.

Firstly – and in direct challenge to both VoC and PRA explanations and predictions of skill governance in England - low skills levels were rendered highly problematic in the narratives of policy-makers. Policy documents presented data indicating growth in the numbers of managerial, professional, and associate professional occupations, and a relative decline in elementary or routine manual occupations, as evidence of the inexorable shift towards an increased share of higher skilled work in the economy (DIUS, 2007:24). Additionally, in direct contrast to evidence of overqualification in the UK labour market (for example, Fauth & Brinkley, 2006); the Leitch Review (2006:5) claimed significant increases in the level of skill required within employment even in lower skilled occupations. For example, by drawing on the argument that skills, such as being 'computer literate', which were previously considered 'specialist' or 'technical', were now considered necessary basic competencies.

Given the way in which policy portrayed the trajectory of change to the basis of competitiveness in the domestic and global economy, the requirement for more and more intermediate and higher level skills was presented as likely to continue and intensify (PIU, 2001:22). The Leitch Review (2006:13) claimed that throughout the economy skill demand was increasing, and that evidence suggests more and more jobs were requiring intermediate and graduate level qualifications (Leitch, 2005:5). Such changes were analysed as further exacerbating the employment security difficulties faced by individuals with lower, increasingly redundant levels of skills (Leitch, 2006:61). Raising levels of skills attainment was offered as the only available way of protecting against the looming spectre of certain low-skills related unemployment, as successive policy statements continually battled to out-bid each other in warning of the ever growing magnitude of the problem.

*“Leitch identified that currently we’ve got roughly five million people who are employed in basically un-skilled activities, and that by 2020 we might need half a million. I mean that was his comparison and indeed I suspect we might even need less than that.” (PM2)*

It was, however, not just the unskilled or very low-skilled for whom employment security and progression was presented as becoming more problematic. In general policy depicted the nature of the labour market within which individual worker-citizens must function as being in an almost permanent state of flux, with technological advancements likely to entirely erode certain occupations. Again, worker-citizens were presented as only able to mitigate the uncertainty and instability of this ‘reality’ through unwavering dedication to the on-going advancement of their skills (HM Treasury, 2002:21) in order to stay useful in a dynamic economy (Leitch, 2005:5).

### ***Selecting and framing the solution: skills as flexibility and adaptability to progress***

Putative employment volatility was used to discredit as ‘out-dated’ the concept of “a job for life” (DfES, 2003:11) – rearticulated as associated with stagnating in low skills stasis and eventual redundancy - and introduce the: “new ambition of ‘employability for life’” (DfES, 2005a:1) associated with exponentially ambitious aspirations in the labour market. The need to be mindful of lifelong progressive employability was presented as vital in a dynamic economy. A sentiment inculcated through policy statements that placed a new requirement on worker-citizens to be: “autonomous, self-motivated learners” (PIU, 2001:56), who are: “willing to train” (Leitch, 2006:61), and who recognise the need to perpetually pursue advancement at work, and in their careers, through continuous education and training, and the attainment of higher level skills.

*“You’ve got to get a situation whereby people actually feel that: ‘yeah I do want to progress. I don’t want to be in this job all my life. I realise that a robot could do this and I ought to be doing something else’. And I just think that that’s going to happen. I think people are already waking up to the fact that there are no jobs for life anywhere now, you know.” (PM2)*

In particular, the specific employability benefits of skills-led 'flexibility' and 'adaptability' to change (again the object rather than the outcome of skill governance) were explained by one policy-maker (PM1) in two distinct respects. Firstly, skills were presented as providing the employee with the capacity to innovate in the workplace. For policy-makers 'innovation' at the workplace fitted with the framing of how complexity was experienced as related to uncertainty, and mediated via attention to ambitions for progress. Employees that had the skills, and are therefore able to: "*adjust to economic change*" (HM Treasury, 2002:21), contribute to the development, advancement, and therefore on-going success of the business, were depicted as simultaneously securing the continuation of their employment as useful and usable workers. Such an interpretation of the role and function of skills as a coping strategy – remade from a 'concern' to an 'opportunity' (PM1)- in the context of uncertainty, was offered as a positive preference to antagonistic less discerning mechanisms that fallaciously attempted to blockade change and insecurity in the labour market rather than supporting employees to adapt to it.

*"The major area of concern, or opportunity – opportunity to succeed and grow in the business – for the individual is, in fact, to make sure that they are constantly up-skilled. So they're skilled to come in but over a five year period those skills become, or can become, redundant if they're not constantly up-skilled. So there are two ways that unions deal with that. One is obviously fighting the job losses in lots of different ways and including negotiating for redundancy. But my view was that if we started ahead of the businesses having redundant skills and as a consequence having redundant people, if we started with the skills stuff..." (PM1)*

This sentiment was echoed in the Leitch Review (2006:31) where skills were depicted as not only the primary means to improve an individual's probability of securing employment, but also as one of the principle mechanisms for enabling business growth, and therefore maintaining and creating employment opportunities.

Secondly, skills were presented as an insurance against the inevitable employment hardships and insecurities faced by vulnerable individuals unfortunate enough to find themselves employed in stagnating low-skills work organisations, which fail to keep pace with the necessity for change. In situations of 'poor' employment – "*the low-skills,*



*low-pay trap*" (DfES, 2005a) - or business failure and unemployment - "*the low pay/no pay trap*" (PIU, 2001:7) - the individual could, through flexible skills enhancement, enable themselves to conform to the requirements of future and better employment elsewhere (DfES, 2003:20).

Indeed, in general skills were constructed as the principle mechanism by which an individual could be empowered to mediate the uncertainties of a dynamic labour market, and continuously reposition themselves in relation to 'good', more secure, and advantageous employment opportunities.

*"Unless people are equipped with flexible skills [...] they will not be able to move into growth industries and take new opportunities." (Leitch, 2006:61)*

*"In the new century, improving and updating skills is the best way to help people make the most of change." (Leitch, 2006:27)*

*"There may always be job losses but you and I have got more skills now than we had before, so we can go somewhere else and say 'actually I can walk in tomorrow and I could do this, that, and the other, for you'. I mean they're all transferable skills; you know skills are very transferable aren't they." (PM1)*

What comes across in all of the presentation above is that the transferability or portability potential of skills (between workplace roles, and between workplaces) was considered critical to contemporary policy interpretations of the role of education and training in securing population welfare in changed and changeable employment circumstances. In other words, skills-led adaptability and flexibility was the object rather than the outcome of skill governance. Alternative means of protecting worker-citizens from the insecurity of changes to the basis of competitiveness in the labour market were repeatedly present as anachronistic, and lambasted for having masked the seriousness of skills shortages amongst current and potential employees. Past governments were chastised for misguidedly interpreting their welfare role as: "protecting people from change" (Leitch, 2006:31), rather than preparing people for it – supporting their capability to find new employment and remain employable through skills-led flexibility and adaptability.

*“In the old days the problem may have been employment, but in the next decade it will be employability. If in the old days lack of jobs demanded priority action, in the new world it is lack of skills. And that means our whole approach to welfare must move on.”*  
(Forward by Gordon Brown - DWP, 2008:2)

In clearly distinguishing the past from the present and future the experience of change was reinterpreted; no longer a threat but an opportunity. Preference for stability ('job for life') became synonymous with a reckless disregard for declining employability and obsolescence, given the discursive framing of imagined realities associated with the dynamic nature of work. Again, it was this particular depiction of an uncertain, changeable and complex labour market that determined the logic for progressive, higher levels of skills, and discredited any alternative.

### **5.2.3 Skills as progress**

*“He who stops being better, stops being good.”*  
(Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England 1653-58 cited in PIU, 2001:17)

In summary, the particular discursive framing of heightened global competition coupled with rapid and constant change to the basis of production and employment prosperity, presents businesses and worker-citizens as operating in conditions of extreme uncertainty. This depiction of uncertainty was articulated as irrefutably actually existing, and as unable to be ignored. As such it offered a specific and highly bounded way of construing and constructing complexity, which gave meaning to and fixed the logic for continuously seeking more and better, higher levels of skills as a primary imperative. For businesses high(er) skills were depicted as enabling flexibility and adaptability to progress in the context of dynamic economic conditions, and therefore the ability to remain competitive and profitable. For worker-citizens high(er) skills were depicted as enabling flexibility and adaptability to progress in the context of a dynamic labour market, and therefore the ability to remain competitive and employable.

By linking skills to the flexibility and adaptability to cope with complexity, they were given a generative, alchemical property and quality in policy discourse. Valued in terms of the 'good' things they unlock, unblock and make possible, rather than given a specific known quality or application. Indeed, beyond offering the necessary flexibility and adaptability to change, skills tended to be described by policy-makers in substantively hollow terms. Policy documents made reference to unacceptably low levels of basic skills - specifically literacy, numeracy and ICT skills, as well as 'broad employability skills' (Leitch, 2006:6) - a general requirement to develop more intermediate and higher level skills (PIU, 2001:22; Leitch, 2006), and the need to tackle weaknesses in leadership and management such that businesses and worker-citizens could be able to identify the skills they are lacking and effectively utilise what skills they have more effectively (PIU, 2001:34; Leitch, 2006:89). However, these broad stipulations were not offered as an exhaustive list of priorities, but indicated a general logic of onward and upward progression from any given base point, towards ever more ambitious aspirations to ensure productivity and better wages in highly competitive economic conditions (Leitch, 2006:28). In general skills were described as 'anything' and 'everything' performative of transformative aspirations for progress and betterment (PM3).

*"Skills are not an end in themselves, but a means towards supporting successful businesses and organisation" (DfES, 2003:21)*

*[Skills are:] "Sort of everything really; it's anything that helps you function effectively" (PM3)*

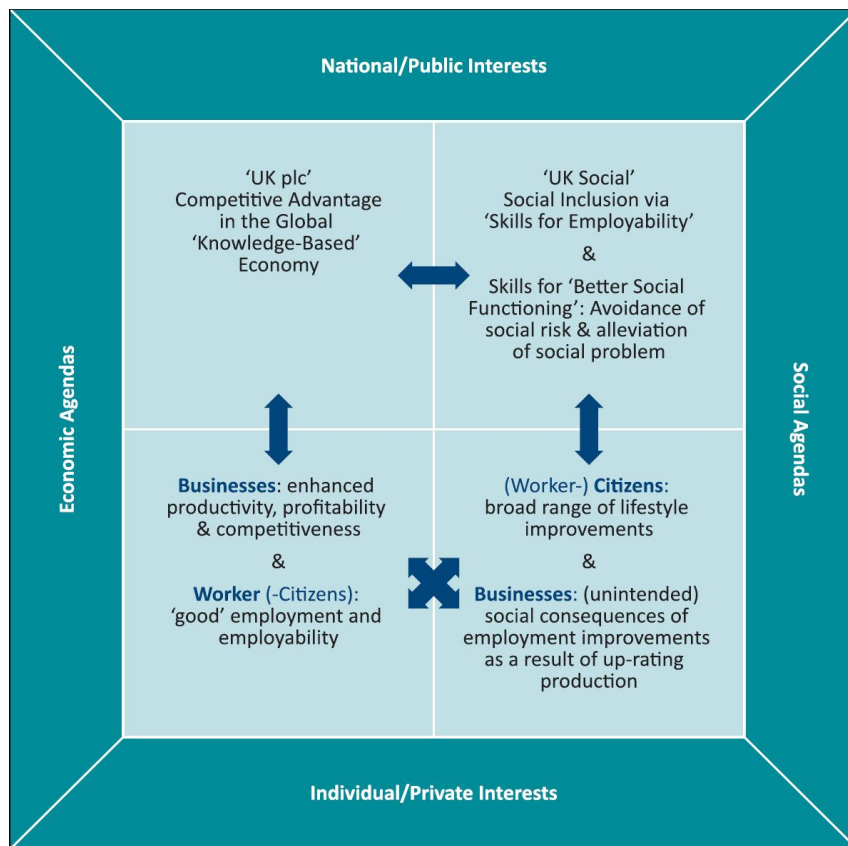
This image of 'skills-as-progress' was particularly powerfully expressed in relation to employees. Critically linked to the capability of worker-citizens to positively participate in the labour market and add value in the workplace. Also, therefore, as the principle source of their security in a post-welfare society, and most importantly as associated with the means of capturing the personal development and life improvement opportunities that better market compatibility was perceived to offer (DfES, 2005a:18).

*"[Skills are] activities which increase the capacity of individuals to participate effectively in the workplace, thereby improving their productivity and employability" (PIU, 2001:6).*

*"Skills mean equipping people with the wherewithal, if you like, to do something more than I currently do. So they're skilling me to do it. So they open up the opportunity. Skills are giving somebody the ability, the wherewithal, to do something at a greater level than the one they currently work at, no matter what it is really [...] But that is what it means. It means I can do this today, but if I have the opportunity to have some training or whatever... " (PM1)*

In short, policy-makers constructed a logic for high(er) skills based on the problem of uncertainty-based complexity, only able to be mitigated with skills-based adaptability and flexibility, and used this logic to present skills as the means of progress.

**Figure 5.1: Mapping the Discourses of High(er) Skills Coherence**



*Source: author's analysis, compilation and design*

### **5.3 Narrating the logic for high(er) skills: The powerful discourse of coherence**

Having presented how policy-makers interpreted and articulated uncertainty as structuring the complexities faced by businesses and worker-citizens, and narrated a logic for more and better skills in mitigating this complexity, this section explores how policy-makers imagined high(er) skills as able to cohere economic and social agendas and reconcile the interests and ambitions of multiple actors. Policy-makers described high(er) skills as fusing state-led economic and social ambitions for the nation; as cohering and realising public/collective interests of the state, and the private/individual interests of businesses and worker-citizens; and as able to reconcile private interests at the site of the workplace. These many and intricately interconnected discourses of coherence are mapped in Figure 5.1, before being examined more fully below.

### 5.3.1 Reconciling economy and society: skills for 'UK plc.' and 'UK social'

*"This is not only an economic challenge. It is just as much a social one" (DfES, 2003:18)*

The issue that the UK/England faces with regard to the unacceptably low skills levels of many working people – specifically: "the gap between the skills-rich and the skills-poor" (DfES, 2003:7) - was presented by policy-makers as equally inhibiting both economic prosperity, and particular social justice aspirations, associated with achieving social inclusion through participation in (paid) work, and reducing (low income related) deprivation.

*"The economy will not maximise its long term growth potential, and UK society cannot be inclusive, if over a third of the workforce have few or no skills and qualifications." (HM Treasury, 2002:37 emphasis added)*

*"Skills is the most important lever within our control to create wealth and to reduce social deprivation" (Leitch, 2006:2 emphasis added)*

*"Supporting training for low-skilled adults is an important way of reducing social exclusion as well as promoting productivity" (HM Treasury, 2002:14 emphasis added)*

At the core of interdependence between the economic and the social agendas was a particular interpretation of the function of high(er) level (flexible and adaptable) 'skills for progress' as mediating imaginatively selected and framed complexities associated with production and employment uncertainty. However, this framing of high(er) skills as able to cohere progressive production and employment aspirations was further grounded in a general (party) political belief in economic and social interdependence (DfES, 2003:11). An interdependence that is expressed in the New Labour ideological hybrid of a 'Third Way' that claimed to combine the egalitarian focus of social democracy with economic liberalism (Blair, 1998; Giddens, 2000), and that ultimately framed the pursuit of 'fairness' as supporting the chances of all to enhance their market compatibility. As such, the coherence of more and better skills was perceived to be substantiated and realised in the virtuous, circular and symbiotic production of economically better, more productive workers for business, and socially better, more

rewarding work and working prospects for individual worker-citizens; work that amply remunerates recommodification.

*“We seek a fairer society which ensures that every individual [...] is helped to realise their own capacity for learning, and raise their quality of life. We also seek a dynamic economy where our national and regional productivity is enhanced through high-skilled, well-rewarded employees working in companies committed to long term investment and leading the world in their business sectors.” (DfES, 2005a:1)*

*“We’ve still got quite a large cohort of our population that have got no qualifications at all, and therefore if we’re going to compete they need the skills. [...] But the second part of that – the same story but in two parts – is to ensure people have social mobility to ensure they are employed and included in our society; the best way to do that is through education and skills. So there is a social inclusion agenda and a social mobility agenda going hand in hand with an economic agenda, because if we can get one right we get the other one right and that is the goal behind this Government.” (PM4)*

*“From this Government’s point of view skills is about lifting everybody. So businesses but also [the individual] gets lifted up as well, and that’s the social agenda isn’t it? (PM1)*

As is suggested in all of the above policy statements, ‘lifting up individuals’ was typically explained in terms of degrees of social inclusion predicted by employment status. more specifically, the social benefits of education and training were framed as not only determined by the ‘exclusion’ of unemployment vs. the ‘inclusion’ of employment, but also as determined by: ‘good’ vs. ‘poor’ work; ‘developmental’ vs. ‘dead-end’ work; ‘secure’ vs. ‘insecure’ work; aggregated and summarised as ‘skilled’ vs. ‘unskilled’ work<sup>37</sup>.

*“Social inclusion is about quality of work and prospects for the future as well as employment. Those with basic skills problems, or skills levels below level 2, usually*

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<sup>37</sup> The point here is that unemployment is presented as the principle factor in social exclusion; however work is not perceived entirely uncritically as the source of social inclusion. Early policy documents in particular explicitly distinguish between ‘any’ employment, and ‘quality’ employment with a degree of security and prospects for future progression (see PIU, 2001:19-20). This distinction was clear in the interviews with policy-makers and remains - albeit somewhat less pronounced but implied - through the later policy documents (see for example Leitch, 2006:36).

*receive lower wages and have little prospect of achieving progression to higher incomes and more rewarding work” (HM Treasury, 2002:14)*

As a consequence of trapping people in ‘poor’ employment and/or (periodic) unemployment, skills deficiencies were explicitly presented as responsible for, or exacerbating, a myriad of low income related social risks and social problems, such as (child/intergenerational) poverty and deprivation; health inequalities; and crime (DÆS, 2003:18; Leitch, 2005:6; Leitch, 2006:60; DIUS, 2007a:25). However, the narrative of economic and social coherence was even more nuanced than simply describing the social prosperity outcomes of better employees for better employment. Policy-makers also appealed to the logic of conceptualising ‘skills for employment’, and ‘skills for a more rewarding life’ as synonymous.

*“A lot of the issues that come up with skills - particularly if you talk to Unionlearn, to the TUC, or anything – is that they shouldn’t just be vocational related, that learning for life opportunities should be in there and everything, and there is a lot of agreement between us on that. But for me [...] as you progress you’re acquiring skills [...] and actually aspects of your personal life change as well. [...] So it is developing individuals as well as making them, if you like, more equipped, or better equipped to do their jobs.”(PM1)*

Specifically, policy-makers presented those better skilled for the dynamic economy as explicitly better parents and as generally better able to: “function effectively in society” (PM3) - offering a particular depiction of functioning as more independently able, and less socially risky individuals, families and communities - in society.

*“Now to me this is what the social mobility agenda is about: we want them to get the skills - get the qualification – and earn the money and then that comes back in their families. That’s also about the second generation. Those children who are brought up in households who can’t read don’t read much themselves; those households who are now learning to read, or can read, will have more books, they do better at schools, and we break into the cycle of deprivation with that. Therefore I can’t split the policy one from the other because it has such an impact on people’s own family lives as well as the impact at work.” (PM4)*



*"I actually think that in social terms there is no doubt about the correlation between having higher order skills and health; what happens to your kids; where you live; what sort of lifestyle you have; the range of activities that are open to you." (PM2)*

By articulating the coherence between skills-dependent 'good' employment potential and the broader social benefits of skills, policy-makers forged, and sought to embed, a powerfully coherent economic and social logic for overcoming the problem of low-skills. Arguments that the attention of the skills strategy was asymmetrically focused on the needs of the economy – 'UK plc.' - could be diverted back to the social ramifications of unemployment or 'poor' employment and the wider lifestyle benefits of better skills; and could thus be closed down and discredited by an analysis of the role of skills in the expansive pursuit of a 'better society' (DfES, 2003:17) – 'UK social'.

*"Gaining new skills and qualifications, learning and training are – alongside finding work – the most powerful ways individuals can transform their life chances and those of their families." (DIUS, 2007a:19).*

*"It's really the impact skills have, or can have, on disadvantaged groups as much as anything else [...] on the basis that if you are in work you are more likely to feel part of, and aligned to, your community and to society as a whole really." (PM3)*

*"When people are better educated and better trained, they have the chance to earn more and use their talents to the full, both in and out of work. They are better able to use their skills for the benefit of their families and their communities." (DfES, 2003:18)*

As a consequence the economic argument for skills was further reinforced and given renewed credence. Policy-makers legitimised the need to drive skills for employment forward because employment was intricately entwined with securing social benefits (social justice as social inclusion) and reducing individual, familial and intergenerational social risks.

*"It's much more exciting driving the economy forward if you believe in employment – and I do believe in employment, I think it is good for people for all sorts of other reasons – I think that becomes a really, really exciting agenda. You know, rather than saying well*

*we'll leave unemployment to these guys, and we'll leave business to these guys, it's actually pulling those together."* (PM2)

*"The Skills Strategy itself, for me, is very much woven around social justice and how it meets with business"* (PM1)

Indeed, policy-makers presented as anachronistic and problematic the previous, seemingly disinterested, disaggregation of economic and social agendas (HM Treasury, 2002:14); instead articulating their role in fusing the governance of the economic and social within a synergistic policy focus on skills. This coherence-based logic was again presented as having no alternative and skills were repeatedly described as: *"increasingly the key lever [for achieving] world class prosperity and fairness"* (Leitch, 2006:52, emphasis added).

*"A strong focus on economic impact does not come at the expense of social inclusion and equality of opportunity the two reinforce one another."* (DfES, 2006:30)

*"I think we are genuinely starting to see all these strands come together. I think traditionally they've all operated in separate silos, and there has been this belief that a process of osmosis occurs whereby if you build up this silo then it pollinates the next silo. I think what Government is looking at, at the moment, is actually plugging things together so that economic policy, skills policy and social policy are all one and the same."* (PM2)

Such a presentation and political positioning of the New Labour high(er) skills project fundamentally challenges straightforward distinctions between types of partisan states in the politics of governing skills, (Chapter 2).

### **5.3.2 Reconciling public and private interests: the 'I' in 'team'**

Alongside presenting high(er) skills as cohering national economic and social agendas, policy-makers also presented high(er) skills as realising the collective ambitions of the nation and the individual ambitions of businesses and worker-citizens. Policy narratives shifted seamlessly between, and in doing so sought to render synonymous, the

aspirations of the state and the public/national (economic and social) interest in skills; and the private skills aspirations of business, interested in enhanced productivity and profitability, and individual worker-citizens, interested in improved employability and a better life.

*“Investing in talent is one of the most powerful things we can do to ensure that our nation’s employers and our economy as a whole can compete in the global age, and to help us build a society where everyone has the opportunity to rise as far as their talents will take them, to improve their lives and those of their families.” (Forward by John Denham – DIUS, 2008b:4)*

*“Skills are central to achieving our national goals of prosperity and fairness. They are an essential contributor to a successful, wealth creating economy. They help businesses become more productive and profitable. They help individuals achieve their ambitions for themselves, their families and their communities.” (DfES, 2005a:5)*

*“Improving skills will help individuals to improve their employability, progress in their careers, and secure better wages. It will help employers to secure increased productivity and profitability for their businesses. It will help us to reduce unemployment, tackle child poverty and improve social mobility. And it will help to reduce crime, improve health outcomes, and improve civic and community participation.” (DIUS, 2007a:8)*

The synergy between economic and social, public and private, skills interests was expressed in the narratives of policy-makers’ in two ways. Firstly, policy language ‘spoke out’ to businesses and worker-citizens about the critical importance of their higher skills strategies for the economic and social success of the nation (UK plc. & UK Social – see Figure 5.1); promoting the equivalence of skills for the public/collective ‘we’ and the private/individual ‘you’.

*“Helping businesses boost their profitability and improving our productivity so we are fit to compete successfully with China, India and other emerging economies, and can make full use of the opportunities presented by these markets.” (DfES, 2005a:1 emphasis added)*

*“The skills of our people are a vital national asset. Skills help business achieve the productivity and profitability needed to compete [...] they help individuals raise their employability and achieve their ambitions for themselves, their families and their communities” (DfES, 2003:7)*

Policy-makers established and built the case for a relationship between public and private skills interests by constructing a logic that explained the condition of the national economy and society as determined by the sum of better skills prospects for individual businesses and worker-citizens. Policy-makers’ statements repeatedly juxtaposed private and public outcomes of skills; emphasising both the stultifying consequences of low skills, and the invigorating potential of high skills, for economic success at the level of the individual business and worker-citizen and at the level of the nation.

*“Having large numbers of people in the workforce with low skills levels limits the prospects of individuals and firms as well as negatively affecting national productivity and increasing wage inequality. It is estimated that the UK economy loses as much as £10 billion a year due to basic skills problems in the workforce.” (HM Treasury, 2002:7)*

*“Better skills mean better productivity and higher incomes for all. A workforce with the right blend of skills helps create and sustain vibrant and successful businesses – the bedrock of national economic success.” (Forward by Tony Blair - Strategy Unit, 2002:2)*

Secondly, policy-makers described – ‘spoke about’ - actually existing, explicitly shared, skills-dependent aims, objectives and benefits, which were being pursued by government for the sustained economic and social security and prosperity of the nation, and by businesses and worker-citizens in accordance with their own private rational ambitions.

*“Benefits will be shared. Businesses will gain a more productive workforce and larger pool of skilled labour. Individuals will gain better job and pay prospects. Society will be both more prosperous and fairer.” (Leitch, 2006:70)*

*"We all want a more prosperous and inclusive country. That can only be achieved by a partnership of government, employers and employees." (Forward by Tony Blair, Strategy Unit, 2002:3)*

To support the contention of shared public and private benefits policy-makers explained the organised interests of businesses and workers as also recognising the significant and mutually beneficial implications of high(er) skills, (at least of overcoming the problem of low skills). Indeed, in the foreword to his final report, Sandy Leitch presented the outcome of his consultation with 'key stakeholders' as explicitly highlighting this collective agreement, stating: *"there is consensus that we need to be much more ambitious and a clear message that the UK must 'raise its game'."* (Leitch, 2006:1). Policy-makers referenced the importance of the strong contribution to policy made by the social partners; specifically the CBI and the TUC. Policy documents described a: *"coalition of support"*, which had worked with Government to: *"achieve a national unity of purpose"* associated with the critical economic and social relevance of skills (DfES, 2005a:2).

*"Government, employers, trade unions and others have been concerned for well over a century about the decline in relative UK economic performance compared with other industrial countries; and about the social consequences of a workforce with low skills levels." (PIU, 2001:11)*

*"The CBI and the TUC have jointly acknowledged the importance of dealing with basic skills deficiencies in the workforce." (HM Treasury, 2002:9)*

In short, the national economy was imagined and described as needing businesses and worker-citizens to enhance their productivity and employability via skills, and individual businesses and worker-citizens were imagined and described as internalising the need for more and better skills at higher levels, and as pursuing such strategies in their own rational interest.

### 5.3.3 Reconciling workplace interests: an age of enlightened consensus

As well as delivering shared public and private benefits, policy-makers presented skills as an issue of workplace consensus; as able to reconcile and cohere the private rational interests of the business and the worker-citizen interacting in the employment relationship. Given that high(er) skills were defined in terms of their potential to enable progress and betterment, policy-makers presented the interdependence of more and better skills at the site of the workplace as predicated on the mutual needs of 'enlightened' business for a useful and usable worker, capable of applying their skills and knowledge to raise productivity and therefore competitiveness on an on-going basis (DIUS, 2007a:6); and the needs of 'motivated' worker-citizens for a means of attaining their personal goals associated with ambitious and on-going employability, as the requirements of employment and their employer changes (DCSF, 2007).

*"The nature of jobs will continue to evolve in response to economic, technological and social change. For many people, the re-training, up-skilling and qualifications that will best help them meet their personal goals will also meet the needs of their employers, because there is a shared benefit from higher skills generating higher productivity at work." (DfES, 2005a:17)*

*"If you increase people's skills they therefore become more productive and therefore you increase first of all their ability to get employment, but also to enhance the company's productivity and therefore profitability." (PM2)*

*"I think the aim is to have successful businesses, and in having successful businesses you have successful employees as one needs to happen for the other to happen as well." (PM1)*

This narrative offers a micro analysis of the function of skills in cohering national economic and social aspirations. As the last comment particularly highlights, what was being explicitly constructed and explained was the symbiotic relationship between the shared interests of successful businesses and successful people; enlightened about, and motivated by, the progressive potential of skills. A potentially virtuous circle

initiated by the rational progressive skills needs of businesses and worker-citizens, which delivers mutually beneficial outcomes and is therefore in everybody's interest (PM1).

*"I think there's a common view, I think now there is a very robust view, that this [skills] is a really good way of doing stuff." (PM1)*

In articulating this image of coherence the discourses of policy-makers fused business and worker-citizens aspirations when describing how the role of skills in mitigating putative complexity is understood and experienced. Ostensibly the logic policy-makers communicated was one that equalised desire and responsibility to skill and utilise skills; a message that was presented as reflecting needs and rational predispositions. In essence policy-makers described high(er) skills as able to support and help build the potential for better, more 'enlightened' workplace relations.

*"[Improving skills will support] "creating new workplace partnerships between employers, trade unions and employees, and improving employment relations through better skilled and motivated staff contributing to higher performing companies and organisations." (DfES, 2005a:1)*

#### **5.3.4 Skills as Partnership**

In summary, policy-makers constructed the logic for a high(er) skills project around the powerful discourse of high(er) skills as cohering multiple interests and agendas. Specifically policy-makers narrated the potential for high(er) skills to serve the: interdependent economic and social betterment ambitions of the nation; public and private aspirations for prosperity; and the mutual interests of employer and employees for better functioning, more successful workplaces. By linking skills to coherence between, and consensus of interests and agendas, they are given a collective and partnership quality in policy discourse. Indeed, the ways in which policy-makers articulated and positioned the logic for high(er) skills in relation to coherence and consensus created the discursive foundations for legitimising particular actors and actions in the governing of high(er) skills. Specifically, policy-makers called for a 'skills

partnership' between government, businesses and worker-citizens (PIU, 2001; DfES, 2003; DfES, 2005; Leitch, 2006). Based on the perception and articulation of: *"shared interests"* (PM1; also PM3; Leitch, 2006:14); *"joint endeavour"* (DfES, 2005a:25); and: *"common action"* (Leitch, 2006:17).

In policy-makers narratives', a skills partnership between government, businesses and worker-citizens was considered both highly beneficial (PIU, 2001:60) for all, and absolutely intrinsic to the longer-term success of the high(er) skills project. Recalling the 'problem' of complexity (section 5.2) – specifically the uncertainty and unpredictability of the pace of economic and employment change – policy-makers reiterated the inability of governments to act alone in determining and dictating the skills that will be progressive and transformative, from the top down.

*"This exciting agenda cannot be delivered top down or by Government alone. It will require a strong partnership in every area between the key public agencies, employers of all sizes in the private, public and voluntary sectors, schools, colleges, universities and training providers, trade unions and individuals, whether in work or seeking employment."* (DfES, 2005a:3)

*"Government cannot do this alone. We need to build a new Skills Alliance, where every employer, every employee and every citizen plays their part."* (DfES, 2003:18)

In short, policy-makers constructed a logic for high(er) skills based on the possibility of coherence between multiple interests and agendas only able to be mediated through high(er) skills, and used this logic to present skills as in everybody's interest and therefore as an issue of partnership.

#### **5.4 Discussion and Concluding Reflections**

This chapter has presented an interpretive analysis of how policy-makers' narratives (during the New Labour administration, and up until completion of fieldwork in 2009), sought to build the case for the New Labour Skills Strategy for England, and in doing so established a logic for skills (formal dimension of skills policy), that gave meaning to, and sought to fix, 'progress in partnership' as the normative object of governance



(‘what is to be governed’). Specifically, the chapter has established how policy-makers sought to construct and narrate the logic for high(er) skills based on:

- o Progress as a means to mitigate insecurities of economic and social complexity associated with dynamic uncertainty
- o Partnership as a means to cohere multiple interests and agendas (economic and social, public and private, and workplace interests)

This section will discuss the implications of these findings for theories of skill governance. It will highlight how these findings expose the limitations of both the VoC and PRA perspective, as unable to account for and explain the role of semiosis in state work and skill governance under New Labour. It will conclude by confirming the usefulness of a CPE-informed conceptual approach to theorising intersubjective meaning making as state work.

Firstly, this chapter has shown that policy-makers’ narratives depicted high(er) skills as the means by which businesses and worker-citizens were able to position themselves in ways which successfully managed and mitigated the complexities of production and employment uncertainty and change. This uncertainty and change was narrated as associated with the terms of supposed post-Fordist knowledge-based production; an ultra-competitive global economy; and a post-welfare (workfare) society that can no longer offer assurances of employment security (Brown & Lauder, 1996; Brown & Lauder, 2001; Jessop, 2002; Jessop, 2004; Crouch *et al*, 2004; Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Cerny, 2010a). In the context of this strategically selected economic and social imaginary – indeed as a causal effect of the meaningful practices and processes of (re)making of economic and social reality in this way (Jessop; 2004; Jessop, 2008) – higher skills were forcefully proselytised as the route to the necessary flexibility and adaptability to change, but beyond that insubstantially defined. Indeed, in policy-makers’ narratives high(er) skills were largely depicted as unable to be centrally determined; having meaning only as whatever would enable businesses and worker-citizens the flexibility and adaptability to cope with dynamism - keep pace’ and ‘excel’ in the: “*knowledge wars*” (Brown *et al*, 2008:4) - and achieve progressive betterment capacity and capability.

The two key points that therefore came across throughout the presentation of this logic for high(er) skills were: firstly, that the flexibility and adaptability potential of skills, (between workplace roles and between workplaces), was considered critical to policy interpretations of the role of education and training in securing on-going business and worker-citizen prosperity, in changed and changeable production and employment circumstances; and secondly, that businesses and worker-citizens were best placed, at any given time, to know precisely what skills would achieve this secured prosperity. This leads to a situation where high(er) skills for flexibility and adaptability to change are to be governed through policy (demand-leading), but where determining what constitutes the high(er) skills for flexibility and adaptability is a private (workplace or individual business/worker-citizen) decision (demand-led).

In seeking to account for and explain this identified logic of skill policy - more and better flexible and adaptable skills, to be determined privately and specified from within the workplace - it is necessary to appraise the findings of this chapter in relation to the perspective of established theories of skill governance (in UK/England), reviewed in Chapter 2. As was discussed in Chapter 2 (and section 5.2 above), the flexibility and adaptability (portability) function of skills is presumed in LMEs as an outcome of institutional complementarities that determine the generic skill preferences of businesses and worker-citizens. However, here we see skill portability as actively pursued by policy-makers in relation to the flexibility and adaptability to cope with product market and labour market complexity, and therefore as an object of governance and intended objective of policy. Given meaning in relation to the way that uncertainty is framed; depicted as inevitable; and imagined as able to be mitigated.

The main challenge that can therefore be put to the VoC approach to explaining skill governance is that it overlooks the role of a seemingly interested state, operating beyond the remit of liberal arbiter, seeking to discursively regulate – bind, fix and reproduce (Jessop, 2009) - the logic and case for high(er) skills in relation to a particular selected macro-economic and social imaginary (global knowledge-based economy, and post-welfare society). A discursive regulation that seeks to set the parameters of the conversation about skills in policy and political debate more widely. In addition we find this seemingly interested state to be specifying high(er) skills-led

flexibility and adaptability for the particular purpose of distinctly defined notion of 'progressive betterment'; economically better (more productive) workers for businesses, and socially better (more rewarding) work for worker-citizens. As such discursive regulation appears as an attempt at semiotic market-shaping in line with Schumpeterian competition logic and a post-welfare concern with the recommodified insertion of all into the better functioning parts of the labour market (Jessop, 2002; Cerny, 2010a). An attempt to forge intersubjective meaning, such that the market would manage itself in relation to the high(er) skills project and dislodge the terms of low skills equilibrium.

Secondly, the chapter has shown that high(er) skills were depicted as the means by which multiple interests and agendas could be brought into a shared partnership for high(er) skills, (to dislodge the low skills equilibrium on the basis of consensus), and cohered. Again, in seeking to account for and explain this identified logic of skill policy by appraising the findings in relation to the perspectives of established theories of skill governance, we find the VoC approach (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Estevez-Abe *et al*, 2001; Thelen, 2004) to explaining skill governance in LMEs (such as the UK/England) has no means to conceptualise the role of the state in seeking to discursively forge alliances; particularly where those alliances fall well short of institutionalising credible commitments. Furthermore, the politics of skill approaches (Chapter 2, and section 5.2 above), in particular the PRA, are no better able to account for a state operating in more complex relation to partisan interests. By assuming the state to operate as an overt power resource for a given set of interests – as a site and outcome of class struggle (Aston & Green, 1996) - again obscures state work as meaning making to construct and (re)produce the terms under which to bring divergent interests into some form of unstable alignment. A key finding of this chapter has been to show how New Labour policy narratives constructed, as reconcilable, the better market compatibility of employees as in the social, public and private interest of worker-citizens, and the social inclusion and social mobility of worker-citizens, and the associated wider lifestyle benefits, as in the economic, public and private interest of business.

In conclusion, by adopting an ontological (as well as methodological) commitment to CPE-informed interpretive analysis – taking meanings and meaning-making seriously, and highlighting the integral relationship between meaning and practice (Jessop, 2004) – this chapter has offered an alternative theoretical approach to the analysis of the formal dimension (what was to be governed) of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England (Carmel & Papadopoulos, 2003). Firstly, the chapter has highlighted the power of selected economic and social imaginaries as productive of meaning. What Jessop (2008:20) refers to as the: *“performative force of the policy paradigm”*. It has shown how discourses of complexity and coherence in relation to the high(er) skills project were narrated manifestations of the *“logics of possibility and limitation”* (Brown, 1999; also Ball, 2007) associated with an imagined and selected global knowledge-based economy and post-welfare society. Secondly the chapter has shown how the solution of progress in partnership – in response to the selected macro-economic imaginary - was narrated by policy-makers in the attempt to (re)produce intersubjective meanings, subjectivities and subject positions (of businesses and worker-citizens) associated with the economic and social imperatives of high(er) skills. In other words, the chapter has shown intersubjective meaning making and meaning (re)production through articulation and narrative as state work; as governing.

Having established how New Labour established the logic for and gave meaning to a higher skills project in England, the thesis now turns to consider the second of three empirical sub-questions, and addresses the relationship between how the logic for skills was constructed and narrated, and the associated way in which ‘doing skills’ is imagined and done

## **6. Governing Workplaces I: The Multiple Strategies for Skills**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter identified and analysed the logics - established in policy-makers' narratives - which gave meaning to, and built a case for, skills as a vehicle of progress in response to a particularly imagined complex world, and as able to reconcile and cohere the interests, (public/national and private/individual), of the state, businesses, and worker-citizens, within a skills partnership. The chapter therefore addressed the first of the empirical sub-questions (SRQ1) of this thesis – 'how did New Labour establish the logic for, and give meaning to, a high(er) skills project in England' - and presented how policy-makers imagined and narrated the principles, priorities, purposes, and intended outcomes ('what was to be governed') of the New Labour Skills Strategy as 'progress in partnership'.

Building on this analysis the thesis is further concerned with the relationship between how the logic for high(er) skills is narrated by policy-makers, the 'formal dimension' of policy (Chapter 5); and the associated ways in which 'doing skills' is imagined and done, the 'operational' dimension of policy (Carmel & Papadopoulos, 2003:32). I have organised the analysis of the operational dimension of skills policy into two closely linked chapters (this chapter and the next) that together offer an interpretative analysis of New Labour Skills Strategy for England, drawing on key policy documents and interviews with policy-makers- politicians and senior civil servants (see Chapter 4). Together they address the second empirical sub-question (SRQ2) of this thesis: 'how was the logic for a high(er) skills project used to order and organise skills policy in England?'

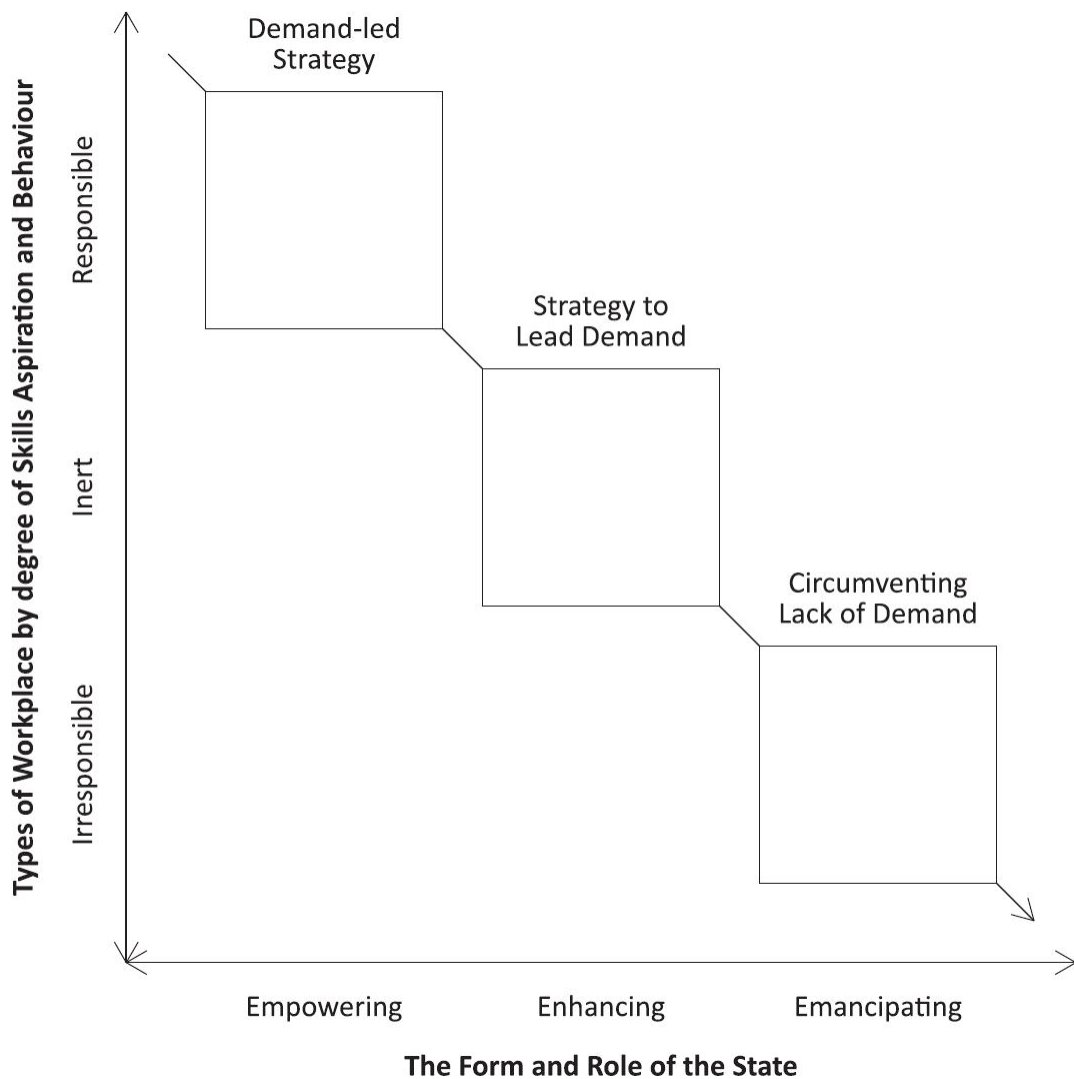
The chapters argue that the operational dimension of skills policy (doing skills under New Labour) involved articulating and assembling: imagined workplace skills actors; the relations between them at the site of the workplace; the form and role of the state; and the organisational arrangements, resources, practices, and processes for skills delivery, into distinct architectures of skill (workplace) governance. I borrow the

concepts of 'articulation' and 'assemblage' from Newman & Clarke (2009a:8-9) and use them to draw attention to state work (Chapter 3) as discursively and materially mobilising meanings, practices and processes, that construct, categorise and position workplace skills actors (businesses and worker-citizens), and seeks to govern them accordingly. This constructing, categorising and positioning of workplace skills actors is based on their imagined degree of responsible skill aspiration and behaviour in relation to the high(er) skills logic of progress in partnership.

The first of the two chapters (this chapter) presents the articulation and assemblage of a skills strategy in relation to a positively imagined: 'responsible workplace'; encountering an 'empowering state'; and a 'demand-led system' for skills. The second (Chapter 7) presents the articulation and assemblage of two further skills strategies in relation to: two versions of negatively imagined 'inert' or 'irresponsible' workplaces; encountering an 'enhancing' or 'exhorting/emancipating' state; and therefore either a 'system to lead demand' for skills, or a 'system to mitigate and circumvent lack of demand'. In summary, taken together the chapters find that within what is framed as a "*coherent approach*" to high(er) skills (Foreword by Tony Blair – PIU, 2001:3), policy-makers' narratives construct and classify three distinct skills strategies for England, by workplace actor skill aspiration and behaviour and therefore proximity to the high(er) skills logic.

Figure 6.1 below provides an outline of these three strategies within a framework that shows how they align with imagined workplaces and different forms and roles of the state. The aim and purpose of the two chapters that follow is to populate this outline with the details of state work in skills policy under New Labour. A populated outline that summarises the two chapters is shown in Figure 7.3. The chapters conclude with a discussion of, and reflection on, the analysis of findings presented.

**Figure 6.1: Three Skills Strategies for England**



Source: author’s analysis, compilation and design

***A note on coherence as opacity: paradox revisited***

Before detailing the first of the three skills strategies - the ‘demand-led strategy’ – it is important to note that distinguishing and explicating these three strategies for governing skills (the presentation that follows) represents the interpretive analytical contribution of this thesis. These three strategies coexist and are muddled in policy. Recalling the paradox that frames this study – a ‘demand-led’ strategy for skills; wherein *demand is to be led by the state*; in the *context of voluntarism* – remembers that contradictory discourses of demand-led or demand-leading/demand-

emancipating skills were entangled and collapsed in New Labour's policy statements, for example:

*"Change must focus on raising the demand for [training and skills]<sup>38</sup> from both employers and individuals, through the development of a demand-led system based on empowering individuals and employees to increase their demand for [training and skills]." (PIU, 2001:5)*

The identification here of three discrete strategies does not seek to correct for contradiction and the incoherence of a supposedly intended 'coherent approach'. Rather it serves to illuminate the cause of contradiction as ambiguity; the blurring of lines between strategies, resulting in the opacity of policy meanings, practices and processes. This is an important factor in understanding the exposure of policy to contestation and reinterpretation, and the implications for skills delivery. This will be returned to at the end of Chapter 7 and is the focus of Chapter 8.

## ***6.2 Responsible Workplaces: an Empowering State and Demand-led Strategy***

This chapter presents the first of three New Labour skills strategies for England, based on a policy imaginary of 'responsible workplaces' within which 'enlightened' employers and 'motivated' employees were seen to demonstrate reciprocal progressive skills aspirations and behaviours in partnership. In other words, this imaginary of responsible workplaces follows directly from the way policy-makers discursively construed and constructed the logic for skills as a shared 'partnership' concern, in pursuit of sought after progress in the context of complexity. As a consequence policy-makers presented an 'empowering' role for the state. Enabling these responsible workplace skills aspirations to be realised by remaking skills delivery to adapt and respond to employer (and employee) voice and choice, as partner-customers in the 'demand-led' system.

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<sup>38</sup> The report uses the term 'workforce development' (WfD) rather than skills, but defines WfD as "a relatively new term for training and skills development. It sits between training (which has a narrow focus) and education (which is broad), and is firmly grounded in business need" (PIU, 2001:3)



## 6.2.1 Constructing and Positioning the Responsible Workplace Skills Partnership

Policy-makers' narratives imagined and described employers and employees, interacting at the site of the workplace, that recognised the challenges and opportunities inherent to the complexity of the production and employment environment as requiring attention to progressive skills aspirations and behaviours.

### ***Constructing the Enlightened Business: a responsible and willing partner in skills***

As discussed in the previous chapter, uncertainty and change was utilised by policy-makers to construct a particular depiction of complexity. Specifically, that the possibility of economic success is exclusively dependent on the ability of businesses to initiate high(er) skills strategies in light of increasing global competition, and continuously seek out and capitalise on future unknown innovations as a consequence of fostering skills-led flexibility and adaptability to change. In imagining 'enlightened' businesses, this putatively apparent operating reality was presented by policy-makers in personalised language which both spoke *to* and *for* (on behalf of) these inherent interests. In other words, the complexity of the productive environment was narrated by policy-makers as experienced by businesses, and as galvanising their want and willingness to train and utilise the skills-led flexibility and adaptability of their employees as the means to survive, bolster their competitiveness, and augment their profitability and long-term prosperity.

*"Change is happening very fast [...] Modern businesses know that to survive they must adapt. And to adapt they need a flexible and skilled workforce." (Foreword by Tony Blair – Strategy Unit, 2002:2)*

*"As an employer, you recognise that developing your workforce and making best use of their skills can increase your productivity and competitiveness." (UKCES, 2008a:3)*

*"Successful employers see up-skilling and re-skilling of the workforce as one of the most powerful things they can do to drive their business forward" (Foreword by John Denham – DIUS, 2008b:4)*

As a consequence of perceiving businesses as cognisant of the challenges and opportunities inherent to the complexity of their operating environment, policy-makers were able to construct and present a rationally self-interested, and responsible, businesses case for investing in skills development. Businesses, even those traditionally considered unlikely to train, were repeatedly explained as realising and actively demonstrating their desire to enhance skills (even of lower skilled employees) because of the numerous benefits – all boiling down to improved productivity and profitability in a dynamic economy - that they perceive to extend from having a more capable and useful workforce.

*“Many employers in England are already engaging in [...] training their low-skilled employees, because they recognise the long term benefits from providing this training.”  
(Leitch, 2006:93)*

*“You look at McDonalds as a really good case; ten years ago the idea that this was a graduate opportunity to go into McDonalds - you would have been laughed at. You look at the big supermarket chains; Tesco have a whole range of NVQ qualifications right through which take people up. They actually have seen that investing in the skills they keep them [employees] for a start. You know they don't do it out of altruism, they do it because it makes good business sense: they're better with their customers; they're better with their products; there's less wastage; and all the rest of it. I think that catches on. I think that is catching on.” (PM2)*

In essence the desire and pressure for more and better skills was explicitly described as emerging not from government alone but bottom-up from the productive economy (Denham, 2007); from business leaders who were actively engaged in skills development, had existing employee training aims and strategies, and who were setting an increasingly contagious and pervasive example within the business community. These imagined 'enlightened' businesses, at whom the Skills Strategy was aimed, were described in unequivocally different terms from businesses of the past. These businesses were neither indifferent to, nor sceptical of, the benefits of skills. They were not prepared to leave skills development to chance, or rely on reactive and remiss poaching strategies. In short, policy-makers presented the skills interests of enlightened businesses as wholly compatible with their own. Enlightened businesses

were narrated as recognising their share in the potential benefits and were, as such, imagined as invested, responsible and unequivocally necessary partners, alongside the state, in the skills vision and mission. Indeed, the perspective of policy-makers was that *“it would be insane to do it without them really”* (PM3).

*“I think we’ve past that stage where employers say ‘oh I don’t want my staffed trained’, you know, ‘I’ll go and head hunt from somewhere else if I want a skilled person’. I think most employers really do see that it’s their responsibility to help us here.”* (PM4)

### ***Constructing the Motivated Worker-Citizen: a responsible and willing partner in skills***

Policy narratives also explicitly described worker-citizens as experiencing the difficulties of remaining competitive in the modern labour market. As discussed in the previous chapter policy-makers presented the notion of a ‘job for life’ as anachronistic, and drew on constant uncertainty and change to reframe employment risk management, security and prosperity, as emanating from skills-dependent progressive employability. By linking employment security and prosperity to progressive employability, on-going high(er) skills attainment was also credited as the principle means of unblocking and unlocking life chances and lifestyle betterment for individual worker-citizens, their families and wider communities, throughout the life course.

Again, in imagining ‘motivated’ worker-citizens as cognisant of this putatively apparent reality policy was framed in language which spoke both *to* and *for* (on behalf of) their inherent interests. In other words, the complexity of the employment environment, and the impact of employment on living standards, was narrated by policy-makers as recognised by worker-citizens, and translated into a personal want and willingness to train and utilise their skills to increase their long-term employability-dependent welfare and well-being.

*“At the personal level, lack of skills and qualifications hold many adults back from realising their potential. Many are looking for a better job, a better standard of living, and more fulfilling lives. They know that the right skills could help them get there.”* (DfES, 2005a:6)

*“Most people I meet, whether they are 16 or 60, acknowledge that taking a course could improve their prospects.” (Foreword by John Denham – DIUS, 2008a:3)*

Specifically, individual worker-citizens were depicted as predominantly economic actors, that recognise the interdependence of ‘skills for employment’ and ‘skills for a more rewarding life’, and sought to realise the benefits of training and qualifications as prosperity gains, associated with attaining the skills necessary to underwrite diverse current and future employability advancement potential.

*“The learner side is very interesting because most people who walk into an FE college for instance, if you talk to them, to learners or to prospective learners, they’re either looking for something for social interest – that’s the evening class student and the rest of it – but often beneath that, if you go beneath that, they have got a glint that they want to change their profession, you know they want to be in a different profession at some time. So that’s one group, but then the main people who come during the daytime – the full-time young person or the full-time adult – what they want is the qualification at the end of it so that they can go and get a good job. So in a way they are the easiest of our stakeholders because they’re on the same wave length as the policy. They actually want that qualification to go and get a good job because they want to improve their lives.” (PM4)*

Again, by portraying such an image of worker-citizens policy-makers were able to insist that the drive for more and better skills emanates from the bottom-up; from responsible, motivated and ambitious individuals actively pursuing training and learning opportunities (Denham, 2007). As a consequence worker-citizens were also conceptualised as on the same page as policy. Interests (public and private) were compatible, benefits shared, and worker-citizens were understood to be willing and active partners, alongside the state, in the skills vision and mission.

### ***Positioning relationships between skills actors: the Responsible Workplace***

In describing images of actually existing bottom-up desire for more and better skills from ‘enlightened’ business and ‘motivated’ worker-citizens, policy-makers presented skills enhancement in these responsible workplaces as an issue of strong consensus

around the mutual aspiration to “raise our game” (Leitch, 2006:1). Taken together at the site of the imagined responsible workplace, employers and employees were conceptualised and narrated as allies. Both were willing and active partners. Both were convinced by the case for skills and had compatible interests in up-skilling; even if their drivers (profitability or employability) for engagement were different (see Chapter 5, section 5.3.3).

*“There is pressure from employers to meet their training needs, particularly for the high level skills the economy now demands. There is also pressure from individuals who want to move into or on at work.” (Denham, 2007:2)*

Indeed, policy-makers’ narratives further imagined this responsible workplace skills alliance to run deeper; cementing the coherence of attainment and application of skills in the mutual concern that both employers and employees had for each other’s aspirations and ambitions. Employees were described as having an intrinsic interest in the success of the business in which they work, and employers were described as having an (at least second-order) interest in the prosperity of their workers; even of society at large.

*“They [employees] want to improve their skills to improve their lives: if they improve their lives they’ll get better wages; that company will do better; it’s a [pause] that is part of it.” (PM4)*

*“Well employers are more [pause]. I was going to say more interested in the economic agenda but actually there are many who are interested in the social inclusion agenda, either personally or because they know if society is more affluent then they will sell more of their products. So they themselves have a dual agenda. [...] Those employers are very keen that their employees do training, and they are qualified.” (PM4)*

## **6.2.2 The ‘empowering’ role of the state**

In describing skills enhancement as an issue of partnership consensus, and the benefits as mutual and shared, policy-makers presented enlightened businesses and motivated

worker-citizens, interacting at the site of the responsible workplace, as necessarily predisposed to act in the national/public economic and social interest in relation to skills, as a consequence of pursuing their own end goal of progress and betterment. Subsequently, policy-makers' narratives presented themselves as having a public obligation, and political mandate, to act in the private interest in relation to skills and support the actually existing progressive ambitions of businesses and worker-citizens.

*"It is in the interest of the UK government to have successful businesses. People often wonder why businesses should be supported by government but actually if you look at the GDP, and look at everything else, there is an interdependence that goes on there. Okay businesses make money for shareholders and all the rest of it, but actually the country gains tremendously."(PM1)*

*"I think [skills] is good politics. This is doing the nation - i.e. people who work in business, business itself, and as a result of that the communities that they operate in - this is doing the right thing, taking the right track." (PM1)*

However, by defining skill as the manoeuvrability to cope with the putative complexity of a dynamic business environment and labour market (as discussed in the previous chapter), policy-makers rendered incompatible attempts, particularly by the state and its agents, to *a priori* prescribe and fix either the knowledge, capabilities and competencies that were required, or the production and employment strategies to which they should be applied. In the analysis of policy-makers, just as the progressive skills demands of enlightened businesses and motivated worker-citizens were for skills that enable flexibility and adaptability to successfully respond to uncertainty and rapid change, what constitutes skill and being skilled, and subsequently the training and learning opportunities available, must equally be flexible and adaptable to rapidly changing demand in response to an uncertain world (PIU, 2001:57). In short, attempts to centrally plan skills needs and impose a top-down agenda for production and employment success were presented by policy-makers as inherently problematic (DfES, 2005a:3).

*"There is a massive problem in forecasting the future and politicians would be anxious to say this is not about picking winners" (PM3)*

Instead policy-makers described their strategic role as *“getting on for tactically neutral”* (PM3), and policy narratives afforded a privileged status to the skills decisions and actions of enlightened businesses and motivated worker-citizens. They were positioned as *“best placed to know what the future demands”* (PM1); the specific knowledges, capabilities and competencies that were needed in light of changing production and employment requirements, and that would therefore constitute the realisation of collective economically and socially valuable ambitions. Furthermore, their investment as partners in a shared and vitally important skills vision was deemed only to be secured by ensuring that they were empowered to steer the skills project and product in accordance with their own interests, motivations, and ambitions (Leitch, 2006:48).

*“The UK will not reap the benefits from a world class skills base [...] unless the skills delivered are the ones employers and individuals need and businesses want, and know how to use effectively in the workplace. Similarly employers will not invest further in skills unless they can see the benefits that such an investment will bring and how they might use new skills.”* (Leitch, 2006:89)

*“For people to consider improving their skills, they need to be aware of and motivated by the benefits of doing so. They must see a link between skills development and achieving their own personal ambitions, such as improving their career, or being able to help their children with their homework”* (Leitch, 2006:106)

*“Addressing the national skills challenge will be far more effective if individual employers and learners make it their own agenda, which they pursue energetically because it helps them achieve their own goals and ambitions.”* (DfES, 2005a:25)

As a consequence of presenting a case for both trust in the consensus of privately held aspirations at the site of the responsible workplace, and the inability of governments, and its delivery agents, to prescribe need, policy-makers carved out space for, and legitimised, their intervention in both promoting the skills interests and empowering the skills decisions of private actors (DIUS, 2007a:44); facilitating a responsible workplace-led partnership for high(er) skills. Leitch (2006:48) identified the role of

government in *“empowering people and employers to make the right training decisions for themselves.”*

*“The government’s intention in introducing the Skills Strategy was to empower people at the workplace; I mean empower businesses, but in empowering businesses empower their employees.” (PM1)*

The depiction of an ‘empowering’ role for the state to meet mutually responsible aspirations, had corresponding and significant implications for the way in which the institutional arrangements for skilling were considered best organised in order to capture and respond to the actually existing and mutually progressive demands of businesses and worker-citizens (PIU, 2001:57).

### **6.2.3 Imagining and structuring the skills delivery architecture: a demand-led system**

#### ***Overcoming the problems of the supply-led system:***

Having established the basis for a policy logic that extends from ‘empowering’ the aspirations of imagined skills responsible workplaces, policy-makers presented a highly critical analysis of the hitherto ‘supply-led’ system. The supply-led system was explained as a fallacious attempt to centrally determine and plan skills – to *“predict and provide”* (Leitch, 2006:48) - and, as such, was considered to have resoundingly failed to meet the need for economically and socially valuable and valued skills and qualifications. Specifically, policy-makers’ narratives discredited the supply-led system as susceptible to degenerating into a mechanism that privileges and responds to the beliefs and interests of misguided politicians, focused blindly on qualification attainment figures rather than relevance and quality.

*“We’ve been so interested in what I call ‘process rather than product’ that we’ve failed to recognise that simply letting people drop off the end of the conveyor belt with a particular qualification has not in fact enhanced our nation in terms of its competitiveness. What it’s done is to satisfy politicians who’ve said: ‘well we’ve achieved that’.” (PM2)*



Consequently, the focus on 'process' in the supply-led system was further criticised for creating conditions, and enabling them to remain unchecked, in which funding bodies and providers understood their role, and benefited accordingly, from filling and completing courses regardless of their utility for businesses and worker-citizens; becoming an inherently venal and self-serving system. The usual stereotypes of unscrupulous colleges receiving funding for persuading unwitting learners to sign up for "*NVQ level 2 egg painting*" and the like (PM3), were dusted off and rehearsed to make the argument that the skills required to meet progressive workplace aspirations were not for funding bodies and delivery agents to define and determine, and anyway an education and training system characterised by unchecked supplier privilege was unlikely to induce incentives for them to do so (Leitch, 2006:111).

Having identified a 'mismatch' between the skill needs and wants of businesses and worker-citizens, and the types of courses and modes of delivery typically offered by publically-funded providers in a supply-led model (DfES, 2003:19), policy-makers' narratives described employers and employees as: manipulated by providers; frustrated about the lack of applicability of training and qualifications; concerned about quality; and put off by ossified, bureaucratic delivery arrangements that hampered accessibility (PM1; PM3; PM4; Strategy Unit, 2002; Leitch, 2006). In addition, a self-serving system, in which producers benefited from selling quantity, was considered to have led to an unwieldy plethora and complex variety of skills and qualification products<sup>39</sup> (Leitch, 2006:71).

As a consequence employers and employees were considered to have become alienated from engagement with publically-funded training and learning<sup>40</sup>, and the supply-led system was further criticised for creating barriers to employer and employee involvement and investment in up-skilling (Leitch, 2006:48) despite their enlightened and motivated aspirations. To overcome the problems inherent to the supply-led system policy-makers proposed new, as well as restructured and reorganised institutions of skills delivery that realigned the focus of the skills product on meeting the demands of businesses and worker-citizens as partner-customers.

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<sup>39</sup> Leitch (2006:80) reports that there are in excess of 22,636 qualifications in the UK.

<sup>40</sup> Leitch (2006:12) reports that less than 10% of employer training is conducted in further education colleges.

*“For too long skills development has been based on what is provided, not what is needed. I believe that for Government to deliver improvements, public services have to be rebuilt around the needs of customers.” (Foreword by Tony Blair - Strategy Unit, 2002:2)*

### ***Making customers: voice and choice in the responsive demand-led system***

In contrast to the *“predict and provide”* (Leitch, 2006:48) supply-led system of the past, policy-makers proposed a ‘demand-led’ approach – able to *“adapt and respond”* (Leitch, 2006:69) - which they claimed would be able to foster the conditions necessary to treat imagined enlightened businesses and motivated worker-citizens as ‘customers’ of the skills system (DfES, 2003:35; DIUS, 2007a:11). Putting them, and their needs, in the *“driving seat”* in terms of determining service delivery priorities (DfES, 2006:35; DfES, 2005a:11).

*“The Government’s job is to ensure that the skills system delivers what employers need – high quality, responsive training that helps employers to improve their businesses and employees to improve their lives.” (DIUS, 2007b:2)*

*“What all our reforms have in common is that they are trying to put the customer – in this case, adult learners and employers – first. We call this our ‘demand-led’ approach.” (DIUS, 2007a:7)*

Central to the conceptualisation of a demand-led system, that remakes businesses and worker-citizens as empowered partner-customers, were policy discourses and practices (operationalised mechanisms) of ‘voice and choice’ (DfES, 2005a:3).

### ***Raising voices: routes to responsive skills***

Throughout the progression of the New Labour Skills Strategy, policy-makers’ narratives consistently placed considerable emphasis on the intention to give employers and employees a *“strong and coherent voice”* (Leitch, 2006:17) to better articulate their demands. In particular, policy-makers talked about the need to *“strengthen the employer voice”* (Leitch, 2006:71; DIUS, 2007a:36) by enhancing their leadership role and influence over the organisations that made up the institutional

architecture, and specific skills policies and practices (DUIS, 2007a:36; DIUS, 2008b:9). The term 'demand-led' was therefore often, but not exclusively, used synonymously with 'employer-led'; as policy-makers reiterated the imagery they had shaped of consensus and alliance between the skills interests of businesses and worker-citizens. Specifically, policy-makers described a circular logic that explained productivity benefits for employers as a precondition and pre-emptive of employment benefits for employees, whilst retaining the potential to treat worker-citizens as customers of skills in their own right.

Organisations and partnership alliances responsible for aspects of skills delivery were established or remodelled (as an institutional ramification of imagined 'responsible workplaces') with a specific remit to be the voice of business, communicate their needs, and raise their influence over the system. In particular the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) - proposed in the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) and established in April 2008 to "*champion the development of an effective and more demand-led skills and employment system across the UK*" (UKCES, 2009a:6) – was described as being able to act in this capacity as a consequence of being 'employer-led' (UKCES, 2010:5)<sup>41</sup>. In practice policy-makers attempted to give the term 'employer-led' meaning through the prescription of organisational governance arrangements. Such as: the appointment of an 'eminent business leader' as chair; employer representation and active participation on the board; and the direct involvement of the Director General of the CBI and General Secretary of the TUC (Leitch, 2006:18). As well as by giving the UKCES a remit and requirement to generally build strong relationships with

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<sup>41</sup> Prior to the implementation of the recommendations of the Leitch Review of Skills, employer and employee representatives were involved in overseeing skills strategy design and implementation in England via membership on high-level strategic groups such as the 'Skills Alliance' - a Ministerially-led group consisting of senior representation of Government departments, delivery agencies such as the major skills funding bodies and Jobcentre Plus, representatives of providers, as well as key external organisations, particularly the CBI, TUC and NIACE (Leitch, 2006:73). In addition employers held a skills advisory role as participants in the 'Skills for Business Network' (SfB), led by the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA), originally responsible for establishing, overseeing and (re) licensing Sector Skills Councils, and the National Employment Panel (NEP) and its local coalitions (Leitch, 2006:73). The Leitch Review of Skills (2006) recommended the dissolution of these mechanisms of employer involvement in favour of the establishment of a new national employer-led Commission for Employment and Skills. The UKCES was originally created by the merger of the SSDA and the NEP, and is ostensibly the re-manifestation and (remains the) current locus of the Skills Alliance.

employers and Trade Unions (DIUS, 2007a:39; UKCES, 2009a:6)<sup>42</sup> in order to act as a credible and relevant voice of the skills partners (UKCES, 2009a:6).

Equally the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs)<sup>43</sup> were set up with the role to *“build a skills system that is driven by employer demand”* (UKCES, 2008a:4). They were also required to be led by employers (DfES, 2006:39), and as such were intended to function as *“a major new voice for employers and employees in each major sector of the economy”* (DfES, 2003:14). Like the UKCES, SSCs were considered to be ‘employer-led’, and therefore able to carry out their remit to articulate the skills demands of employers in their sector as a consequence of having business representation involved in their organisational governance; ensuring that employers could direct their work and have ‘confidence’ in SSC leadership (UKCES, 2008b:7). Indeed, for policy-makers the critical test for any SSCs - upon which its very continuation was dependent (UKCES, 2008a:5) - was its ability to *“command powerful support from its industry”* (UKCES, 2008b:13).<sup>44</sup>

*“The most fundamental test of each SSC will be whether it carries the confidence and support of its industry.” (UKCES, 2008a:5)*

*“The big, big thing for them [SSCs] is employer engagement. If they don’t get employer engagement then their Sector Skills Council doesn’t work. You know you can have all the best ideas in the world but unless it’s employer driven...” (PM1)*

Indeed all organisations within the institutional framework of skills delivery - both those newly established under the auspices of the New Labour Skills Strategy, and those that pre-existed this policy era - were (re)described as having an explicit purpose and remit to be led by employer voice that articulates the aspirations and demands of

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<sup>42</sup> On its current website the UKCES describes itself as a “social partnership, led by Commissioners from large and small employers, trade unions and the voluntary sector.” (UKCES, 2011)

<sup>43</sup> SSCs were established to replace the 73 former National Training Organisations. They were introduced in phases and initially licensed from 2003 to 2006. At the time of conducting fieldwork there were 25 SSCs, however, following the relicensing process that commenced in 2008 this number has since been rationalised to 22. According to the UKCES (2008a:13; 2011) and the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils (ASSC) the network has achieved approximately 90% coverage of workforce activity across the UK economy.

<sup>44</sup> SSCs have gone through periodic relicensing, which has involved audit and inspection of their functions undertaken by the UKCES with involvement from the National Audit Office. The 2008-2009 relicensing process principally focused on the degree to which the SSCs had achieved ‘employer engagement’.

businesses and worker-citizens. Along with the UKCES and SSCs, policy-makers' narratives first tasked the LSC to reconceptualise its role in order to better capture the voice of business and relinquish its previous responsibility for planning skills supply (Leitch, 2006:76; DIUS, 2007a:49); and later proposed the replacement of the LSC with a new Skills Funding Agency more explicitly focused on overseeing a system more able to respond to demand by ensuring a funding mechanism that follows the purchasing choices of 'customers' (DCSF & DIUS, 2008:11)<sup>45</sup>.

Equally skills providers were described as having a core requirement to engage with, and enhance their understanding of, employers' workforce skills needs, and (re)focus their activity accordingly.

*"We will expect the colleges, universities and training providers that supply education and training to be increasingly responsive to what learners and employers actually want." (DIUS, 2007a:7)*

Following the Foster Review into the future role of Further Education (FE) Colleges (Foster, 2005), policy-makers gave employers the authority to propose and sponsor National Skills Academies to lead networks of specialist providers in developing and delivering training and learning for their sector (DfES, 2006:26). These Academies were also explicitly described as employer-led. As one policy-maker explained, the principle aim was to reposition all the elements of the skills delivery infrastructure around the same purpose – to capture, listen to, and respond to the demands of their customer.

*"If you look at the Sector Skills Councils, which are the main partners in putting all this together, it is very much in their interest to make sure that both the employer – because it's employer-led – is on board, but also the employees, and the Sector Skills Councils all work with the Trade Unions to try and keep that relationship on board. Then obviously LSC and providers, and now there are a number of manufacturing academies and stuff like that, so all of them have the same remit; they're all there for a purpose; from the nuts and bolts of it they all have just exactly the same purpose." (PM1)*

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<sup>45</sup> The LSC was officially abolished and replaced with the Skills Funding Agency on 1 April 2010. At the time of proposing the establishment of the new Skills Funding Agency the decision was described by policy-makers as underscoring a further move towards a more responsive and flexible demand-led system facilitated by an agency more explicitly focused on funding rather than planning skills provision.

The dominant rationale presented for organising institutions around enhanced customer voice was to create a system that was directed by, and responsive to, the articulated need for economically and socially valuable and valued skills and qualifications; ensuring that these needs, rather than the self-interest of providers, drove the design and delivery of provision (PIU, 2001:8; DfES, 2006:6). Again, policy discourses tended to preference the influence of employers; privileging their right to determine the skills and qualifications that are needed, and how they should be delivered (DfES, 2003:21), for both business productivity and associated worker-citizen employability. Again policy-makers validated the privileging of employer skills decisions as simultaneously the best means to ensure valuable training and learning for worker-citizens, by imagining employers as acting in ways that secured improved productivity and competitiveness that were inherently and entirely compatible with improving employability prospects. As such, although the actual policy mechanisms proposed offered more limited avenues by which the voice of worker-citizens could directly influence the design and delivery of skills products, policy-makers were able to imagine and narrate an employer-led system as, in practice, responding to employee needs and securing their confidence in the training and learning outputs. For example, policy narratives spoke of SCCs as needing to function as a

*"[...]strong mechanism to ensure that employers, sector by sector, can shape the training provided by the system, helping also to ensure a continued focus on what will be of most value to learners" (DfES, 2006:22).*

*"The Sector Skills Councils have got a job to do in making sure that all the qualifications we're offering are fit for purpose, and then it makes the life of the college and the provider much easier because they know that those qualifications that they get funding for have got the credibility with employers, and therefore when the learner comes along they are feeling very confident because they know if they've got this NVO in construction, or in plumbing, or in childcare, the industry thinks it's a really good qualification, so therefore you get this buoyancy of confidence being built up" (PM4)*

Specifically, a number of tools and mechanisms were established in policy with the intention of operationalising the vital influence of employers over the design and delivery of skills and qualifications. SSCs were charged to work with employers to

develop Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs) with businesses in their 'footprint'<sup>46</sup>. The SSAs were described by policy-makers as a means of setting out the skills priorities of the sector and establishing a Sector Qualification Strategy (SQS) that reflected the qualifications employers, and therefore employees, find valuable (Leitch, 2006:74; DfES, 2006:22).

Policy-makers' narratives described the outcome of increasing employer voice and influence over curriculum and qualifications as serving to energise engagement with, and investment in, skills training. The outcome of refocusing provision in accordance with captured demand was considered to be an increase in customer, particularly employer, investment in skills. A demand-led system was therefore offered as a remedy to the stifling influence that the perverse incentives structure of the supply-led system was perceived to have on actually existing skills aspirations of enlightened businesses and motivated worker-citizens.

*"We will give employers the opportunity to exert real leverage and decision-making over both the content and delivery of skills [...] programmes. That will help us to build employer confidence in the qualification and learning programmes provided by universities, colleges and training providers, and it will open the door to increased employer investment in skills." (DIUS, 2007a:11)*

*"Building a demand-led system is the only way in which to increase employer and individual investment in skills and ensure that increased investment delivers economically valuable skills" (Leitch, 2006:49)*

### ***Exercising choice: routes to responsive skills***

The other important dimension to the remaking of businesses and worker-citizens as skills 'partner-customers' was illuminated in the way policy-makers narrated discourses and practices of increased choice. Again, when policy-makers promoted the need for greater priority to be given to the choices of partner-customers, they drew

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<sup>46</sup> In the Skills Strategy lexicon a SSCs 'footprint' is a way of describing the boundaries of inclusion that delimit a particular Councils sectoral coverage. It is shorthand for all the industries, occupations and specific businesses/organisations that are represented by the particular Sector Skills Council and thus constitute the 'sector'.

specifically on their conceptualisation of businesses as 'enlightened' and worker-citizens as 'motivated'; reemphasising the coherence of private and public interests in progressive skills such that the national Skills Strategy was presented as principally functioning to liberate responsible personal choices.

*"You and I might make personal choices about where we choose to develop our skills because of where we think the labour market is going, so it's kind of doing that on a national level really" (PM3)*

In terms of best promoting the exercise of choice, policy-makers commonly extolled the virtues of mechanisms designed to boost the 'purchasing power' of both employers and employees, and contrasted them with the depiction of the *"you'll-get-what-you're-given"* (PM4) approach to determining the training and learning offer available under a supply-led system. Policy-makers envisaged, and sought to affect, the boosting of employer purchasing power by routing significant proportions of the adult learning budget through Train to Gain. The Train to Gain service was introduced in 2006<sup>47</sup>. It offered employers free or subsidised training for their lower skilled employees<sup>48</sup>, and brokerage expertise to support them in translating their skills needs into relevant and sourced packages of study and qualifications for their workforce (DfES, 2006:40; LSC, 2007:3; DIUS, 2007a:56).

As such, policy-makers emphasised the most important feature of Train to Gain to be ensuring that funding for training and learning followed and reflected employer demand. Policy-makers described the changes as meaning providers were no longer able to attempt to predict need and recruit learners to planned provision; instead providers could only receive funding for programmes that had been validated and agreed to by employers.

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<sup>47</sup> Train to Gain followed on from the Employer Training Pilots (ETP) trialled in England in 2002 with the intention of testing a new approach to workforce training; particularly the training of low skilled employees (Leitch, 2006:75)

<sup>48</sup> The New Labour Government introduced a new entitlement to a free first full NVQ level 2 qualification and, in specific cases, a free or subsidised NVQ level 3 qualification. Employers could access this entitlement via Train to Gain to fund training for their low skilled employees



*'You [provider] can't get the funding for a course unless an employer agrees to buy it on behalf of their staff. [...] The employer has to sign up to the plan which says: 'yes these are the skills that my business needs'; as opposed to: 'I'll just take what you give me or get nothing'. Now you can only give me something if I agree to take it, and you don't get the money unless I agree to take it" (PM3)*

This policy-maker went on to describe the new process – that gives employers purchasing clout to realise their choices in meeting their needs - as a change for the better to the *"balance of power"* (PM3) between the partner-customer and the supplier of training and learning. In policy-makers' narratives, reforms that put purchasing power in the hands of employers were considered a crucial element in increasing engagement and investment in skills and qualifications (PIU, 2001:8). These reforms would, it was suggested, ensure demand leads supply, and counteract the self-serving incentive structures that had prohibited providers aligning their courses and qualifications with need (Leitch, 2006:85).

In addition to Train to Gain - the principal mechanism for improving employer choice - Individual Skills Accounts were introduced<sup>49</sup> to provide a mechanism for supporting worker-citizens in exercising choice. Individual Skills Accounts were described as virtual funding (DIUS, 2007a:27) or a 'training voucher' (PM3); and as designed to enhance the purchasing power of the worker-citizen/learner by enabling them to exercise choice over courses and providers. Again, by improving the purchasing power of worker-citizens/learners as customers, policy-makers expected to improve engagement with, and investment in training and learning. Policy-makers perceived an individual's motivation to participate with skills and qualification to derive from having a sense of choice and ownership over what they do and where (DfES, 2005a:21), in order to meet their responsible and progressive skills aspirations (DfES, 2006:18).

Taken together, both the demand-led (voice-led) institutions and the choice-led policy mechanisms were narrated by policy-makers as empowering; designed, by government, to improve the responsiveness of the skills system and the institutions of supply.

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<sup>49</sup> Learner Accounts were one of the recommendations of the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) piloted in 2007/08 and rolled out across England in 2010.

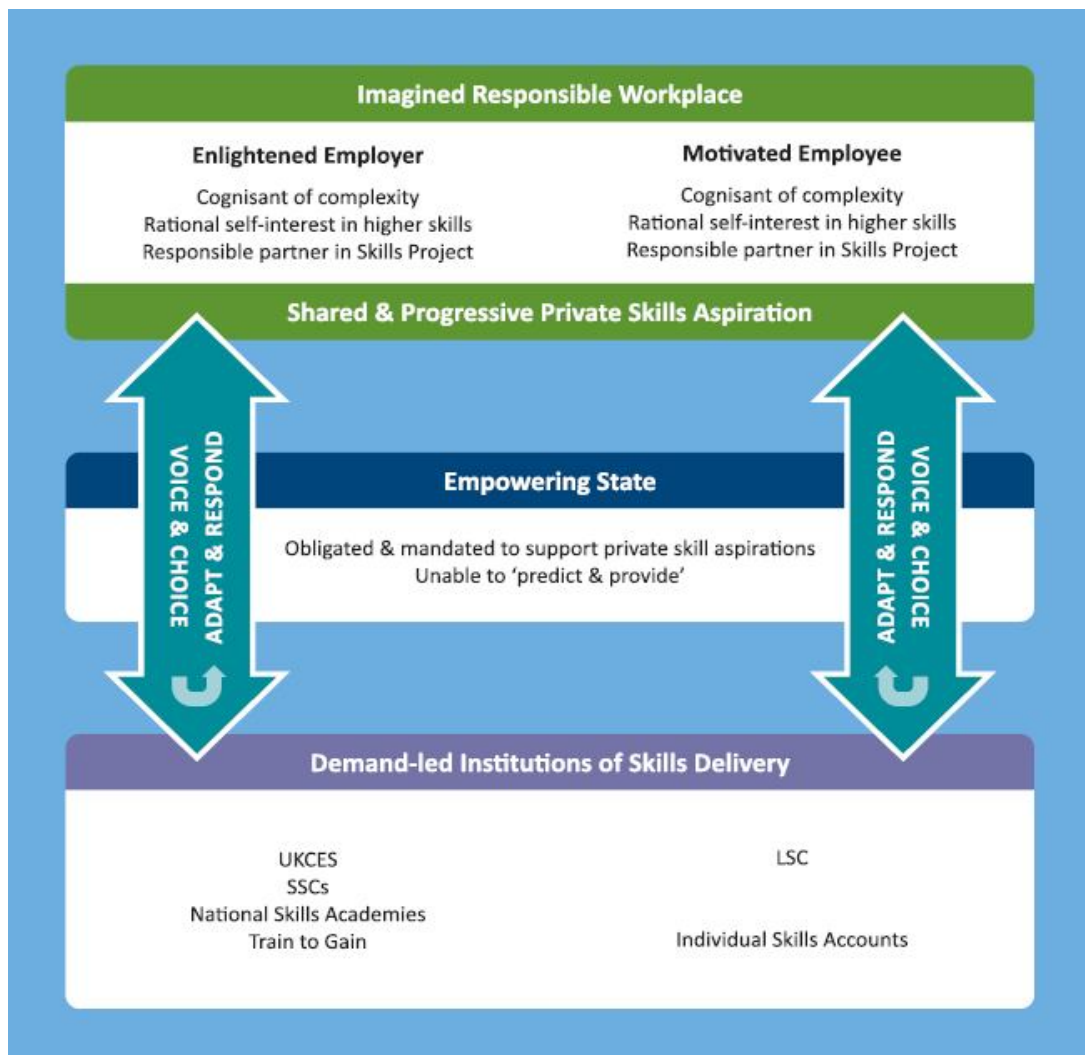
*“The advent of Skills Accounts and the growth of Train to Gain herald a radically different model of organisation of the skills system, where the role of Government is to ensure that customers are empowered, well-informed and well-supported, so that demand can lead supply”. (DCSF/DIUS, 2008:11)*

#### **6.2.4 Summary: The Demand-led Strategy**

Figure 6.2 below illustrates the findings of this chapter. Overall the chapter presents a distinct demand-led strategy for skills based on a particular arrangement of skills actors and the relationships between them defined, articulated, and assembled into an order and system of organisation by the state, in relation to imagined responsible workplaces.

The image of responsible workplaces follows directly from the way in which policy-makers construe and construct the logic for skills as a shared ‘partnership’ concern in pursuit of sought after ‘progress’. Enlightened employers and motivated employees, interacting at the site of the workplace, were depicted as cognisant of the uncertainty-based complexity of their environment, and as having rational and shared self interest in mitigating this complexity through the attainment and utilisation of higher skills. That the private interests of businesses and worker-citizens were perceived as also in the public/national interest of UK plc. and UK social (Chapter 5, section 5.3.2) afforded a privileged position to employer and employee demand to drive the skills partnership. Policy-makers then defined the role of the state as an empowering facilitator and enabler of the high(er) skills aspirations and behaviours of these responsible workplaces. The state was positioned between the workplace partnership and the institutions of skill delivery to realign skills supply in response to the voice and choice of partner-customers.

**Figure 6.2: The Demand-led Strategy**



*Source: author's analysis, compilation and design*

### **6.3 Discussion and Concluding Reflections**

As stated in the introduction, this chapter is one of two focused on exposing, explaining and understanding the relationship between the formal dimension of skill policy (Chapter 5) - the semiotic construal and construction of 'progress in partnership' as the 'object' of governance (Jessop, 2008; Jessop, 2009), in relation to a selected economic and social imaginary defined by complexity and coherence - and the operational dimension of 'how skills are done'. (I borrow the terms and distinctions between 'formal' and 'operational' dimensions of policy from Carmel & Papadopoulos, 2003).

The argument of both chapters is that the operational dimension of skills policy (doing skills under New Labour) involved discursively and materially 'articulating' and 'assembling' the components parts of the skills project: imagined skills actors; the relations between them at the site of the workplace; the form of the state; and the organisational arrangements, resources, practices, and processes for skills delivery, into distinct architectures of skill governance. The foundation of these architectures is the imagined degree of responsible skill aspiration and behaviour of workplace actors in relation to the high(er) skills logic established in policy. (I borrow the concepts of 'articulation' and 'assemblage' from Newman & Clarke, 2009a:8-9).

Although the main discussion and concluding reflections regarding how New Labour used the logic for high(er) skills to order and organise the operational dimension skill policy will be provided at the end of Chapter 7, it is worth making a few points here in relation to the articulation and assemblage of the demand-led strategy for skills. One of three skills strategies for England under New Labour identified in this thesis.

The demand-led strategy starts from the image of enlightened and motivated employers and employees within a responsible workplace partnership, constructed and narrated as having high(er) skills aspirations and behaviours in close proximity to those required to achieve 'progress in partnership'. From this articulation of workplaces as having internalised the logic for high(er) skills, the other components parts of the skills project were articulated and assembled by the state (not a neutral state à la VoC, or a straightforwardly partisan state à la PRA) so that the overall order and system of organisation involved the arrangement and sequencing of:

- Enlightened employers and motivated employees (section 6.2.1)
- Interacting in a responsible (high skills) workplace partnership (section 6.2.1)
- Empowered by the state (section 6.2.2)
- Through a demand-led system of skill delivery (section 6.2.3)

The analytical strength of the concepts of 'articulation' and 'assemblage' are shown in the way in which they draw attention to and explain the complex practices and processes involved in the continuous semiotic construal and construction of economic and social imaginaries, and the associated objects and subjects of governance; the way

in which meanings make policies and policies make meanings (also Carmel & Papadopoulos, 2003; Ball, 2007). Practices and processes that involve on-going work (in this case state work) to meaningfully (re)make, (re)produce or disrupt discursive and material alignments and alliances (Newman & Clarke, 2009a; Jessop, 2004) between workplaces, workplace actors, skills delivery and the state. The ongoing-ness and partiality/incompleteness of this work (shown through the combination of the finding of this Chapter and the next) highlights its fragility and instability; its exposure to redirection, contestation, and resistance, (which will be the focus of Chapter 8).

The demand-led strategy involves making-up/imagining 'progressive' workplaces and workplace actor relations, based on subject positions and subjectivities associated with enlightened employers and motivated employees, that have some partial resemblance to 'actually existing' workplaces. But that involves discursively accentuating and extending aspects and features of these sites and the interactions within them, whilst subverting and obscuring others. Furthermore, the demand-led strategy involves bringing workplaces into alignment with some aspects and features of economic and social state projects and policies (supporting economic competitiveness and better social functioning) and in relation to a selected interpretation of the delivery of skills products and services (ossified and self-serving). Overall, articulating and assembling the demand-led strategy is an exercise in selective discursive exaggeration and caricature to present a bounded version of the policy terrain – normatively prescribed objects and subjects of governance (Carmel & Harlock, 2008) - that presumes certain modes and mechanisms of governing to act as regulatory and distributional devices; determining who does what, gets what and how. In this case determining relations between workplaces, the state, and the institutions of skills delivery as governed through a 'workplace-led' and enabled partnership. As such, we can see this form of governing - the demand-led strategy - as the "*institutional crystallisation of particular discourses*" (Carmel & Papadopolos, 2003:33).

In conclusion the chapter has shown that the demand-led strategy for skills represents an instance of fragile discursive and material assemblage. The selecting, bringing together, arranging and sequencing of a set of articulated and linked ideas, images, actors, institutions, technologies, techniques, or tools of skills delivery, that order and

organise the governance of skills policy to create a seemingly coherent response to solve a problem; the low skills problem in England. In the demand-led strategy, where employers and employees are invited to see themselves as enlightened and motivated about the potential of high(er) skills, and the state affords itself an obligation and mandate to empower private skills decision in the public interest, the problem of low skills in England – the stick in the cogs of the ‘progress in partnership’ wheel - is a system of delivery that needs to redirect its activity; adapting and responding to the responsible skills aspirations and behaviours of workplace partner-customers.

Chapter 7, to which we now turn, will however show that this was not the only way in which the problem of low skills in England was given meaning in relation to complexity and coherence, and depicted and narrated as being responded too by the state. The demand-led strategy represents one strand of state work to narrate one version of the workplace and the skills system in response, and therefore one conjunctural possibility for relating the formal dimension of policy (‘what is to be governed’) to the operational dimension (‘how skills were done’).

## 7. Governing Workplaces II: The Multiple Strategies for Skills

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the second part of the interpretive analytical work to explicate the multiple strategies for skills from within the New Labour high(er) skills project for England, and address the second empirical sub-question (SRQ2) of this thesis: 'how was the logic for a high(er) skills project used to order and organise skills policy in England?'. Following on from the previous chapter (Chapter 6) it presents state work to articulate and assemble two further skills strategies in relation to: two versions of negatively imagined 'inert' or 'irresponsible' workplaces; encountering an 'enhancing' or 'exhorting/emancipating' state; and therefore either a 'system to lead demand' for skills, or a 'system to mitigate and circumvent lack of demand'. In other words this chapter presents two further distinct architectures of skill governance in England under New Labour that are based on: re-imagined skills actors; the relations between them at the site of the workplace; the form and role of the state; and the organisational arrangements, resources, practices and processes for skill delivery. The reconstructing, re-categorising and repositioning of workplace skills actors is based on their imagined distance from responsible skill aspiration and behaviour in relation to the high(er) skills logic of progress in partnership.

The first main section that follows (section 7.2) presents the imaginary of inert workplaces as required to raise their responsibility for high(er) skills. In this workplace type, businesses and worker-citizens are perceived as deficient partners in the skills project; lacking the capacity and capability to demonstrate sufficiently progressive skills aspirations. Such an image suggests the requirement for an enhancing role of the state to drive the skills vision forward via ambitious targets for betterment, and a (re)structured system of skills delivery to lead raised levels of skill demand.

The second main section that follows (section 7.3) presents the imaginary of irresponsible workplaces; an imaginary that predominantly involves the juxtaposition of either skills deviant businesses and disempowered and vulnerable worker-citizens,

or skills deviant worker-citizens and disempowered and vulnerable businesses. Such an imaginary suggests the need for an emancipating form and role for the state, and institutions of skills delivery that attempt to change attitudes and mitigate bad behaviour and/or release the disempowered and vulnerable party by circumventing the deviance of the other. In this context skills become the means to free the progressive aspirations of disempowered and vulnerable worker-citizens from the bondage of the 'bad boss' in the low-skills business, and skills become the means by which businesses can free their progressive aspirations, which are suffocated by the indolence of the low-skilled 'bad worker'.

Having presented these two further strategies for skills; strategies based on negatively imaged workplaces operating at degrees of distance from the high(er) skills logic, the chapter concludes with a discussion of, and reflection on, the analysis of findings presented in both Chapter 6 and this chapter (Chapter 7). In particular the issue of policy opacity – the muddled blurring of the lines between distinct strategies – will be returned to.

## ***7.2 Inert Workplaces: An enhancing state, leading demand for skills***

*“We have committed to joining the worlds ‘premier league’ for skills. This will require an enormous shift in attitudes and aspirations [...]. For the Government, it means adopting a much more positive approach [...]. It means encouraging people to raise their aspirations for themselves.” (DIUS, 2007a:3)*

This section presents the policy imaginary of 'inert workplaces' within which employers and employees demonstrated blocked and therefore deficient, skills aspirations and behaviours in relation to mitigating complexity and mediating coherence of high(er) skills. In response policy-makers depicted an 'enhancing' role for the state – to communicate a vision and drive the direction of progress via high(er) skills targets – realised by remaking the organisations of skills delivery to 'lead' the demand of employers and employees as 'partner-subjects' of the Skills Strategy for England.



### **7.2.1 Constructing and Positioning the Deficient Skills Partnership**

Policy-makers' narratives' imagined and described employers and employees, interacting at the site of the 'inert' workplace, as demonstrating deficient skills aspirations and behaviours. In this workplace imaginary policy-makers depicted both businesses and worker-citizens as experiencing barriers to engaging in education and training, associated with lack of motivation and means to up-skill; trapping them in short-termist low skills equilibrium (Finegold & Soskice, 1988; Wilson & Hogarth, 2003). As such the 'problem' of deficient skills aspirations and behaviours was considered to emanate from – was a consequence and condition of – the structure and effect of inert workplaces.

In response, policy-makers presented the 'solution' to this experience of low skills equilibrium as equally emanating from within the workplace. Albeit as a consequence and condition of state support to affect the reciprocal influence employers and employees could have over each other by each upgrading their skills-led ambition, and thereby catapulting the workplace forwards towards a better, more progressive performance culture.

#### ***Constructing the inert Business: a deficient partner in skills***

In contrast to the discursively constructed depiction of businesses as 'enlightened' responsible partners in the progressive skills project, policy-makers' narratives also presented a distinct image of 'inert' businesses. Despite overwhelming pressures to up-rate their product market and production strategies and techniques, these businesses exhibited sluggish/deficient skills behaviours (DIUS, 2007a:38). They were imagined as principally suffering from a lack of capacity and capability to overcome the barriers they face in rethinking and upgrading their skills aspirations. To act in their own best interests to develop the progressive skills needed to mitigate challenges and exploit opportunities inherent to the complexity of their competitive operating environment.

This image of inert workplaces was exposed, in part, where policy-makers presented and lamented past failures to embrace the potential of skills. Failures which gave the UK a comparatively poor baseline position from which to embark on a skills mission, and carve out a competitive high-skills space in the global knowledge-based economy. Although in general policy-makers' narratives tended to place blame for the national skills deficit with the ossified and self-serving education and training system (see Chapter 6, section 6.2.3 and Leitch, 2006:39; Leitch, 2005), employer risk aversion (PIU, 2001:34) compounded by poor strategic management capacity to effectively utilise skills (Leitch, 2005:5), in a voluntarist system, was also highlighted as contributing to the problem. The implied concern was that, left to their own devices, employers had not yet responded to the need to generate and utilise high(er) skills, and could therefore be considered unlikely to step up to what policy-makers perceive to be the more urgent necessity to do so now.

In accounting for under investment in skills, policy-makers' narratives insisted on the recognition of 'actually existing' barriers to training faced by many employers. Contradicting the portrayal of 'enlightened' businesses as actively engaged - for rational, self-interested profit-making purposes - in the up-skilling of their low skilled workforce (section 6.2.1). A counter-narrative existed that presented, as accepted wisdom, the problem of employers realising negligible returns from lower levels of training whilst risking their staff being poached by their competitors (Leitch, 2006:92), and recognised that low skills product market and production strategies, once adopted and embedded, are difficult to break away from (PIU, 2001:33; Strategy Unit, 2002). Policy-makers further justified the barriers businesses face, and their limited capacity to train, by reference to dynamic economic cycles (more pronounced in certain sectors) and their relative size (PM3). In general smaller businesses were portrayed as experiencing the greatest barriers to training their staff, but importantly, not because they don't want to (PM4). They were presented in policy narratives as less resilient to training 'risks'; less able to absorb the cost of fees and lost work hours; and as having less capacity to plan long-term skills needs strategically.

*“One of the difficulties, that I think in part is dependent on economic cycle, is that it’s very difficult to focus on three or five years ahead when what you’re really trying to do is survive the next three months.” (PM3)*

*“We still have a problem with smaller and medium sized companies, who cannot somehow manage to get training in as part of their normal yearly pattern of activity, but that’s not because they don’t want to now.” (PM4)*

Overall, the image that policy-makers presented here was one of businesses struggling against their experience of barriers to training and utilising more and better skills, despite potentially harbouring progressive ambitions, and therefore as stuck in a short-termist trap of low skills aspiration and behaviour (Leitch, 2006:59). These ‘inert’ businesses were portrayed in policy-makers’ narratives as requiring encouragement and support to enhance their skills demand.

### ***Constructing the inert Worker-Citizen: a deficient partner in skills***

Again, in contrast to the discursively constructed depiction of employees as ‘motivated’ responsible partners in the progressive skills project, policy-makers’ narratives also presented a distinct image of ‘inert’ worker-citizens. In this construction, worker-citizens were also portrayed as suffering from a lack of capacity and capability to act in their own best interests. Similarly to ‘inert’ businesses, they were described as generally less able to respond to the pressure to skill and enhance their employability in an uncertain and competitive labour market.

This image essentially encapsulates policy-makers identification of low skills demand amongst low-skilled, low-paid worker-citizens, stuck in a trap of low skills ambition. What Gordon Brown MP – then Prime Minister - referred to in a speech delivered at Greenwich University as *“inequalities in aspiration”* (Brown, 2007). Low-skilled worker-citizens were presented as predominantly experiencing barriers to training and learning that extended from low confidence (PIU, 2001:93; Leitch, 2006:106; PM1; PM2; PM3; PM4), which blocked their motivation to train and inhibited them from developing the necessary longer-term responsible and beneficial skills aspirations and behaviours.

*"I don't believe it is just the highly skilled; the wealthy; the well-educated who respond to incentives. I think everybody does that. But I think there is a resistance which is often borne out of inadequacy. I think it's a fear of failure; it's a fear of this isn't quite for me."*  
(PM2)

*"Low aspirations and a low awareness of the benefits of skills mean that many people choose not to improve their skills even where it would benefit them."* (Leitch, 2006:103)

Overall the image that policy-makers presented here was one of worker-citizens struggling against barriers to train and enhance their employability and employment prospects, despite having the potential to develop progressive aspirations. As such, policy-makers conceptualised their role as encouraging these worker-citizens to enhance their progressive skills-led ambitions.

### ***Positioning relationships between skills actors: the Inert Workplace***

Bringing together conceptualisations of the deficient skills aspirations and behaviours of businesses and worker-citizens, policy-makers imagined and constructed the 'inert workplace'. The inert workplace is presented as a profoundly interconnected space of employer and employee relations, functioning as a vicious cycle of low skill, low wage employment and low skill, low value-added production, and depicted as inherently problematic in light of the complex and increasingly uncertain and unstable environment in which businesses and worker-citizens find themselves. However, the way in which policy-makers also imagined and narrated the interplay between the latent progressive ambitions of both the employers and employees in these workplaces, created the possibility for policy to be directed at overcoming inertia, and initiating the production of "*virtuous spirals*" (Strategy Unit, 2002:12) of increasing engagement with skills, as a consequence of encouraging and enhancing responsible skills aspirations and behaviours.

Specifically, policy narratives highlighted the potential for these inert workplaces to change their performance culture, as a result of the influence employers and employees could have over each other given government support to upwardly adjust their own demand for skills. The logic presented was that if employers could be

prevailed upon and helped to increase their demand for skills, it would encourage individuals to train to realise the increased recognition and reward from employment. In turn, policy-makers perceived that assisting employees to raise their demand for, and attainment of, skills would pressure employers to utilise the increased capabilities of the workforce. As a result policy-makers constructed a strong justification for their role in unblocking, unlocking, and stimulating the latent progressive skills aspirations and behaviours of employers and employees in inert workplaces (PIU, 2001:53; Strategy Unit, 2002; HM Treasury, 2002).<sup>50</sup>

*“The UK needs to raise the aspirations of both individuals and employers to create workplace environments that enable skills to be used to maximum effect, increasing performance and improving job satisfaction.” (UKCES, 2010:5)*

*“Motivating employees to learn is critical to ensuring training is effectively used in the workplace.” (Leitch, 2006:92)*

## **7.2.2 The encouraging and ‘enhancing’ role of the state**

### ***The need to intervene***

Whilst imagined ‘responsible’ workplaces were met by an ‘empowering’ state to facilitate and promote the realisation of private progressive skills aspirations, (Section 6.2.2 above). The depiction of ‘inert’, if left to their own devices, workplaces called into question the validity of leaving skills decisions to the whim of private interest, (employer/employee ‘voice and choice’), which was reinterpreted as lacking appropriate ambition. In particular, policy-makers’ narratives highlighted a critical disjuncture between the short-term, immediate and narrow specificity of ‘inert’ business skills interests – preoccupied with their need for a *“widget-maker for tomorrow”* (PM2) - and the long-term developmental and transformative skills

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<sup>50</sup> This imagined connection between employer and employee aspiration, and virtuous circles of skill supply and skill demand at the workplace, is explicit in earlier policy documents and more implied in later documents. However by reading together the (somewhat separated) sections of later policy documents addressing the (expected/anticipated) skill aspirations and behaviours of employers and employees this connection is re-established in policy discourses of the inert workplace (see for example DIUS, 2007a).

interests of government, conscious of the need for 'UK plc.' to secure a position of competitive advantage in the global knowledge-based economy.

*"Employers rightly focus on the success of their own organisation. [...] But no business operates in isolation. In a highly inter-connected and inter-dependent world, the Government also has a role to promote long term, as well as short term, gains from skills, and the value of broad-based training programmes and qualifications in promoting wider employability and labour market flexibility." (DfES, 2003:30)*

*"We've accepted that the market isn't perfect. And the way the market articulates demand - employers articulate demand - will not be perfect, and it will not meet all our sort of strategic needs. So you arrive at the conclusion that you do need, as government, to do something about it, or enable things to happen." (PM3)*

Therefore, in response to the image of 'inert' workplaces, in which employers and employees exhibit deficient skills aspirations and behaviours, policy-makers constructed and narrated an inherently more *"interventionist"* role for the state and state policy (PM3). In defining this role policy-makers set the New Labour Administration apart from disinterested (more liberal state) government of the past (PM2). Appealing, as indicated in the statements above, to their discursively constructed logic for skills - as able to mitigate complexity and mediate progressive economic and social and public and private agendas and interests (see Chapter 5) - they validated and legitimised state action to enhance employer and employee awareness and demand for skills (Leitch, 2006:5; DfES, 2003:120; DfES, 2006:36; DIUS, 2007a:39).

*"We must raise ambition in the demand for skill. We will only achieve increased productivity and competitiveness if more employers and more employees are encouraged and supported to make the necessary investment in skills." (DfES, 2003:8)*

*"There are a lot of people who are not able to exploit all the opportunities that are available to them - and I don't just mean work opportunities, I mean all sorts, you know the whole range - simply because they don't have the skills or enthusiasm or whatever [...]. The question is should we be doing something about that?" (PM3)*

The role of the state became to encourage a changed culture of betterment (PIU; 2001:53; HM Treasury, 2002:22; Brown, 2007), through support (including the removal of financial barriers) to stretch the skills ambitions of businesses and worker-citizen. Specifically, policy-makers perceived their role as galvanising a sense of possibility and responsibility to overcome the limited demand for skill in 'inert workplaces' (Leitch, 2006:22; PM2), by making high(er) skills provision available and accessible. To persuade employers to develop the required higher level skills ambitions necessary to upgrade to higher value-added product market and production strategies (DfES, 2003:21); encouraging them to become: *"responsible for high aspirations in their firm"* (PIU, 2001:61). Or as one policy-maker expressed it: *"it's about making what we call UK plc. It's making [pause] you know allowing or supporting businesses to become world class businesses"* (PM1). Equally, to *"energise"* (Leitch, 2006:25) and *"motivate"* (DfES, 2003:9) individuals; encouraging them to enhance their commitment to learning, and make provision available. Again, the purpose was expressed as: *"to make people [pause] or sorry to accommodate and support people so that they get on the skills path"* (PM1).

### ***Communicating the vision and driving the target***

In essence what policy-makers presented was their discursively constructed role to determine and define the *"big picture"* (PM2); to communicate the 'skills vision' as amounting to an economic and social vision for the nation (PIU, 2001:61; Leitch, 2006:3; Brown, 2007; PM1).

*"First of all I think the role of government is to have vision; you know for the nation. I don't mean that it has got to have vision in terms of individual businesses or individual areas of economic activity, but [...] I think there are huge benefits [...] which apply to a nation that is ambitious for its people, and I actually think that this Labour Government has been ambitious for its people."* (PM2)

*"As a Government, we have an ambitious agenda for transforming our society and economy. Much of that agenda is dependent on developing ever higher skills, in our young people, in the workforce, and across the community."* (DfES, 2003:9)

As the last statement implies, policy-makers' narratives perceived this 'vision for the nation' to be manifest in stretching government targets that reflected the 'agenda' for higher levels of skill and qualification attainment across the board (Leitch, 2006; DIUS, 2007a). Specifically, New Labour established a commitment (in England) to meeting a series of qualification attainment goals, originally recommended in the Leitch Review of Skills (2006:3), that came to be known as the '2020 ambition' (DIUS, 2007a:9). These goals included:

- 95% of adults to achieve basic skills of functional literacy and numeracy<sup>51</sup>;
- more than 90% of adults qualified to NVQ level 2 or above<sup>52</sup>;
- 1.9 million more adults to achieve an NVQ level 3 qualification; and
- 40% or more adults to achieve an NVQ level 4 qualification or above<sup>53</sup>.

The UKCES report (2009b:42) assessing progress toward the '2020 ambition' exposed the magnitude of the targets by calculating that achieving them would amount to the equivalent of over 22 million additional qualification attainments<sup>54</sup>. This represented more than one additional qualification attainment for very second working age adult in the UK.

However, despite the unequivocally ambitious extent of the targets, we again see that policy declined to define the skills project in substantive terms (Chapter 5). At the strategic level skill was quite simply quantitatively more and higher, measured by qualification attainment. Rather than prescribe the nature of skill, for policy-makers, ambitious targets represented a vehicle to communicate greater expectation, and served as a means to direct and shape enhanced economic and social aspirations. In other words, skills policy, framed by a particular imaginary of 'inert' workplaces,

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<sup>51</sup> This target, when originally recommended in the Leitch Review of Skills (2006:3) represented an increase from the 2005 baseline position of 85% of adults with basic literacy and 79% of adults with basic numeracy

<sup>52</sup> This target, when originally recommended in the Leitch Review of Skills (2006:3), represented an increase from 69% of adults qualified to NVQ level 2 or above in 2005. It was further recommended by Leitch (2006:3), and accepted by the New Labour Government (DIUS, 2007a:15), that the target be extended to 95% of adults qualified to NVQ level 2 as soon as possible

<sup>53</sup> For clarification Leitch (2006:3) defines 'adults' as referring to persons aged 19 to State Pension age; NVQ level 2 as broadly equivalent to 5 good GCSEs (A\*-C); NVQ level 3 as broadly equivalent to 2 'A' levels; and NVQ level 4 as broadly equivalent to a degree. Others equate NVQ level 4 with a Higher Education Certificate; and equate Bachelor's degrees and Foundation degrees with NVQ level 5 (see Cuddy & Leney, 2005:18)

<sup>54</sup> UKCES calculated that achieving the '2020 ambition' requires: 7.4 million basic skills attainments; 5.7 million NVQ level 2 attainments; 4 million NVQ level 3 attainments; and 5.5 million NVQ level 4 attainments (UKCES, 2009b:42)



sought to regulate a sense of aspirational betterment; to normalise the requirement to excel beyond acceptance of low skills; and be transformative and performative of the progressive skills behaviours of employers and employees (significantly enhancing engagement and investment in education and training). Including the expectation that we should all be actively encouraging friends, colleagues and family members to embark on skills-led self-improvement (PIU, 2001:61).

Furthermore, again drawing on their construction of 'skills as progress' to mitigate the challenges of staying prosperous in the context of perpetual and rapid changes to the basis of competitiveness (Chapter 5), policy-makers depicted skills targets as a movable feast (Brown, 2007; PM3); reflecting the ideal of a never-ending, unremitting pursuit of ambitious betterment to keep pace with a dynamic economy. A mechanism by which policy-makers could narrate and communicate, particularly to worker-citizens, the responsibility to always be making advancements for their on-going employability, and to ensure they are able: *"to maximise the chances of businesses success"* (PM3).

*"What we really want now is for people to progress. So if they get their Level 2 we want them to go on to their Level 3, we want them to do a Foundation Degree. That's the vital bit of the strategy."* (PM4)

*"No matter how advanced their skills are today, we need to see every individual across the nation rising up the skills ladder, reaping the financial benefit for themselves, their families, their employers and the community."* (DIUS, 2007a:4)

*"It's exactly what Obama said at Georgetown when he made his big speech on skills, you know, that he expects everyone to actually think about how do I go up another level?"* (PM2)

### **Reordering the partnership**

Although a partnership discourse remained present and critical in the policy narrative; expressed as businesses and worker-citizens engaging in skills advancement *with* government (Leitch, 2006:71; PM2). Given the reconstructed role of the 'enhancing' state in communicating the skills vision and driving the skills target the relations

between the partners were fundamentally reordered and remade. Despite policy-makers' narratives firmly resisting the implication that the more interventionist role for the state extended to predicting and prescribing the (flexibility and adaptability) skills that are needed for prosperous businesses and worker-citizens, they nonetheless placed government squarely at the head of the partnership table; setting and dictating the aspirational and progressive direction of travel for others – 'partner-subjects' - to embrace and follow. This reordering and remaking of relations within the 'skills partnership' was again justified by policy-makers by drawing on the progressive potential of skills in the context of production and employment complexity, and as such their rhetoric retained a flavour of the empowerment discourse. Albeit rearticulated with a different inflection to subtly alter meaning from customers 'directing', to subjects 'being directed' for their own good.

*"It is not for the Government to tell private business what products and services to invest in. But it is the Government's role to offer support to businesses to increase productivity and invest in innovation, so that they stand the best chance of success. That means encouraging and helping employers to invest in skills and training in a more strategic way." (DfES, 2003:22)*

*"For those both in and outside the labour market, we want to create a culture where everyone knows and understands that what people can do is not set for life, it is 'in our hands' and all of us can, through up-skilling, take control and change our lives for the better." (DIUS, 2007a:35)*

### **7.2.3 Imagining and structuring the skills delivery architecture: leading demand**

Given the imaginary of 'inert', (if left to their own devices), workplaces, within which employers and employees lack the capacity and capability to develop sufficiently responsible skills aspirations and behaviours, and therefore the construction of an 'enhancing' role for the state, policy-makers' narratives remade the institutions and mechanisms of skills delivery to 'lead' demand. Although still described as a 'demand-led' system, the demand that leads the system was rearticulated as unblocked and therefore expected and anticipated - related to government vision and targets - rather

than existing and articulated (from within the workplace). Although still described as a 'new approach' to workplace skills delivery, the new skills delivery approach for workplaces was reoriented from 'adapting' to 'encouraging', and from 'responding' to 'initiating' a change in skills demand (PIU, 2001:55).

*"What is needed in the UK, therefore, is a new approach that encourages firms and individuals to train." (HM Treasury, 2002:20)*

*"As a key part of creating a genuinely demand-led system, the Skills Funding Agency will lead the development and management of the new England-wide adult advancement and careers service. It will play a vital role [...] in boosting individual demand for skills." (DCSF/DIUS, 2008:12)*

*"I think it is about giving people the opportunity, and managing the opportunity to change the way you are towards what is there for you. And the government has got to be able to make sure [...] that those opportunities are there to change." (PM1)*

In seeking to lead demand and 'manage change' policy-makers' narratives reorganised and reordered the relations between the institutions and mechanisms of skills supply, and employers and employees. As a conduit for government vision and targets the institutions of skills supply were recast as leaders rather than followers in the Skills Strategy for England. As actively communicating rather than passively listening, in order to *"not just engage with [employers] but try and win over hearts and minds about the benefits of skills in general"* (PM1).

The UKCES – which in relation to the imaginary of 'responsible' workplaces was described as exclusively employer-led - was re-tasked in policy discourse with the *"job to say what the nation needs"* (PM4). To communicate the skills ambition out to businesses and worker-citizens with the intention to *"promote employer investment in people and the better use of their skills at all levels"* (DIUS, 2007a:38). In short, policy-makers' narratives in relation to the imaginary of inert workplaces required the UKCES to take on the altered role of *"driving forward the skills agenda"* (Alan Johnson, MP cited in DCSF, 2007).

The SSCs – also described as exclusively employer-led in relation to the imaginary of responsible workplaces – were recast in policy discourse to *“take a leading role”* (Leitch, 2006:18), and *“raise employer ambition and investment in skills”* (DIUS, 2007a:36). Indeed, to champion and galvanise skills action within their sector and support businesses significantly drive up their engagement with education and training (HM Treasury, 2002:16; Leitch, 2006:74; UKCES, 2008a; UKCES, 2008b). To set ‘hard’ skills attainment targets for employers to deliver against (Leitch, 2006:79) - for example, through National Skills Academies (also depicted as employer-led mechanisms of skills delivery in relation to imagined responsible workplaces), and Apprenticeships - and require employers to clearly set out their commitment to participate in up-skilling their workforce in the SSAs. As such, SSAs were reconceptualised. No longer depicted as the means by which ‘enlightened’ employers could set the qualification priorities for their sector, but redefined as a contract for skills improvements; an *“agreement between Government and the SSC and employers”* (DfES, 2006:42) to address training needs (shortages and weaknesses) as a consequence of low aspiration in inert workplaces.

The role of brokerage as part of the Train to Gain offer was likewise remade. Described by policy-makers in relation to ‘inert’ workplaces as functioning to *“encourage employers to see the benefit of higher skills”* (DfES, 2005b:7); principally targeting employers and employees perceived to have not historically engaged in education and training (DfES, 2006:40) and that were depicted as suffering from insufficiently responsible aspirations and behaviours with regard to skill enhancement. Similarly, policy-makers’ narratives repositioned providers of Further Education (predominantly FE Colleges) as required to *“achieve demanding targets for level 2 and level 3 qualifications [...] persuading more employers of the value [of these qualifications] to them”* (Denham, 2007). Essentially envisaging the role of the FE sector to *“increase the demand [for skills and qualifications] from employers and potential learners”*, by addressing *“the cultural, social and economic factors which can limit aspiration and participation”* (DfES, 2006:36); particularly, by addressing the limited demand for skills amongst those who have not previously succeeded at school (Leitch, 2006:116).

Individual Skills Accounts were reconceptualised as a mechanism to “energise” learning. With Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) advisors re-tasked with an active role - based on “reaching out, rather than waiting for people to come” (Leitch, 2006:109) - to raise people’s awareness of their skills deficiencies, as the first step in supporting them to address their weaknesses (Leitch, 2006:110), and to “steer” them to the courses that will best meet their needs (DfES, 2006:37). Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) – as well as the TUC and the trade unions in general - were narrated as having “a vital role in encouraging individuals back into learning through help and support in the workplace” (DfES, 2003:44; also Leitch, 2006:92).

In short, what is exposed is an additional policy-maker narrative that significantly reconstructs the role of the skills delivery system in response to an inert workplace imaginary and an enhancing role of the state. Depicting the need for the institutional architecture and policy mechanisms to encourage employers and employees to raise their skills aspirations by ‘leading skills demand’. As such, employers and employees were redefined and rearticulated as ‘partner-subjects’ of the Skills Strategy for England. Repositioned as relative subordinates in relation to the state, state policy and policy delivery; expected to listen and respond to the state-led vision and targets in order to enhance their otherwise underdeveloped skills aspirations and behaviours.

*“The best way to increase employer demand is by helping employers to rethink their business and organisational strategies around more ambitious goals.” (PIU, 2001:8)*

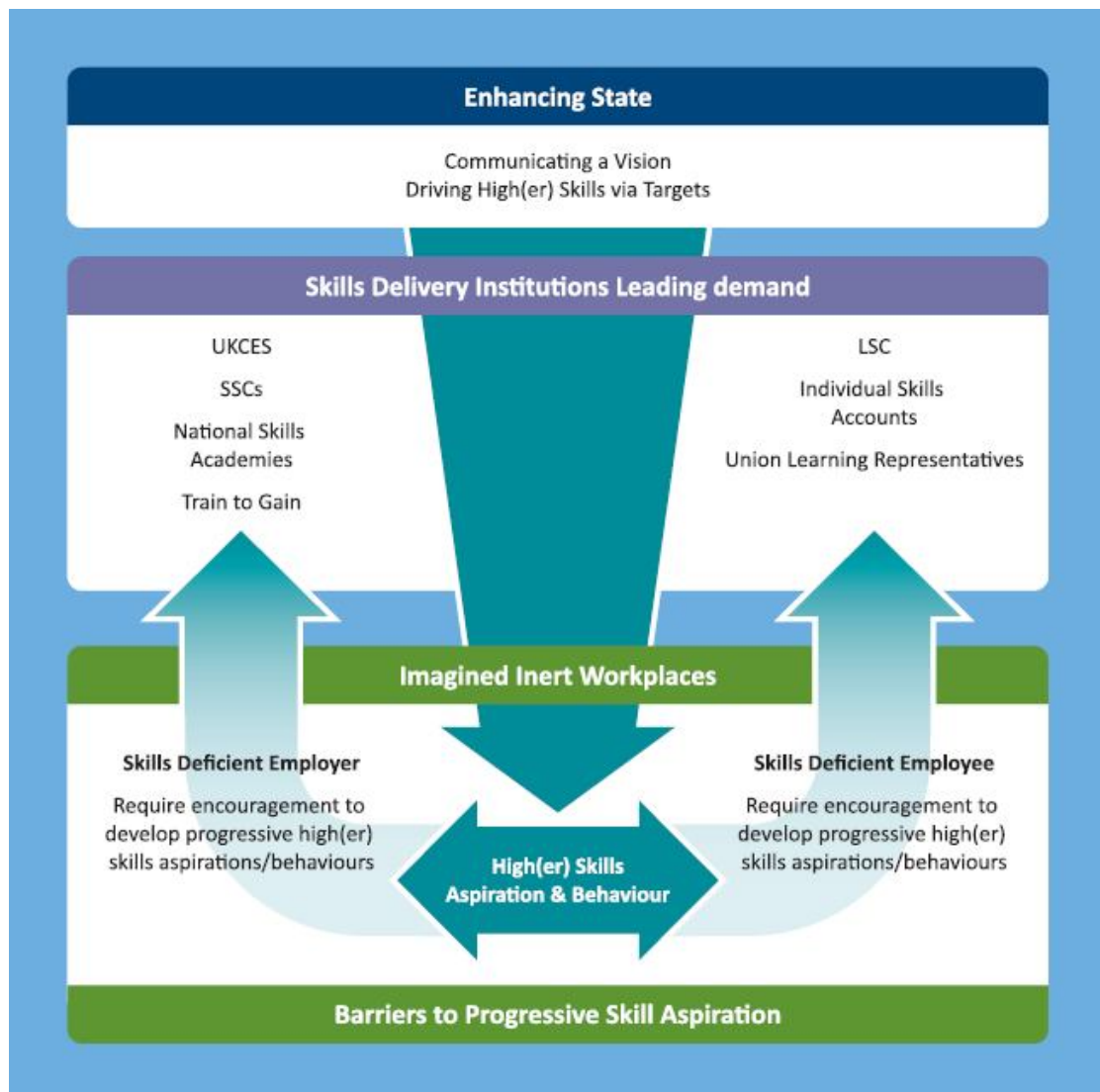
*“Employers need to be persuaded to adopt best practices in developing their employees and to put in place appropriate strategies to make best use of these individuals within a learning organisation.” (PIU, 2001:80)*

*“Somehow you’ve got to incentivise an individual worker to say ‘look I’m alright now - I’ve a decent job here - but where do I want to be in five years’ time, and how do I actually get the advice to be able to say well will this job actually be here in five years’ time?’ [...] One of the tasks of government is to be able to start to act as that broker [...] so that people actually do invest in their own training and the employers invest in their workforce.” (PM2)*

## 7.2.4 Summary: The Strategy for Leading Demand

This section has outlined the second of three strategies for skills. Figure 7.1 below illustrates the findings of this section.

**Figure 7.1: The Strategy for Leading Demand**



*Source: author's analysis, compilation and design*

Overall the section presents a distinct strategy to lead demand for skills based on a particular rearrangement of skills actors and the relationships between them, again defined, articulated, and assembled into an order and system of organisation by the state, in relation to imagined inert workplaces. The slightly more negatively depicted image of the inert workplace positions employers and employees in subordinate

relation to a state-driven vision, and regime of targets, for high(er) skills. A vision and regime of targets deemed necessary to affect the high(er) skills necessary to mitigate complexity and mediate coherence. A vision and regime of targets to lead the unblocking of problematic deficient demand, and therefore legitimised as a state-led partnership directing partner-subjects for their own good. The institutions of skill delivery are reorder and reorganised to realise the vision and targets. As leaders of people their function shifts from listening to communicating, promoting, persuading, and encouraging, in order to enact the enhancement ambitions of the state.

This chapter now turns to describe the last of the three skills strategies identified in the interpretive analysis of policy-makers narratives (documentary analysis and analysis of interviews). This last strategy for skills has been termed the strategy to mitigate and circumvent lack of demand.

### ***7.3 Irresponsible Workplaces: An emancipating state, mitigating and circumventing lack of demand***

This section describes the imaginary of 'irresponsible' workplaces. Or more specifically, it describes policy-makers' narratives that constructed 'irresponsible' businesses or 'irresponsible' worker-citizens as not only lacking requisite high(er) skills aspirations and behaviours, but that furthermore demonstrated a deviant lack of interest in, and regard for, skills improvement.

Organised slightly differently from previous sections from here, it then goes on to describe the responding role of the state: firstly to exhort the need for changed behaviours; and secondly, where these changed behaviours failed to materialise, the withdrawal of the state from any direct responsibility for the consequences of skills deviance (inevitable business failure or the declining employability, and therefore security and prosperity, of worker-citizens and their families). Given the withdrawal of the state from any direct responsibility for the business or individual consequences of skills deviance, the New Labour Skills Strategy was reconceptualised and refocused as principally serving to mitigate and circumvent the ramifications of this lack of skills

demand on behalf of vulnerable others. Policy-makers' narratives tended to juxtapose skills deviant businesses and disempowered and vulnerable worker-citizens, and skills deviant worker-citizens and disempowered and vulnerable businesses.

Such a positioning of the relationship between skills actors at the workplace rendered necessary an 'emancipating' role for the institutions of skills delivery that were depicted as functioning – behind the scenes - to address bad behaviour, and release the disempowered and vulnerable party. In short the reconceptualised and refocused New Labour Skills Strategy, that sought to 'circumvent lack of demand', became the means to free the progressive aspirations of disempowered and vulnerable worker-citizens from the bondage of the 'bad boss' in the low-skills business, or became the means by which businesses could free their progressive aspirations, otherwise suffocated by the indolence of the low-skilled 'bad worker'.

### **7.3.1 Constructing and Positioning Irresponsibility: the absence of skills partnership**

#### ***Constructing the Irresponsible Business: A deviant outsider***<sup>55</sup>

Alongside policy-makers' narratives of 'enlightened' businesses and 'inert' businesses, an additional narrative of 'irresponsible' businesses can be extricated as a discrete story being told through skills policy discourse. These 'irresponsible' businesses were described by policy-makers as both undervaluing skills, and undervaluing low-skilled employees.

Policy-makers lamented the resilience of low skills equilibrium. Raising concerns about the unacceptably large proportion of businesses that are "*some way off the pace*" (DIUS, 2007a:38) with regard to valuing the benefits of high(er) skills for progressive innovative product market and production strategies (Strategy Unit, 2002:8). Businesses that routinely failed to invest in skills and engage in training their workforce.

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<sup>55</sup> This section draws on document analysis and compiled data also presented in a contribution to the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) National Research Report for the United Kingdom (2009) published by CEDEFOP. This paper is referenced in the bibliography as Durrant (2009).



Drawing on survey data<sup>56</sup> policy documents for England, published throughout the fieldwork period, made repeated reference to an identified one-third of firms (35%) that have no training budget, persistently do no training at all, and 'condemned' eight million employees to go without training at the workplace (Leitch, 2006:12; DIUS, 2007a:37; DIUS, 2008b:4; UKCES, 2009b). A further 6% of firms in England were identified as only offering a minimum of induction and health and safety training (DIUS, 2007a:37).

Likelihood of training was also shown to be considerably variable by sector (UKCES, 2009b), and size of business. According to the UKCES (2009b)<sup>57</sup>, in the following sectors significantly more than 35% of employers reported offering no training at all to employees: fashion and textiles (53%); environment and land based (48%); passenger transport (45%); and process and manufacturing sectors (42%). Smaller employers were less likely to train, with only just over half of the smallest firms providing any training or workforce development activity (LSC, 2008). According to NESS data, the most common reason for not training given by those employers that didn't train was that they believed their employees to already be adequately proficient in their job (UKCES, 2009b). Indeed Fauth & Brinkley (2006) reported evidence of overqualification in the labour market, even amongst employees with fairly basic levels of skills<sup>58</sup>.

Furthermore, even in those businesses that did train, the training that was done was identified as mostly unaccredited<sup>59</sup> (Glesson & Keep, 2004), and disproportionately weighted towards those with existing higher levels of skills and qualification attainment<sup>60</sup> (PM2; Strategy Unit, 2002:12; DfES, 2005a). Indeed, the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) reported highly-skilled workers to be five times more likely to receive

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<sup>56</sup> For England, a much cited source of survey data was the LSC National Employers Skills Survey (NESS). The NESS was conducted in 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007 and 2009. Since 2009 the UKCES has taken over the role of conducting employer skills surveys for the whole of the UK; the most recent being the UK Employer Skills Survey, 2011.

<sup>57</sup> Drawing on the 2007 NESS data

<sup>58</sup> See also TUC (2007) for a review of the evidence for overqualification in the UK workforce

<sup>59</sup> In general, when compared with European competitor nations, the proportion of UK employees receiving *certified* continuing vocational training is low (Dent & Wiseman, 2008; UKCES: 2009b; OECD, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> It should also be noted that according to Labour Force Survey data analysed by Page & Hillage (2006), likelihood of training also declines significantly with age, as does training duration (a measure of training quality). Although women are more likely to receive training (UKCES, 2009b), average training intensity (a measure of training quality) remains greater amongst men, and being non-white negatively affects both likelihood of receiving training and training duration/intensity (DfES, 2005c).

training at work than low-skilled workers (Leitch, 2006:50)<sup>61</sup>. As such, policy-makers' narratives presented 'irresponsible' businesses as overlooking and undervaluing the development of low-skilled employees (DIUS, 2007a:25).

By undervaluing skills and undervaluing low-skilled employees, policy-makers positioned 'irresponsible' businesses as failing to recognise the inherent complexities of the economic environment in which they operate; complexities that require them to pursue high(er) skills strategies across the board as the means to progress. Irresponsible businesses were therefore positioned as 'outsiders' to the skills partnership, failing to recognise their private responsibility to act in the public interest with regard to skills.

*"Many private and public sector organisations undervalue how better skilled, trained and qualified workforce can improve their 'bottom line' performance. Such organisations can experience a 'low skills equilibrium', producing low value-added products and services, making it harder for us to compete internationally." (DfES, 2003:19, emphasis added)*

Policy-makers' narratives repeatedly insisted on the need for 'action' to ensure more lower-skilled workers received training, (PIU, 2001:61; HM Treasury, 2002:12; Leitch, 2006; DIUS, 2007a)

### ***Constructing the Irresponsible Worker-Citizen: A deviant outsider***

In addition to defining and describing 'irresponsible' businesses as lacking skills aspirations, policy-makers' narratives depicted and lamented a widespread lack of appetite and desire to train and learn among worker-citizens (Leitch, 2006:2). The 2001 Cabinet Office report – In Demand: Adult Skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – had a section headed *"Many individuals lack the motivation to learn"* (PIU, 2001:35), and, by analysing data from the 1997 National Adult Learning Survey, went on to highlight *"how little motivation many individuals have to participate in any activity through which they may learn new skills or acquire new knowledge"* (ibid: 36).

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<sup>61</sup> Evidence suggests that employees are more likely to start benefiting from employer investment and provision of training once they have attained a minimum level of basic skills or an NVQ level 2 qualification (HM Treasury, 2002:11).

In contrast to the depiction of 'inert' worker-citizens that have latent progressive skills aspirations but face barriers to training and learning, in this imaginary individuals were seen as having more deviant reasons for not engaging in their own skills development. Leitch (2006:106) identified *"lack of interest"* in learning as an attitudinal barrier, distinct from lack of confidence and practical barriers such as lack of time or resources. Recklessly irresponsible worker-citizens were seen as harbouring a contumacious *"preference to spend free time doing other things"* (PIU, 2001:36). Again, policy-makers' narratives insisted on the need for individuals to recognise their private responsibility with regard to skills development.

*"There is a responsibility on the individual to do it as well, you know to take part in it [...] for the individual to actually go out and do their best."* (PM1)

### **7.3.2 The role of the state: exhorting change, excluding deviance**

#### ***Exhorting changed behaviours***

In response to an identified 'irresponsible' lack of skills aspiration and behaviour among workplace actors, and recognising their inability to act alone in pursuance of a high(er) skills vision (PIU, 2001; Strategy Unit, 2002; DfES, 2005a; Leitch, 2006; DIUS, 2007a; PM2; PM4), policy rhetoric urged employers and employees to accept the obligations on them to alter their attitudes. In contrast to the keen portrayal of skills as instinctively cohering public and private interests (whether manifest or latent) and as such the proclamation of an endorsed high(er) skills consensus (certainly where policy-makers imagine businesses as 'enlightened' and worker-citizens as 'motivated') this image of 'irresponsible' businesses and worker-citizens suggested that lack of interest in skills had to be checked and brought in line through the self-correction of private actors.

*"Changes in Government policy must be accompanied by changes in attitudes and in work culture. [...] Government action alone cannot bring about the sorts of changes necessary to make a real impact on the problems of low skills. It is important that*

*everyone [...] takes seriously their responsibility to deliver a high skill, high productivity economy.” (HM Treasury, 2002:20)*

Therefore, in relation to an imaginary of ‘irresponsible’ workplaces the role of the state in policy-makers’ narratives shifted from encouraging an enhanced culture of training and learning, to exhorting changed behaviours of employers and employees; insisting on a required set of properly responsible skills aspirations and behaviours. Policy-makers described their role as *“informing people that they’re morally responsible”* (PM4); as requiring *“[worker-citizens] to think about why they should get the qualification and making the employer understand that they have a responsibility over it”* (PM4).

Specifically, businesses were described as required to engage with a *“something for something approach”*; as needing to *“play their part”*, by *“raising their engagement in skills at all levels and using skills effectively”* (Leitch, 2006:87). As such, there was a strong insistence that employers should realise their responsibility to use the skills products and services that were on offer to train their employees (Leitch, 2006:89; DIUS, 2007a:12); particularly their low-skills employees. In essence, employers’ were urged to turn their backs on the exploitative deviance of operating in low skills equilibrium, which in turn would enable them, and ‘UK plc.’, to better compete in conditions of heightened global competition (DfES, 2003:30).

Furthermore, and in support of ‘UK plc.’ and ‘UK social’, policy-makers’ narratives urged employers to take responsibility for the broader career development needs of their employees (HM Treasury, 2002:20). Investing in ‘portable skills’ and ‘accredited training’ (Leitch, 2006:88) because, in the context of uncertainty-based complexity, they recognised that their ‘social’ responsibilities extended beyond their immediate business needs.

*“You know, we want the business to do better if we have [employees] better skilled and everything else, but also to understand exactly what it means if [they] fall on hard times [...] that they’ve equally got a responsibility there”* (PM1).

Individual worker-citizens were similarly described as needing to “*play their part in a shared mission for world class skills*” (Leitch, 2006:22); to “*feel that it is their responsibility to improve their skills throughout their lives*” (DIUS, 2007a:7); to “*take responsibility for their personal career development, and be prepared to learn new skills*” (HM Treasury, 2002:20). Specifically, to realise their responsibility to gain the ‘economically valuable skills’ necessary to bolster their “*ability to contribute*” to their workplace and “*make the most of [their] own lives*” (DIUS, 2007a:35)

*“We want to create a nation where all adults, whether employees, employers, self-employed or non-employed, understand that training is the only reliable route to sustained employability, progression and success over a lifetime.” (DIUS, 2007a:35)*

*“Our ambition is that we become a society in which young people and adults expect to keep learning and developing new skills, because everyone takes it for granted that you need skills to get a good job and a fulfilling life.” (DFES, 2005:7)*

### ***Excluding the deviant: the withdrawal of the state***

Running alongside strong exhortation for businesses and worker-citizens to change their behaviour and amend their deviant attitudes towards reliance on low skills, was the fundamental axiom – common to LMEs in general and voluntarist ET systems specifically - that governments cannot compel the actions of private actors (PIU, 2001). Although earlier policy documents did not rule out the possibility of enforcing a minimum level of engagement with education and training at the workplace, and the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) recommended revisiting the case for compulsion should adequate progress towards the ‘2020 ambition’ not be made by employers and employees on a voluntary basis (a recommendation that provided an ever present threat to incentivise the urged need for changed behaviours), these recommendations were uttered tentatively, and were invariably closely followed by a list of reservations and warnings about the ineffectiveness of any such measures and mechanisms (Leitch, 2006:94; DIUS, 2007a:44; PM1; PM2).

Given the absence of a strong commitment to compulsion, and policy-makers insistence that ultimately engagement and investment in skills should be a private

responsibility, there was a clear sense that where businesses and worker-citizens refrained from changing their behaviours the inevitable consequences of declining productivity/profitability and employability in circumstances of heightened competition was not the responsibility of the state. Businesses that ostracise themselves from the 'skills partnership' were described as having full responsibility for the likelihood that they would fail as a result of: positioning themselves in the wrong product markets with the wrong product specification; losing their capable workforce; and, as a result of resisting the need to change their production strategies, finding themselves more and more unable to make improvements, and more and more at a distance from 'best practice' (PIU, 2001:8).

*"The reality is they will go out of business, you know. There will be such a small demand for an unskilled or low-skilled workforce-based business in the future, and that really is the challenge for employers". (PM3)*

*"You can lose your workforce or you can retain it. You can build your business to the next level or stay there and die. So it's hard economics, and it's not the government's job to sustain low level business at all." (PM2)*

Equally, worker-citizens that ostracise themselves from the 'skills partnership' were described as having full responsibility for the likelihood that they would fail to secure the potential for improving their lives by failing to realise the opportunity to reap the greater prosperity rewards of better market compatibility.

*"The Government cannot promise people jobs for life. Nor can we promise to meet the cost of all the training and learning that people need. Individuals have to play their part, in terms of motivation, engagement and financial investment" (DfES, 2005:17)*

*"It's a statement that was made that I believe is actually true that the greatest improvement people can make in their lives is by earning. You know you can do lots of other things in your life which are great – you know having a family, loving, and all the rest of it is fantastic – but life is much better and easier if you're also earning a living. [...] but the level of job that you can get also puts a burden and a responsibility on the individual. So I can, you know if I want to get on and do stuff then I've got to do something about it as well, nobody's going to come along and just give me all of this.*

*Not many of us have got where we have got just by [pause] whatever. Most of it is hard work isn't it? [...] So other people can make the opportunity but unless you take it, it won't happen for you." (PM1)*

In summary, having remade employers or employees that don't and won't train (lack demand for skills) as irresponsible, policy-makers remade the role of the state as either to exhort changed attitudes and behaviours, or to exclude the deviant by removing the consequence of deviance (business failure, and declining employability and social security) from the care, concern or responsibility of the state. The next section shows how, given the depiction of persistently irresponsible employers or employees as outside the scope of the skills strategy, the position and function of skills delivery became to mitigate and circumvent this deviant lack of demand on behalf of, and to emancipate, the vulnerable other.

### **7.3.3 Imagining and structuring the skills delivery architecture: mitigating and circumventing lack of demand**

#### ***The 'Bad Boss', the vulnerable employee, and the Skills Strategy***

Policy-makers presented images of the *"bad boss"* (PIU, 2001:34; PM1; PM4) juxtaposed with images of the 'vulnerable' employee being 'left behind' as a consequence of being *"trapped in a cycle of low-skilled, poorly-paid, often short-term employment with few training opportunities"* (DIUS, 2007a:22). These 'bad bosses' were described as both actively and maliciously undervaluing, and deliberately intending to hold back the skills development of their employees, in order to maintain their vulnerability in the employment relationship and in the labour market at large.

Indeed, in interviews policy-makers offered an impression of businesses as wantonly disregarding their lower-skilled workers, and their potential. As failing to recognise their contribution in ways which called to mind an image of deviant employment practices, designed to reinforce and sustain (at least overlook) the existing discriminatory and oppressive imbalance of power relations and status at the workplace.

*“I’ve talked to hundreds of employers over the years and their position doesn’t change. If the person’s employed, already with them - so it’s Joe or Sally who sits in that bit – then it’s: ‘oh they don’t need their qualification. I just want them to have the experience of doing the thing’. As soon as Joe leaves they advertise that job as the qualified job, with the qualification. It’s absolutely bizarre. Then for their own children they want them to have the best qualifications in the country.” (PM4)*

*“Employers think they know what skills those lower-skilled – or ‘unqualified’ as they would say – people have, but actually if they sit and measure what they do they are huge skills, [...] it’s quite amazing how people on the shop floor can just change the way in which something is done. I don’t say that in a patronising way. I’m just saying it in the sense of recognising it. And in a way these people haven’t expected any recognition either; it’s never been in their mind-set. They just do the job because it’s quicker that way, and it’s easier, and we can all work as a team better if we all do it this way, and so all those skills [pause]. If you just listen to what I’m saying, they’re huge skills aren’t they” (PM1)*

This disregarding of lower-skilled workers – the refusal to recognise their capabilities and develop their potential via skills and qualifications - was further explained in policy-makers’ narratives as firstly associated with the ‘bad bosses’ treatment of the workforce (or segments of the workforce) as disposable and infinity replaceable (PM1; PM2; PM4); and secondly, as serving to restrict the low-skilled workers employability potential in the wider labour market (PM1; PM3), effectively ‘handcuffing’ them to the workplace on the low-pay and fragile employment terms offered.

*“If they’re not an enlightened employer or anything it’s because they don’t want that person to be promotable elsewhere; it’s a protection, it’s like a handcuff. They’re handcuffing them into that organisation [...]. But often employers wrap it up as a caring thing, they say: ‘oh I don’t want Joe or Sally to have to go through the sort of harassment and stress of doing tests’, you know. But I think it’s just an excuse.” (PM4)*

In response to this problematic image of the ‘bad boss’ policy-makers’ narratives remade the institutions and mechanisms of skills delivery as functioning to mitigate and circumvent this deviant lack of skills demand, and emancipate the vulnerable worker-citizen. Firstly, the tools of skills policy – particularly the LSC, the Train to Gain



initiative, and the free entitlement for first full NVQ level 2 (and in some cases NVQ level 3) qualifications - were recast in a new role to overcome the 'selfishness' of irresponsible businesses (PM1); as seeking to enact exhortation of changed behaviours through practice. They described the LSC's quality control function, Train to Gain brokers, and Union Learning Representatives (ULRs), as not just responding to what businesses want in terms of skills development, but as requiring them to undertake a more holistic review of the skills needs of their entire workforce; particularly those lower-skilled employees requiring basic and NVQ level 2 qualifications. In this way brokerage was described as presenting "a carrot and a stick" (PM1) to employers; preventing them from 'cherry-picking' their engagement with skills, and making full qualification attainment – in the interest of the vulnerable worker-citizen - a condition of receipt of funding.

*"[In the past] employers could say [...] 'well I really just want [employee] to do this, this, and this, because that's just what I need for the job'. Now that might be fine but it's like a third of a level 2 qualification, and the [LSC and broker] was saying 'well no, she needs all these other things'. So, in the end, that was the carrot and stick stuff - for you to get those bits that you [employer] want I [employee] was able to get the other bits as well to give me a better opportunity for moving on." (PM1)*

*"If we were going to go down an employer focused strategy we wouldn't [pause] we might have bended to some of the lobby groups that say qualifications don't matter, but qualifications really matter for the individual; all our research shows that that's what the individual really wants, yeah. So we've made sure that the qualification focus is there." (PM4)*

Along with Train to Gain as a policy tool to persuade employers to change their behaviour towards lower-skilled employees need for training and development, the New Labour Administration introduced the 'Skills Pledge'. Recommended in the Leitch Review of Skills (2006:4), the Skills Pledge was described as a mechanism by which the leadership of a business could make a voluntary commitment to instigate a 'new workplace partnership' (DIUS, 2007a:54) by agreeing to train their workforce to a minimum of NVQ level 2 (DIUS, 2007a:53; DIUS, 2008b:9); and as a way for government to measure commitment towards the '2020 ambition'. The Skills Pledge

was therefore offered as an alternative (carrot) to revisiting the case for compulsion (stick), and the introduction of a statutory entitlement to workplace training (Leitch, 2006:20). The Skills Pledge was described in ceremonious terms as a “*particular form of words*” (PM1; also DIUS, 2007a:54) constituting a formal promise made by the employer to their employees, accompanied by “*celebrations of signing*” (PM1). Policy-makers claimed that this ‘carrot-with-the-threat-of-a-stick’ approach offered employers an incentive to change their behaviours towards engaging with, and investing, in education and training for the low-skilled workers (PM1; PM4); an incentive that was, at least in part, about avoiding stigma. Successive policy documents made reference to and commend the increasing number of employers who had signed up. Naming those that had as explicitly ‘good’ employers and urging them to become “Skills Pledge Champions” (DIUS, 2007a:55) to actively recruit further businesses to the cause, therefore implicitly shaming those deviant enough to continue to resist the pressure to reform their attitudes.

In short, policy-makers’ narratives described the Skills Strategy as functioning as exhortation through practice; as instigating the reappraisal and revaluing of lower-skilled employees, by drawing attention to their existing but unacknowledged capability and their potential for future development.

*“This is the massive change in level 2 that this Government’s brought about - responsibility to train people. [...] What this level 2 stuff has done is give value to those jobs, so even if we have to lose our job because the business isn’t there then we’ve got something else to go to, and I think that’s a - for me - that’s a real social issue.” (PM1)*

To complement the Skills Pledge, and the exhortation through practice of the requirement to revalue lower-skilled workers, the New Labour Administration later consulted on and introduced (after the completion of fieldwork) a statutory right for employees to request time off for training<sup>62</sup>, known as ‘time to train’ (DIUS, 2008b). The introduction of this right to request was again accompanied by a guarantee from government to further delay the review of voluntarism and the revisiting of

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<sup>62</sup> Employees are eligible to make this request as long as they: work in an organisation that employs more than 250 employees; are over 19; have a contract of employment; and have been with the employer for a minimum of 26 weeks.

compulsion; and therefore again was described as offering employers a 'carrot-with-the-threat-of-a-stick' by which to redress their deviant attitudes to training low-skilled employees. Specifically, one policy-maker described 'time to train' as *giving employers the chance to be enlightened employers, and then we'll see what happens next*" (PM4).

As well as representing exhortation through practice, the right to request time off for training was also described in policy-makers' narratives as serving as a mechanism to redress power imbalances in the workplace, and therefore emancipating employees from the restrictive, discriminatory and oppressive practices of irresponsible employers. John Denham, in the foreword to the 2008 consultation on the introduction of 'time to train' (DIUS, 2008b:4) described the initiative as *"giving all employees in England a right to a serious conversation with their employer about their skills development"*. In essence 'time to train' was presented as a means for vulnerable employees, denied access to training – particularly training leading to a qualification – in the past, to *"make demands"* (PM2) at the workplace in relation to their own skills development, and exercise control over their own learning (DIUS, 2008b:11).

The introduction of Individual Skills Accounts (and the associated IAG) was presented in policy-makers' narratives as likewise giving vulnerable and disempowered employees back agency and leverage over their own circumstances. Giving them 'control' as well as 'choice' in skills decision making as a result of having options to *"develop their careers away from their existing employer or alongside their current jobs"* (Leitch, 2006:24).

*"For those who are not being supported to train in the workplace, Skills Accounts will become the way into learning and up-skilling."* (DIUS, 2007a:27)

*"Individuals need opportunities to train to change jobs within a flexible labour market, particularly where their current employer is not committed to training."* (DfES, 2003:17)

In this way the Skills Strategy further withdrew from taking responsibility for the inevitable failure of irresponsible businesses, and instead operated 'behind the scenes' to enable vulnerable worker-citizens to circumvent the lack of demand for skill displayed by their deviant employer. Helping them to develop and enhance their

progressive aspirations (PM1), and ultimately ensure that they can reposition themselves favourably in relation to the better functioning parts of the labour market where there is a consensus of high(er) skills aspiration and behaviour in the context of economic (and social) complexity. As one policy-maker explained

*"I don't think anyone's going to regulate call centres to say you have to have an NVQ. There are call centre qualifications, but I don't think anyone's going to regulate and say you have to do that. And people, I'm sure, get treated extremely badly in some of them. Is the objective of skills policy to get them treated better? Probably not, but the objective of the Skills Strategy might well be to give them the qualifications so they can choose not to be employed there anymore" (PM3)*

### ***The 'Bad Worker', the 'vulnerable' employer & the Skills Strategy***

As discussed (in section 7.3.1 above) the image of 'irresponsible' worker-citizen is set apart in policy discourse from the images of 'inert' worker-citizen struggling against barriers to training and learning, as having a deviant lack of appetite, interest and motivation to invest and engage in skills. These indolent individuals were consequently presented as holding back aspirational businesses from developing the high(er) skills capacities and capabilities needed to stay competitive in complex economic conditions (Leitch, 2005:6). Policy documents highlight employers' persistent experiences of skills deficiencies, gaps and shortages within their workforce and within the wider labour market that they recruit from (Leitch, 2005:6; Leitch, 2006:41). The NESS 2005 (cited in Leitch, 2006) reported one in four vacancies as 'hard to fill' due to the skills deficiencies of applicants, and 1.3 million employees as not fully proficient in their job.

To overcome these apparent problems with the stock of human capital (Leitch, 2005:6), policy-makers' narratives referenced the need for individuals to 'change their behaviour' (Leitch, 2006:22) *"demanding more of themselves"* (Leitch, 2006:17) in relation to training and learning and *"working with their employers to improve their skills in work"* (Leitch, 2006:103). To take more responsibility for their part in attaining the skills required for the success of the business in which they are employed. In short,

to *“think about updating their skills and qualifications, to ensure that they are giving employers what they really need”* (DIUS, 2007a:4).

*“There is also a responsibility for individuals to contribute to the success of the organisation that employs them by discussing their skills needs with their employer and participating in training programmes tailored to the needs of the organisation.”* (DfES, 2003:31

In response to this problematic image of the ‘bad worker’ policy-makers’ narratives remade the institutions and mechanisms of skills delivery as functioning to mitigate and circumvent this deviant lack of skills demand and emancipate the vulnerable business. The tools of skills policy – particularly the Train to Gain initiative, the free entitlement for first full NVQ level 2 (and in some cases NVQ level 3) qualifications, the SSCs, and the Skills Pledge - were again reconceptualised as functioning to overcome the indolence of irresponsible employees, and release the aspirations of businesses from the suffocating burden of low-skill, low-aspiration workers.

Specifically, the role of brokerage as part of the Train to Gain offer was recast as serving to raise employers’ awareness of the skills shortages they have by diagnosing the deficiencies within their existing workforce. Helping businesses to understand the implications of these deficiencies in light of economic developments, uncertainties and perpetual change, and identify relevant education and training programmes for their employees that meet the business need and circumvent deviant lack of demand for skills amongst their irresponsible employees (Leitch, 2006:91; DIUS, 2008b:6).

Furthermore, the SSCs and Train to Gain were described as explicitly driving an economic agenda through the Skills Strategy; ensuring that providers and provision were exclusively focused on the delivery of the *“economically valuable skills”* (Leitch, 2006:2) that businesses need. Contradicting the constructed coherence between ‘skills for employment’ and ‘skills for a more rewarding life’ policy-makers’ narratives explained worker-citizens as no longer able to look to a state-subsidised education and training system for their *“social life”* (PM4), but to recognise government’s first and foremost priority as the needs of employers for useful and useable employees (PM4).

Making this “*economic mission*” (DfES, 2006:5) a priority, was described as giving employers’ back ‘control’ (Leitch, 2006: 82) over skills decision making, and as again emancipating them from the lack of demand – or lack of correct demand – for skills amongst irresponsible worker-citizens.

*“We will put the economic mission of the sector at the heart of its role. That means defining its central purpose as being to equip young people and adults with the skills, competencies and qualifications that employers want, and which will prepare them for productive, rewarding, high-value employment in a modern economy.” (DfES, 2006:5)*

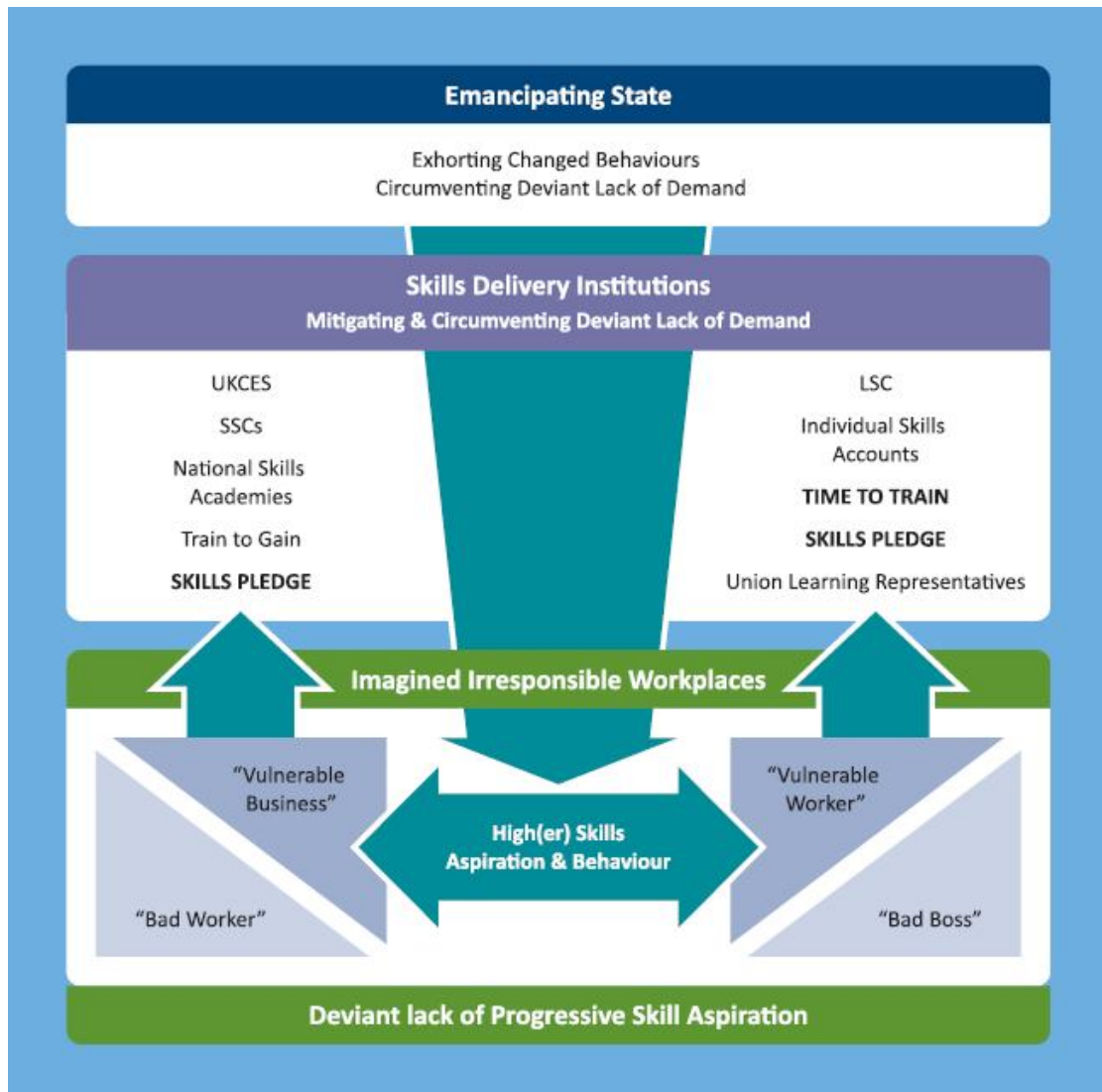
*“We want to create a future where employers say, clearly and consistently, that our workforce now have the skills that are needed for productive employment and business success” (DIUS, 2007a:40)*

Finally, policy-makers narratives also reconceptualised the Skills Pledge from a commitment by employers to train their low-skilled employees to a statement of intention made by employers to set the tone of expectation for low-skilled employees to address their skills deficiencies in line with the requirements of business success. Employers were described as being able to use the Pledged commitment to drive up skills, productivity and performance in the workplace (DfES, 2008b:9); thereby mitigating the consequences of the deviant lack of skills demand amongst irresponsible worker-citizens.

#### **7.3.4 Summary: The Strategy for Mitigating and Circumventing Lack of Demand**

This section has outlined the last of three strategies for skills. Figure 7.2 below illustrates the findings of this section.

**Figure 7.2: The Strategy for Mitigating and Circumventing Lack of Demand**



*Source: author’s analysis, compilation and design*

Again the section presents a distinct strategy for skills based on a particular rearrangement of skills actors and the relationships between them, again defined, articulated, and assembled into an order and system of organisation by the state. In this case related to the negative imaginary of irresponsible workplaces, where either the employer or the employees demonstrate a deviant lack of demand for skills; particularly given the identified uncertainty-based complexity of a dynamic economy. The role of the state, through the institutions, practices and processes of skill delivery, becomes to exhort changed attitudes and behaviours and/or mitigate and circumvent – working behind the scenes - the deviant disregard for high(er) skills to emancipate

the vulnerability party. The aim of the skills strategy becomes to separate the juxtaposed 'vulnerable worker' from the bondage of the 'bad boss', or to free the juxtaposed 'vulnerable business' from the indolence of the 'bad worker'. Again the workplace occupies a subordinate position as subject to this state-led intervention; a suite of products and services designed to operate in both the public interest (for better business or worker-citizen prospects), and the private interest of the disempowered other. However, persistent skills deviance is not the care, concern or responsibility of the state.

#### ***7.4 Discussion and Concluding Reflections***

This chapter is the second of two that have been focused on exposing, explaining and understanding the relationship between the formal dimension of skill policy (Chapter 5) - the semiotic construal and construction of 'progress in partnership' as the 'object' of governance (Jessop, 2008; Jessop, 2009), in relation to a selected economic and social imaginary defined by complexity and coherence - and the operational dimension of 'how skills are done'. The argument of both chapters is that the operational dimension of skills policy (doing skills under New Labour) involved state work (not a neutral state à la VoC, or a straightforwardly partisan state à la PRA) to discursively and materially 'articulate' and 'assemble' (Newman & Clarke, 2009a) the component parts of the skills project: imagined skills actors; the relations between them at the site of the workplace; the form of the state; and the organisational arrangements, resources, practices, and processes for skills delivery, into distinct architectures of skill governance. These architectures have their foundations in the imagined degree of responsible skill aspiration and behaviour of workplace actors in relation to the high(er) skills logic established in policy.

There is a clear distinction between the two chapters. Whilst Chapter 6 discussed the articulation and assemblage of a skills strategy based on imagining workplaces (workplace actors) with a high degree of responsible skill aspiration and behaviour, acting privately in the public interest in recognition of the logic for skills; 'progress in partnership'. This chapter has described two further articulated and assembled skills



strategies based on imagining workplaces (workplace actors) that exhibit a deficient or deviant lack of responsible skill aspiration and behaviour.

Where Chapter 6 presented a demand-led strategy; by caricaturing responsible workplaces; aligned with a state project and policy to 'support' competitiveness; that positioned the problem of low skills with a delivery system needing to be reconstituted in service to the demands of partner-customer. Chapter 7 has shown a re-conceptualisation of the problem of low skills as emanating from workplaces. By making-up and imagining workplaces as exhibiting a deficient or deviant lack of demand for high(er) skills (again workplaces and workplace actor relations that bear some partial, but accentuated and exaggerated, resemblance to actually existing workplaces) the problem of low skills is given new meaning. From this articulation of workplaces the other component parts of the skills project were articulated and assembled by the state. Strategies for high(er) skills that lead demand or circumvent lack of demand were brought into alignment and sequenced with differently construed and constructed state projects and policies. Projects and policies to discursively 'shape' the market and engender competitiveness concerns in the light of the knowledge-based economy and post-welfare society; or to 'work behind the scenes' to emancipate the vulnerability of either businesses or worker-citizens, armed with justification narratives associated with economic prosperity or social inclusion and social mobility respectively.

In essence what the two chapters offer is an explanation and understanding of how the component parts of doing skills are re-imagined, remade and re-narrated in relation to workplaces with more or less responsible skills aspirations and behaviours, and how these re-imagined, remade and re-narrated component parts are then selected, threaded and stitched together, into differently articulated and assembled strategies for high(er) skills in England:

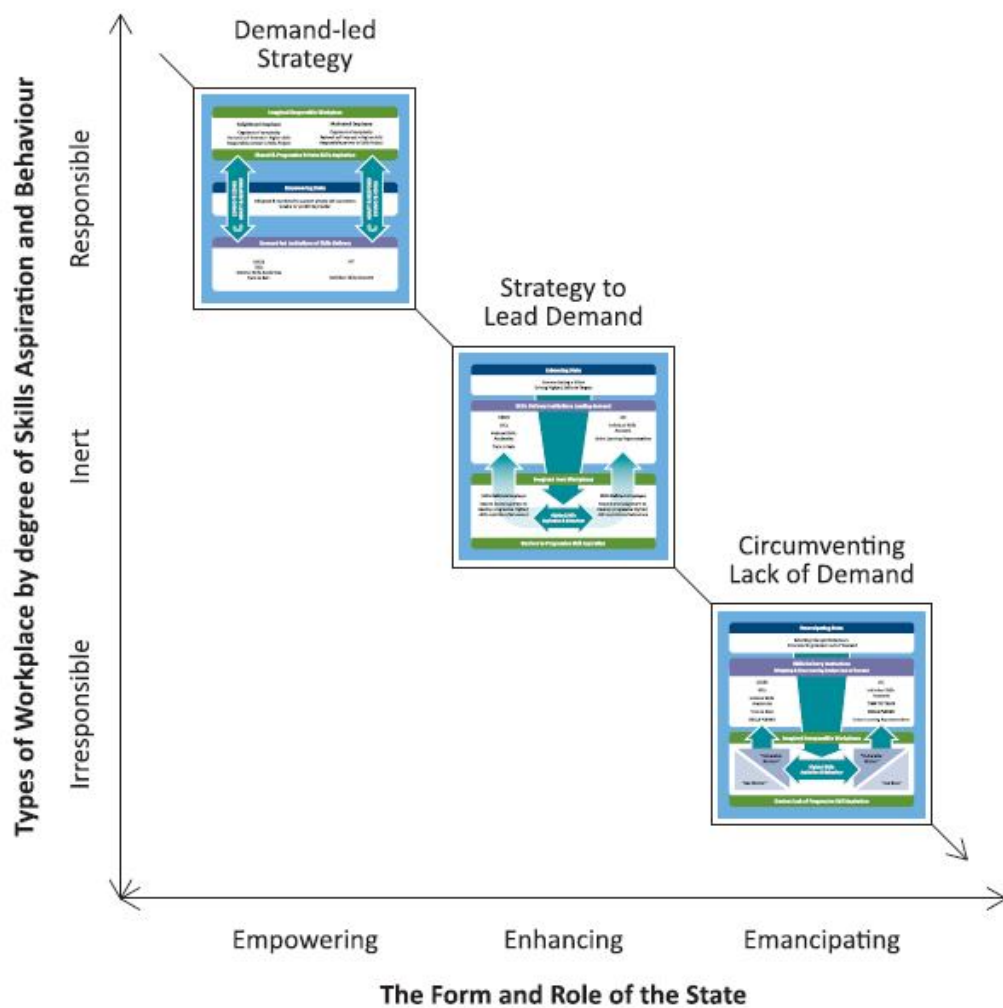
- Imagined *responsible workplaces*, meet an *empowering state*, and a *demand-led* system of skills delivery (Chapter 6)
- Imagined *inert workplaces*, meet an *enhancing state*, and a system of skills delivery to *lead demand* (Chapter 7, section 7.2)

- o Imagined *irresponsible workplaces*, meet an exhorting and *emancipating state*, and a system of skills delivery to *mitigate and circumvent lack of demand* (Chapter 7, section 7.3)

Having established policy as differentiating between workplace types, to be acted on and governed in relation to skills (where imagining different workplace types presumes different governance strategies) the chapters argue that the New Labour Skills Strategy for England can be explained and understood as three distinct strategies (see Figure 7.3 and Table 7.1 below).

The implications of these findings are firstly to confirm the importance of taking a CPE-informed approach to understanding the logic of the regime, the objects of governance and the objectives of policy; an approach that avoids both the VoC tendency to write out the state in LMEs, and a traditional politics of skills approach (i.e. PRA) that has a tendency to neglect the nuanced complexity and multiplicity of state projects and policies. Projects and policies to ‘support’, ‘shape’ or ‘emancipate’ competitiveness for both business productivity and worker-citizen employability, within a selected economic and social imaginary of the knowledge-based economy and post-welfare society. The CPE approach refocuses analytical attention on intersubjective meaning-making or meaning reproduction, and the associated discursive regulation of subjects and subjectivities as state work with real (material) effects; for example, the real effects that are substantiated in the operational remaking of the institutional arrangements for doing skills (from demand-led to demand-leading).

**Figure 7.3: Three Skills Strategies for England (*populated*)**



*Source: author's analysis, compilation and design*

Secondly, by combining CPE with critical governance studies the importance of looking below the level of regime logic ordering of policy objectives to explore how meanings are produced and reproduced in policy has been shown. Borrowing the concepts of articulation and assemblage from Newman & Clarke (2009a) the findings offer an explanation and understanding of three skills strategies for England under New Labour. It is argued that the different strategies involved state work to articulate: types of workplaces; workplace actor relations; the form and role of the state; and the institutions of skills delivery, into assembled and sequenced architectures of ordering and organising the governance of the high(er) skills project. This work was fragile and incomplete, requiring the repeated (re)making, (re)producing or disrupting of discursive and material alignments and alliances between these workplace types, the

institutions of skills delivery and the state. Again this assembling – reordering and reorganising - of the governance of high(er) skills represents an attempt at discursive regulation of skills actors (employers, employees and the institutions of skill deliver) by imagined workplace type proximity to the high(er) skills logic, as well as the redistribution of who does what, gets what, and how; as an attempt, in differently imagined contexts, to dislodge the low skills equilibrium in the context of voluntarism.

In conclusion, taken together Chapters 6 and 7 have shown the different ways in which workplace actors are imagined, articulated and called to action in relation to skills; the ways in which relations between them are ordered by policy-makers; and the way policy organises skills delivery in response. Specifically, how policy-makers distinguish the form and role of the state in producing responsible skills aspirations and behaviours. The conceptual and methodological approach taken offers significant advantages for explaining the nuances of the relationship between the formal and operational dimensions of policy (*cf.* VoC and PRA), and therefore for explaining and accounting for the paradox of a ‘*demand-led*’ strategy for skills; wherein *demand is to be led by the state*; in the *context of voluntarism*.

### ***A note on coherence as opacity: paradox revisited again***

So far the analytical task and contribution of the empirical chapters of this thesis has been to extricate the distinct strategies for skills, from within what is framed as a “*coherent approach*” to high(er) skills ( Foreword by Tony Blair – PIU, 2001:3), to explain and understand the governance – ordering and organising - of skills policy and account for the paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy. As has been shown the distinction between the strategies was based on how the logic for high(er) skills was built and used in policy, and how workplaces and workplace relations were imagined in response. However, at this point it is necessary to remember that the distinct strategies coexisted and were muddled (entangled and intertwined) in policy-makers’ narratives and policy discourse.

Indeed, as was shown in Chapter 1 (also recalled at the beginning of Chapter 6) the discourses of skill policy for England under New Labour shifted somewhat seamlessly

and fluidly between the importance of a *“demand-led approach”* and the facilitation of a *“new culture for learning and an appetite for improved skills amongst individuals and employers”* (Leitch, 2006); between *“putting employers’ needs for skills centre stage”*, and encouraging more employers and employee to raise their demand and *“make the necessary investment in skills”* (DfES, 2003:8). In short, between the demand-led and two versions of demand-leading projects for high(er) skills in England.

Presenting the interpretative analytical findings of this thesis in the form of Table 7.1 below (which displays the distinct strategies, and the ways in which their component parts are depicted and described, side-by-side) is better able to hint at the fluidity between the discursive categorisations of linked ideas, images, actors, institutions, technologies, techniques and tools of skills delivery, and their sequencing in the ordering and organising of skill governance. This presentation makes more apparent the source of skill policy contradiction as ambiguity and the blurring of lines between strategies, resulting in the opacity of policy meanings, practices and processes. The significance of this ambiguity and the blurring of lines between strategies is the focus of the next chapter (Chapter 8) which addresses the last of the empirical sub-questions (SRQ3): how did employer and employee representatives interpret and respond to the New Labour high(er) skills project for England, and with what implications for the ordering and organising of skills delivery?

Table 7.1: Three Skills Strategies for England – the Component Discourses

Proximity to High(er) Skills Logic			
Workplace Imaginary:	<b>'Responsible'</b>	<b>'Inert'</b>	<b>'Irresponsible'</b>
Business/Employer:	<b>'Enlightened'</b> Recognise complexity & coherence High(er) Skills = Higher productivity Bottom-up Demand	<b>'Sluggish'</b> Lack of capacity & capability = Barriers Deficient Demand	<b>'Deviant'</b> Undervalue Skills Undervalue Low-Skilled Employees Lack of Demand
Worker-citizen/Employee:	<b>'Motivated'</b> Recognise complexity & coherence High(er) Skills = Higher employability Bottom-up Demand	<b>'Sluggish'</b> Lack of capacity & capability = Barriers Deficient Demand	<b>'Deviant'</b> Undervalue Skills Lack of Demand
Role of the State:	<b>'Empowering'</b> Act in Private Interest Unable to Predict and Provide Construct partner-customers Workplace-led partnership	<b>'Enhancing'</b> Act in Public Interest State Vision and Targets Construct partner-subject State-led partnership	<b>'Emancipating'</b> Intervene in Public & Private Interest Exhort Changed Behaviours Exclude Deviance Construct partner-subjects State-led intervention
Role of Skills Delivery:	<b>'Demand-Led System'</b> Overcome problems of supply-led system Adapt & Respond to Customer Voice Adapt & Respond to Customer Choice	<b>'System to Lead Demand'</b> Encouraging & Initiating Subjects High(er) Skills Demand Managing Subjects High(er) Skills Demand	<b>'System to Mitigate &amp; Circumvent Lack of Demand'</b> Exhortation through practice: 'Carrots & Sticks' Emancipating the disempowered & vulnerable party: 'Support Behind the Scenes'

## 8. Talking Back to Policy Opacity: The Limits of State-Steered Voluntarism

### 8.1 Introduction

The analytical task of the previous two chapters (Chapters 6 and 7) has been to explicate from within the entangled, collapsed and therefore opaque paradox - of a 'demand-led' strategy; wherein *demand is to be led by the state*; in the context of voluntarism - the distinct strategies for governing skill in England under New Labour: the demand-led strategy; the strategy for leading demand; and the strategy for mitigating and circumventing lack of demand. The chapters have shown that defining these distinct strategies involved state work to (re)articulate and (re)assemble: imagined skills actors; their relations at the site of the workplace; the form of the state; and the organisational arrangements, resources, practices and processes of doing skills delivery.

This chapter now turns to address the final empirical sub-question of this thesis: how did employer and employee representatives interpret and respond to the New Labour high(er) skills project for England, and with what implications for the ordering and organising of skills delivery (SRQ3). Drawing on document analysis and interviews with strategic employer representatives and employee representatives, and interviews with strategic representatives of skills delivery (see Chapter 4), the chapter offers an interpretative analysis of how representatives of workplace actors utilised the opacity between distinct, but entangled and collapsed together, strategies for governing skills in England to reassemble and remake the strategy, and the effects for skill delivery. The chapter argues that collapsing and entangling (blurring the lines between) the strategies effectively creates a repertoire of available but contradictory and disconnected narrative threads associated with different depictions of the skills aspirations and behaviours of employers and employees; their rights and responsibilities with regard to skills, and in relation to each other and the state; the proper role of the state in empowering, enhancing or exhorting and emancipating skills aspirations and behaviours; and a skills

delivery system that should adapt and respond to demand, encourage raised demand, or seek to mitigate lack of demand.

It is this repertoire of easily disconnected and dislocated narrative threads within policy that representatives of workplace actors select from to firstly, remake the logic for high(er) skills (the formal dimension of skill policy that defines the object of governance); and secondly, stretch and reshape, and resist and restate certain aspects of the operational dimension of skills policy, that defines who is to be governed and how (Carmel & Papadopoulos, 2003). In other words, this chapter finds that representatives of workplace actors engage in a second level of strategic selection. Extracting, re-inflecting and elevating parts of the high(er) skills project discourse to reorder, reorganise, and reassemble the meanings, practices and processes of doing skills from within the skills strategy. Having addressed how employer and employee representatives interpreted and responded to the New Labour Skills Strategy for England, the chapter then goes on to expose how skills delivery representatives experienced the effects<sup>63</sup>.

This section finds skills delivery representatives articulating the disruption, disorganisation and frustration of their already disparate given roles in relation to being demand-led and demand leading. The section concludes by discussing how the experience of skills delivery illuminates how skill governance and the role of the state in skills policy under New Labour can be conceptualised as a limited attempt at managing workplace actor skills aspirations and behaviours through state-steered voluntarism.

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<sup>63</sup> Much of the section that describes and discusses skills delivery representatives accounts of strategic selection and reassemblage of policy meanings, practices and processes, relates to how they experience employer representatives as engaged in this work. This is because this is what skills delivery representatives talked about in interviews. The reason for their asymmetrical focus on how the strategy has been interpreted and responded to by employer representatives is twofold. Firstly, because the New Labour Skills Strategy for England tends to treat a demand-led system as synonymous with an 'employer-led' system on the basis of imagined shared and progressive high(er) skills aspirations and behaviours in responsible workplaces; and secondly (and in relation) because many of the skills delivery organisations were, at least in part, remade as employer-led (see Chapter 6).



## **8.2 Talking back into policy opacity: the narratives of employer representatives**

In response to the research aims guiding this chapter, this section presents the narratives of employer representatives as talking back into policy opacity. It starts by showing how employer representatives engaged in rebuilding the logic for skills (formal dimension of policy) around a primary and priority economic ambition, by twisting and tilting narratives of complexity and coherence available in policy. It then analyses how this rebuilt logic is used by employer representatives to underscore a selective stretching and reshaping or resisting and restating of the operational dimension of policy; how skills are to be done. It argues that by extracting, re-inflecting and elevating partial narratives available within policy associated with the imaginaries of enlightened employers and deficient/deviant worker-citizens, employer representatives were able to counter and attempt to close down alternative imaginaries of employer deficiency/deviance. The section concludes that the stretching and reshaping, and resisting and restating, work of employer representatives amounted to an attempt to reassemble the skills project from within.

### **8.2.1 Remaking the Logic for Skills: Emphasising the Economic Ambition**

Employer representatives presented their members as both driving awareness and aligned with policy-makers in articulating the uncertainty-based complexity of the economic environment experienced by businesses in the context of heightened global competition and on-going technological advancements (see Chapter 5). As such, they equally voiced their support for an urgent policy focus on skills as a means to underwrite successful business strategies, 'keep pace' and 'excel' in the modern economy, and mitigate this complexity (ERR1; ERR2; ERR4; ERR6; EEF, 2006a; EEF, 2006b; BCC, 2006; IoD, 2006a; CBI, 2007).

Like policy-makers, they made specific reference to the 'rise' of NICs as meaning that the UK cannot afford to "*rest on its laurels*" (ERR4), with regard to pursuing the high(er) skills necessary for enhanced productivity, competitiveness, and profitability in changing

markets (ERR1; ERR4). Indeed, they presented a general and widespread recognition within the business community that there is no alternative to improving the skills base (CBI, 2007:5); that *“to a certain extent it has become a crunch time”* (ERR4).

As such employer representatives constructed their members within the positive imaginary of ‘enlightened’ partners in the skills agenda that recognised and wanted to realise the progressive potential of high(er) skills. They depicted the businesses they represent as ambitiously *“high-tech and high-skills”* (ERR4); and as having the aspiration to *“drive things forward much more aggressively”* (ERR1).

*“We have been very supportive of the Government’s focus on skills as an issue because of what we know about how that impacts on our members growth strategies, and just how they can do business. So I think that is very positive.”* (ERR1)

*“Well our members tell us that it is crucial. If you don’t keep up with the skills agenda, don’t keep up with up-skilling your workforce and skilling even the employer themselves, you’re going to lose ground on your competitors.”* (ERR2)

Employer representatives also picked up on, and sought to present themselves as aligned with, policy-makers portrayal of high(er) skills as cohering the interests and ambitions of multiple stakeholders and multiple agendas (see Chapter 5). Borrowing what employer representatives explicitly identify as a New Labour ‘language of reconciliation’ (Fairclough, 2000; Newman, 2001) - by which policy-makers intertwine and harmonise public and private, economic (recognised as ‘supporting markets’), and social (recognised as ‘finding ways for everyone to participate more effectively in the market’), agendas (ERR5) - they equally presented the focus on skills as, in their view, the best way to simultaneously meet the interests and ambitions of government, businesses and worker-citizens. However, this coherence of stakeholder interests and agendas was somewhat reinterpreted, reorganised and retold in employer representatives’ narratives.

The logic for skills presented by policy-makers was subtly dissected and distilled, and consequentially repackaged; such that strategic emphasis was principally and fundamentally placed on delivering the economic ambitions of improved productivity and competitiveness; whilst social ambitions were relegated to the position of a secondary consequence.

*“It [the skills strategy] comes back to competitiveness and economic growth, and the fact that to have sort of all the things we’d like for the UK economy - both in terms of opportunities in terms of social welfare and standard of living - all those things come back to competitiveness.” (ERR5)*

*“They [policy-makers] have accepted the Leitch targets, in doing so they wish not only to improve economic competitiveness but also social inclusion and individual’s development. It’s a very holistic strategy [...] but as a fundamental goal - recognising that skills are absolutely fundamental to productivity and therefore to our competitiveness - absolutely support it.” (ERR1, emphasis in original)*

*“I think clearly the main aims of the Skills Strategy are [pause] well if you’ve read Leitch and the Government reports it would be driving economic performance [pause] and, I guess, individual employability as well.” (ERR3)*

Indeed, employer representatives emphasised the need to ensure policy was able to “*get the balance right*” (ERR3; also ERR4; ERR6) between the co-existing, but in their view asymmetrically important, messages running through policy-makers’ narratives. Voicing their concern about the possibility of strategic drift (ERR1)<sup>64</sup> if too much attention was paid to the lobby groups they perceived to represent the non-economically valuable interests of learners/workers (ERR3; CBI, 2007:45). Employer representatives strongly cautioned against allowing skills to become a predominantly ‘socially-driven’ or ‘welfare-driven’ project; whereby the primary goal to support competitive business performance

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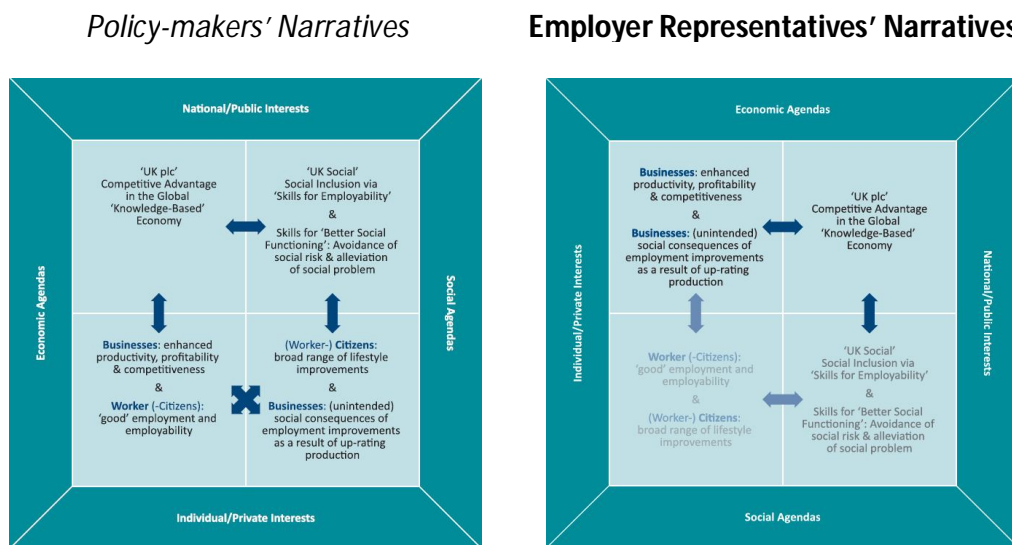
<sup>64</sup> One employer representative in particular questioned the meaning of changing names and functions of some government departments. Offering their perception that part of a previous Department for Education and Skills had become problematically re-focused on children and families, and that there had recently been a “*subtle rowing back*” going on inside DIUS to reorient policy to the needs of individuals and the more “*welfare-driven aspects of that strategy*” (ERR1; also ERR4).

(CBI, 2007:45) - expressed as *“the bigger picture”* (ERR1) – becomes weakened. To make this case they selected and stretched the perspective available in policy that social gains for the individual employee and for society as a whole will best be achieved as a result of developing the kinds of skills businesses need and want (ERR5). Furthermore, they were quick to draw out and elevate the narrative available in skills policy that *“good employees”* – those that *“want to have good jobs, be able to support themselves and their families, and the kind of life they’d like to live”* (ERR5) - share this perspective (ERR5).

*“It’s absolutely vital that individuals have got the opportunity and access to developing their skills, particularly up to a certain level to really make sure they get a foot in the labour market; get a good job. But [...] I think we would argue that the focus has got to be on skills that are going to improve economic performance, because that’s the best way of improving employment opportunities and so on. [...] We have to remember that businesses need to keep running.”* (ERR3)

In summary, in seeming contrast to VoC and PRA explanations of the dynamics that govern skill formation in liberal market political economies (of which the UK/England is an archetypical case), employer representatives presented their members as strongly favouring and supporting progressive market shaping strategies - such as investment in higher skills – and therefore as ‘enlightened employers’. However, in their narratives the argument for high(er) skills was carefully rebuilt around an exclusively economic logic, which placed the interest of private business at the fore. They enacted this rebuilding by using, but twisting and tilting, the narratives available in policy-makers presentation of skills as cohering multiple interests and agendas. They selectively extracted the discursive threads that supported their argument (i.e. economically viable skills for business sustainability and prosperity): reordering, reorganising and realigning them in relation to the wider context of coherence between economic and social logics (i.e. nature of work and work opportunities), elevating them to a primary position and diminishing and therefore somewhat subverting social agendas (see Figure 8.1).

Figure 8.1: Remapping the Discourses of High(er) Skill Coherence: *Economic Ambition*<sup>65</sup>



Source: author's analysis, compilation and design

Having rebuilt the logic for high(er) skills (formal dimension of policy) by emphasising the economic ambition, the next two subsections show how employer representatives used this remade primary and priority object of governance to stretch and reshape, or resist and restate certain aspects of the operational dimension of policy; the 'doing of skills'. This stretching and reshaping/resisting and restating work was rendered possible by utilising the opaque spaces between the entangled and collapsed, but distinct and contradictory strategies, (to be demand-led; to lead demand; and to circumvent lack of demand) and parts of the narratives of policy-makers related to differently imagined workplaces and workplace skills actors.

### 8.2.2 Stretching and reshaping skills policy: the 'demand-led' strategy retold

Drawing on partial narratives available in relation to imagined enlightened business and inert and deviant worker-citizens, employer representatives stretched and reshaped the operational dimension of the New Labour Skills Strategy as exclusively concerned to provide for employers as customers. Specifically they remade the role of the state in

<sup>65</sup> Policy-makers' map of discourses of high(er) skill coherence shown in Chapter 5 as Figure 5.1

listening to business, and managing the deficiency and irresponsibility of worker-citizens as subjects.

***Providing for employers: Disentangling the partner-customer narrative***

Given the way employer representatives rebuilt the logic for skills in relation to their 'enlightened' members, the New Labour Skills Strategy was primarily interpreted as a "*policy directed at business*" (ERR3). They stretched policy narratives of skills both for business and designed in the interest of business, and in doing so disentangled their dual 'partner-customer' role identified in the construction of enlightened employers (see Chapter 6). Specifically, they suppressed the active 'partner' element that implied a business commitment and contribution to developing an organisational up-skilling agenda; particularly with regard to low skilled employees. Whilst foregrounding their status and position as passive, and provided for, 'customer'.

They lamented the existing skills weaknesses in the workforce which their members experienced as severely holding back their competitive success (ERR2; ERR6; BCC, 2006; EEF, 2006a; IoD, 2006a; LCC, 2007). Particularly given the depiction of their 'enlightened' growth-orientated members whose business strategies are likely to suffer significantly, even fatally, as a result of skills supply shortages (ERR1; ERR4; IoD, 2006a:1). Highlighting the extent to which these skills weaknesses are evidence that skills policy and skills delivery had not adequately met the needs of businesses as customers (ERR1). They talked back to policy with reference to the real and growing demand for 'a new kind of worker' - a better skilled worker – amongst their membership, and argued that this demand had not yet been satisfied (ERR2; ERR4; ERR6).

*"What we find generally on the skills agenda is that employers still aren't finding the skills that they want and the skills that they need, and they're always asking us what more we can do to sort of push the envelope to find more people that they need" (ERR5)*

What therefore became apparent in the way employer representatives interpreted the Skills Strategy is that better skilled employees were explicitly considered to be a product/resource that should be provided - from the 'outside-in' - to their member businesses in order to support their operational requirements. Drawing selectively on narratives available within the construction of the responsible workplace, they specifically interpreted the problem of low skills as acknowledged to be external to their members (ERR1; ERR3; ERR4; IoD, 2006:5). A problem they were seen to experience as a consequence of the previous failures of the supply-led education system, and that they should be engaged in highlighting through 'voice and choice', rather than engaged in solving through partnership (ERR1; ERR4; ERR6).

The consequence of stretching their position as 'provided for customer' was a reshaping in employer representatives' narratives of what is meant in policy by the 'demand-led' strategy. A reshaping that firstly involved government and the skills delivery system in actively and exclusively listening to the demands of employers (linking the output of the education and training system to their specific wants), and secondly involved transferring full responsibility for solving the problem of low skills to inert and deviant worker-citizens.

### ***Listening to business***

In interviews employer representatives expressed their support for a 'demand-led' system, which they interpreted to mean that government and the skills delivery system had finally realised the vital relevance of 'listening to businesses' (ERR5). Specifically, that government and the skills delivery system were committed to taking their steer on skills exclusively from them and their members, and were focused on providing what they needed and wanted (ERR2; ERR3; ERR5; ERR6). Indeed, that government and the skills delivery system had realised that to *"create policy without them [employers] is crazy and would actually produce nothing"* (ERR5). As such, they emphasise what they recognised in policy as the new *"rights"* (ERR5) and *"entitlements"* (ERR6) of employers to have an *"influence"* (ERR2; ERR6); *"telling the government and providers exactly the skills that they*

*need to be able to compete*" (ERR2). To *"call the tune"* (ERR6), because they alone know what is required (economically valuable) to meet their business need.

This right of employers to be listened to and to influence the skills product was stretched in the narratives of employer representatives as intended to extend across, and infiltrate all the activities of the education and training system. They presented their relationship with government as 'good' where they interpreted policy initiatives as being exclusively aimed at *"ticking the business box"* (ERR3). Train to Gain was supported where it was defined as the epitome of the demand-led system; *"asking employers what the needs are [...] and then responding to that very directly"* (ERR1). In the same vein, specific concern was taken to emphasise policy narratives that Individual Skills Accounts<sup>66</sup> were intended to deliver the skills employers want (CBI, 2007a:10; ERR3), and not be misused by employees/learners to support non-economically viable 'leisure activities' (FSB, 2006:2). Indeed, as one employer representative neatly summarised, the business lobby perception of the overall stance of policy-makers was generally interpreted as *"it's no good educating people if they're not going to have jobs at the end; so they've got to produce what employers want"* (ERR6).

### ***Stretch responsibility of employees***

Having interpreted and stretched the position of employers as the priority customers of high(er) skills – the only demand that matters in the demand-led system - employer representatives simultaneously located employees as the responsabilised partner-subjects of the skills strategy. Specifically, and again drawing selectively on available narratives of worker-citizen inertia and deviance, employees were depicted as required to actively and continuously attend to and seek to align and realign their skills aspirations and behaviours with what employers want. Indeed, meeting the skills expectations of business was explicitly interpreted as the 'responsibility' - even the duty – given in policy to (potential) employees (ERR1; ERR3; ERR4).

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<sup>66</sup> Also referred to as Adult Learner Accounts (CBI, 2007a:10) and Learning Accounts (FSB, 2006:2)



*“They [employees] have a responsibility to listen to what employers are going to want. There is an enormous tendency [...] of saying “but I want to do this”. Well if there isn't a job doing that you can't do it. So I think learners do have a responsibility to realise that actually they can't call the tune. They've got to go with whatever flow there is, and look at what the opportunities are and not expect the opportunities to just suddenly fall in their laps.” (ERR6)*

What is implicit in such a depiction of employee responsibility is employer representatives' characterisation of their further requirement to be independently accountable for actively and continuously seeking to change and adapt their abilities, and achieve necessary skills enhancement for the benefit of their employer. Essentially (potential) employees were portrayed as needing to assume responsibility for mediating the uncertainty-based complexity experienced by business. Indeed, utilising policy-makers presentation of a 'job for life' as anachronistic in the modern economy, they emphasised the skills strategy as being all about motivating employees to accept the challenge of ensuring they have the adaptability and flexibility to stay useful and useable, and therefore employable (ERR1; ERR4).

*“I mean it's a cliché but there's no job for life. Employees now are going to have to adapt to changing economic circumstances; you know changing roles, changing jobs. So I think it's [the Skills Strategy] just making sure they've got the skills to do that really.” (ERR3)*

Mimicking policy language that constructs inert and deviant worker-citizens, they spoke the need for people to show they are *“able and willing”* to improve their *“use to an employer”* (ERR4). To *“do something for themselves”* (ERR6) to make sure they are *“valuable in the labour market”* (ERR1), rather than expecting to be *“spoon fed by employers”* (ERR6). In essence by stretching and reshaping policy narratives regarding the role of employees in a way that brings the entanglement of a responsabilised partner-subject discourse to the foreground, employer representatives selectively emphasised policy as seeking to steer and manage the skills voluntarism of worker-citizens in relation to their members' position as customers of skills. In doing so, they again remade the Skills Strategy as being exclusively about the passive delivery of what businesses need from employees.

In summary employer representatives utilised their rebuilt logic for skills, and selected partial narratives related to the construction of businesses as 'enlightened' and worker-citizens as inert and deviant, to stretch and reshape a strong position for their members as customers of the New Labour Skills Strategy; to be listened to, and provided for though the steering and management of employee voluntarism. Furthermore, this strong (re)positioning of their members as customers provided the bedrock for their resistance and restating of alternative, but entangled and collapsed together, policy narratives related to differently assembled logics, workplace imaginaries, and roles and responsibilities of skills actors.

### **8.2.3 Resisting and restating skills policy: the strategy to lead demand retold**

*"What you'll hear a lot is this phrase 'bad employers', you know. [...] I don't know what they're doing by the way, but they're somehow living in the dark ages and they're probably exploiting their workforce. All this is just complete bunkum. It's just complete bunkum."*  
(ERR1)

This subsection provides the mirror of the subsection above. It highlights how employer representatives countered and attempted to close down – resisted and restated - identified policy narratives associated with the inertia and irresponsibility of business; narratives that prefaced a skills strategy to lead or circumvent lack of demand. Again, that distinct policy narratives are entangled and collapsed rendered it possible for employer representatives to utilise the opacity of the spaces between them. Specifically policy opacity was used to firstly claim contradiction and therefore incoherence of strategy, and secondly to challenge employer deficiency and deviance. By recalling narratives of employer enlightenment and associated privilege in a demand-led system, employer representatives used one image of business as responsible to recast perceived inertia and irresponsibility as either a lack of recognition, that much business training is going 'unseen'; or as an issue of relevance, that policy prescriptions - targets for skills measured

by qualification - are irreconcilable with an aim and ambition to ensure skills in England are demand-led.

***Resisting inertia and deviance: restating a lack of recognition***

Employer representatives defended businesses in their membership – enlightened and therefore successful businesses - as fully engaged in training their workforce (ERR2; ERR3; ERR4). To the extent that, as one employer representative stated, “*We think 100% of businesses train*” (ERR2). These businesses, they argued, do not need to be encouraged or ‘told’ to train by government (ERR1; ERR4; ERR5; CBI, 2007:34). These are businesses within which there is an actually existing and firmly entrenched realisation that training has critical intrinsic and instrumental value (ERR1; ERR4).

*“I wouldn’t think that they [members] would feel responsible [for training] because the state told them to be, and in fact that might put them off [laughs]. In fact I would think it was more that they would want to do so, and that would be good for their company, and good for the people who work for them, and they would feel good about doing so.” (ERR5)*

Indeed, they explicitly challenged what they considered to be the erroneous, and frankly incongruous, perception that insidious businesses – concerned about poaching – play risky games of chicken with their ambitious business aspirations in order to avoid the competitive disadvantage of making investments in skill development (ERR1). Drawing on the very logics used to build a case for skills, they questioned how policy-makers could reconcile the survival of such insidious businesses given the uncertainty-based complexity of the economic environment (ERR1; ERR2; ERR4).

Instead they evidenced a range of survey data, especially LSC reported data regarding business spend on training, to highlight that, in their opinion employers were more than ‘playing their part’ (CBI, 2007:5; ERR3<sup>67</sup>; ERR4). Taking pains to mitigate controversy over

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<sup>67</sup> As would be expected, there were some discrepancies between reports over the total value of employer training. In interview (2008) ERR3 compared approximately £39bn per year spend on training by business

the figures (see section 8.3.2 below) by stating their belief that the vast majority of this spend is on “*proper training*” (ERR1). By which they mean training that is both valuable to the business and developmental for the employee - even if it is not necessarily formal and accredited - as opposed to just basic induction programmes and mandatory Health and Safety courses. The issue then, as they restated it, was not that businesses weren't training – a consequence of either their inertia or deviant irresponsibility – but rather that the quantity and quality of the training they were providing was largely going ‘unrecognised’ (FSB, 2009b:1; FSB, 2008:30; ERR4).

*“We believe that in some form all businesses [...] are training and unfortunately it's going unrecognised. It's going unrecognised by the employer themselves providing training to the employee; it's going unrecognised by a colleague in the workforce providing on-the-job training; private providers coming in; etc. In any shape or form there is training going on it's just not recognised.” (ERR2)*

*“There is a lot of training going on sort of underneath the surface that, you know, isn't easily measured; that's on-the-job. It's done by sitting next to a skilled person and sort of learning as you're going.” (ERR3)*

In essence, what this narrative of the employer representatives attempted to achieve was to render visible forms of training and skilling which policy discourse obscured when the state-led vision for skills, and the targets for capturing progress towards the vision, were set out (see Chapter 7). Employer representatives' narratives sought to locate the source of perceptions of inertia and deviance with a government (and therefore a policy) that only recognised as meaningful what it could measure and only measured and therefore recognised formal training that leads to a full qualification. The result was that informal, internal or private sector provided skills development, that they argued is ‘demanded’ and valued by businesses that “*train to competence rather than qualification*” (CBI, 2007:7; also ERR2; ERR3; ERR5), was ‘unseen’ (FSB, 2008; FSB, 2009b) and therefore overlooked.

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with a government adult skills budget of £4bn to make the point about employers commitment to skills. Documents produced by employer representative groups during the fieldwork period reported business spend on training of around £33bn per year (CBI, 2007; EEF, 2006a:2; IoD, 2006:8; BCC, 2006:5)

This lack of recognition was often presented in terms of a 'barrier'. A term that was here used to reinforce the perspective that what businesses face is not so much obstacles to training (lack of capacity, capability or care to engage – see Chapter 7), but barriers to shared meaning about the nature of the skills project; what counts as skills demand and development and therefore the proper role and responsibility of businesses in relation to the notion of 'enlightened' skills aspiration and behaviour. In short it was the absence of shared meaning that, for them, resulted in the erroneous perception that there are 'bad' employers.

*"I think often the Government's obsession with measuring things through qualifications is a sort of barrier; that kind of 'nothing counts' in training really to the Government, to a certain extent, unless it's a full qualification. I mean there's quite a hell of a lot of very valuable training happening in-house which sometimes doesn't have a qualification at all." (ERR4)*

*"It does frustrate me when you hear the language around ambition, around being enlightened. It doesn't reflect a real understanding of what businesses are about, how businesses function. It's very much based on this preconceived understanding that there are rapacious individuals who are, you know, running chain gangs, and exploiting people, and not investing in skills; I don't know out of stubbornness, and not understanding? It's just completely wrong." (ERR1)*

In summary, when faced with messages from policy-makers that inert and deviant businesses need to 'raise their game' and change their behaviour in line with a more ambitious skills vision, employer representatives retaliated and responded by utilising and reasserting the positive image of enlightened and responsible businesses. Restating the problem as a lack of recognition, they instead challenged government to find ways of acknowledging – better 'evidencing' (ERR2; BCC, 2006:20; FSB, 2008:30) - their actually existing skills development activities.

In addition to challenging recognition of informal and unaccredited training, employer representatives also called into question the 'relevance' of formal and accredited training (FSB, 2008; FSB, 2009b). They did this by reasserting the policy narrative – also associated

with images of enlightened and responsible employers - of ensuring demand-led skills. By questioning the 'relevance' of qualifications they further justified business choices to train and skill employees in other ways.

***Resisting inertia and deviance: restating a lack of relevance***

Drawing on explanations for why businesses don't engage in the skills project made available and legitimate in policy narratives (see Chapter 7), employer representatives talked back the challenges their members can face associated with capacity and capability to offer training that leads to 'full formal qualifications' (ERR1; ERR3; ERR4). However, they resisted inertia and irresponsibility as the basis of business limits to capacity and capability to train, and restated their reasons for not engaging with accredited training by recalling policy narratives associated with the need for a demand-led system to meet the aspirations of enlightened business in two different but interrelated ways.

Firstly, they again distinguished and delimited their demand for training to task competence rather than qualification (ERR2; ERR3; IoD, 2006:8), thereby reemphasising the role of government to ensure (potential) employees are overcoming their inertia and deviance regarding more generic skills development: ensuring worker-citizens are taking responsibility and equipping themselves with the economically viable skills businesses need, which in turn serve the interest of the wider economy/country and are therefore rightly a 'public' concern (ERR4; IoD, 2006). Secondly, they argued that a publically funded system focused on full formal qualification attainment remains inflexible to accommodating and meeting the needs of businesses as customers and therefore remains 'unresponsive' (ERR1; ERR2; ERR3; ERR4).

By restating the basis of business limits to capacity and capability to train in this way they were again quick to disassociate what they perceived to be the actually existing challenges to formal training that employers' face, from erroneous claims that inert and irresponsible employers are choosing not to train. Rather, they highlighted and emphasised the problem of business case 'relevance' (ERR2) - *"real issues about how good the*

*qualifications are; how relevant they are; whether firms actually want them” (ERR3) - as presenting significant barriers to business engagement with government initiatives and programmes (ERR1; ERR2; ERR4).*

*“When we did a study last year, half of our members hadn’t heard of it [Train to Gain]. Now if you think of the profile of the [organisation name] membership who are very switched on to training, who spend a lot of money training - skills are integral to their business strategy and how they approach their competitiveness - for half of them to not have heard of Train to Gain was surprising and really disappointing; disappointing in the sense that it just showed it wasn’t meeting their need.” (ERR1)*

*“Train to Gain is the big programme through which the vast majority of Government funding of skills is going to be put, but, you know, we’re not at a stage where that’s demand-led. It’s still focused on qualifications; there isn’t a lot of flexibility. I think there’s a lot of work to do to make sure that you get the balance better in terms of actually meeting employers’ skills needs.”(ERR3)*

In essence they argued that there is a long way to go before the rhetoric of a ‘demand-led’ skills system – which they draw on as a “*central pillar*” (EER1) of strategy and they restate as being about “*putting the employer in the driving seat*” (ERR3); ensuring provision is “*fit for purpose*” (IoD, 2006:4); “*tailored to meet their need*” (ERR2); and “*leading to outcomes they need*” (ERR4) - is experienced by businesses as a reality (IoD, 2006:3; FSB, 2008:29). By utilising the opaque space between policy narratives of a ‘demand-led’ strategy and a strategy to ‘lead demand’, the problem, as it is restated by employer representatives, is that initiatives such as SSCs, Train to Gain, and the right to request time to train, are still driven to achieve targets for qualification attainment that have been set to meet spurious government aims and ambitions, not the aims and ambitions of businesses. They identified these spurious aims and ambitions of government as both problematically pseudo-social, and as inherently self-serving (IoD, 2006; EEF, 2006a; FSB, 2009a). As asking employers to make up the shortcomings of irresponsible worker-citizens and a failing education and training system despite the lack of relevance for their business (ERR1;

ERR2; ERR3; ERR4; ERR5; ERR6) - and as therefore having the intention of “creating ‘level 2 basic skills factories’ out of those firms using the initiative” (FSB, 2008:29).

*“One of the things in the consultation was ‘oh well the Learning and Skills Council met its objectives’. Okay, but employers don’t have the kind of skills that they want, and we still have this huge problem with people not being employed and not making the most of the skills they do have or gaining new ones. [...] I mean ticking boxes and saying that the targets have been met doesn’t actually mean that we’ve gotten there” (ERR5)*

As this employer representative went on to state, when the training offer and associated qualifications are not perceived to map onto skills need (ERR3), the question businesses ask is “*who are they actually delivering for?*” (ERR5). Highlighting policy-makers own identification of the problems associated with the ‘old’ approach to centrally planned supply-led systems (see Chapter 6) - “*government meeting its own targets and not actually creating any real impact*” (ERR5; also FSB, 2006:1; ERR1; ERR3) – employer representatives depicted the New Labour Skills Strategy as nonetheless continuing in the mould of the mythical Procrustes. Determined to fit, however painfully, all their businesses ‘customers’ - with their diversity of specialised and niche requirements - into an iron framework of arbitrarily standardised and rationalised qualifications at different skills levels (ERR1; ERR3; ERR4; IoD, 2006:4). Whilst at the same time disingenuously attempting to ‘sell’ these fixed products, and the requirement for businesses to be drawn or chopped to size in order to align with them, as meeting need (ERR2; BCC, 2006:18).

*“Train to Gain seems more focused on sort of selling a product. I mean you get providers and brokers coming to firms and saying ‘we’ve got these level 2 qualifications which one do you want because they’ll be free’, rather than perhaps really looking at businesses skills needs, and tailoring the training so it’s actually much more relevant. [...] I mean I don’t think it’s surprising that a lot of firms just think it’s not really worth my time.” (ERR3)*

*“People just get funnelled into broad qualification solutions. You see a skills broker and the first thing they do is talk about an Apprenticeship because they’ve got a target to meet. It’s a*



*big national priority. Well if it's not addressing the need it's a complete waste of time, effort, and money." (ERR1)*

Employer representatives argued that the consequence for their members of this attempt to 'lead demand' - requiring employers to enhance or change their skills aspirations and behaviours to meet prescribed targets – was the further 'devaluing' of qualifications and their further 'disengagement' with the system (FSB, 2006:1). However, for them, this withdrawal is not to be confused with inertia or deviance. The point, they argued, is that none of this 'enhancing' or 'exhorting' activity of the state can actually be reconciled as demand-led and as meeting demand.

*"If you're going to have a truly demand-led system then it's got to be demand-led. It's got to be employers and individuals saying 'look we need these sorts of skills', and the system should be delivering it rather than the Government essentially coming to them and trying to push these skills onto companies" (ERR3)*

*"If you're going to be properly demand-led you've got to be open to being very flexible. [...] What worries me is any initiative which tries to close down and make uniform the provision. How that is meeting demand? I just cannot fathom it." (ERR1)*

In short, by utilising the distinction between 'demand-led' and 'leading demand' as contradictory skills strategies, employer representatives were able to effectively resist images of employer inertia and deviance, and restate the problem of 'relevance'. In doing so, they sought to legitimise the disengagement of business from government skills initiatives and programmes.

#### **8.2.4 Summary of employer representatives: talking back**

This section has shown how employer representatives engaged with the New Labour Skills Strategy for England to firstly rebuild the logic for skills around a primary and priority economic ambition, and secondly stretch and reshape, and resist and restate, elements of

the practices and process of 'doing skills' in relation to this rebuilt logic. What has been explicitly and analytically developed through this section is that the rebuilding - stretching and reshaping, resisting and restating - work is rendered possible as a consequence of the way in which policy-makers entangle, collapse and therefore obscure the lines between the distinct strategies for skills (to be demand-led, to lead demand, and to mitigate/circumvent lack of demand).

As a result of collapsing the lines between strategies employer representatives can selectively and strategically dissect, distil and dislocate available partial narrative threads within policy, stitching them back together in new patterns to reassemble the skills project from within. Specifically they use partial and re-stitched narratives associated with employers as enlightened and employees as deficient/deviant to reemphasise and remake the meaning and nature of the associated demand-led system (providing for employers as customers and managing employees as subjects); highlight the incongruence and incoherence between a demand-led strategy and a strategy to lead demand; and counter and attempt to close down policy imaginaries of inert and deviant employers, highlighting instead lack of recognition for their demand, and lack of relevance of demand leading activity.

### ***8.3 Talking back into policy opacity: the narratives of employee representatives***

As a mirror to the previous section, this section presents the narratives of employee representatives also talking back into policy opacity. It again starts by showing how employee representatives engaged in rebuilding the logic for skills (formal dimension of policy) around a primary and priority social ambition, by twisting and tilting policy-makers' narratives of complexity and coherence. It then analyses how this rebuilt logic is used by employee representatives to underscore a selective stretching and reshaping or resisting and restating of the operational dimension of policy. The section shows that by extracting, re-inflecting, and elevating partial narratives available within policy associated with the imaginaries of motivated but disadvantaged worker-citizens and deficient/deviant

businesses, employee representatives were able to counter and attempt to close down imaginaries of employee deficiency/deviance and restate the disadvantage and vulnerability of the low-skilled. Therefore they constructed a case for increasing the responsibility of employers and the state in a 'truly' progressive skills agenda. The section again concludes that the stretching and reshaping/resisting and restating work of employee representatives amounted to an attempt to reassemble the skills project from within.

### **8.3.1 Remaking the Logic for Skills: Emphasising the Social Ambition**

Employee representatives also aligned with policy-makers in narrating the strategic need for a focus on skills to mitigate uncertainty-based complexity, and ensure competitive advantage in the global knowledge-based economy (EER1; EER3). They described the nation as *"facing a tidal wave of competition"* (EER2), in particular from the NICs, and spoke in terms of the need to win the *"skills arms race"* (EER2) in order to maintain economic pole position and secure prosperous standards of living for all. Indeed, as one employee representative explained *"the logic of moving towards a more skilled economy is the only industrial logic in a globally trading market"* (EER1).

The necessity for economic progress towards ever high(er) skilled activity, and the implications of an emerging *"flowerpot"* (EER2) shaped labour market, is narrated as requiring everybody - employers and employees alike - to urgently address their skill development needs. Employee representatives, like employer representatives, were quick to characterise those they represent as active partners in this project; as *"committed, engaged, interested, enthusiastic, and supportive"* (EER2); and as fully bought into the high(er) skills agenda (TUC, 2005). In short, they depict the worker-citizens they represent within the positive imaginary of 'motivated' employees that recognise and want to realise the progressive potential of skills (see Chapter 6).

In presenting skills as 'everybody's concern', employee representatives also align themselves with policy-makers portrayal of skills as cohering the interests and ambitions of multiple stakeholders and multiple agendas (see Chapter 5). Again borrowing policy-makers 'language of reconciliation' (Fairclough, 2000; Newman, 2001), they explicitly identified the focus on skills as addressing both the productivity and profitability of businesses (economic modernisation), and issues of social inclusion and social justice (EER1; EER2; EER3; EER4; EER5: TUC, 2007d). However, they stressed that *"raising the skills level is particularly about social justice"* (EER4). Specifically that policy was distinctively about the issue of economic and social 'participation' (inclusion) of all in the emerging knowledge-based economy and society, and therefore about the *"social and cultural dimensions of Lifelong Learning"* (EER1). That policy was about *"empowering people to actually access training and development and to actually enable them to move up the career ladder"*, and that that is *"all about social justice."* (EER5).

In emphasising the link between skills and social justice the coherence of stakeholder interests and agendas is again somewhat reinterpreted, reorganised and retold in employee representatives' narratives. Selecting from within the ways in which policy-makers build the logic for skills, employee representatives privileged and placed particular significance on the looming problem of low-skilled unemployment, and therefore the social ambition of improving employability and employment chances; bringing these issues to the foreground of the logic for skills (EER2; TUC, 2007d). In particular they remade and supported the focus of skills policy as particularly aimed at those most distanced from the better functioning/more progressive parts of the labour market, and therefore those placed most at risk by the dynamics of a knowledge-based economy.

*"You can see what the Skills Strategy tries to do is to say well for a substantial swathe of the people who are missing out in all of this there is a win-win between the wider economic interests of the country, and the interests of individuals in having choices in their lives if we can give them the skills for employability. All that I absolutely am behind."* (EER1)

*“There are lots of aspects of the Government’s policy that we support. I mean the Government has had a focus on actually how do you help the most disadvantaged; the people who are not able to access training and skills at the workplace generally.” (EER5)*

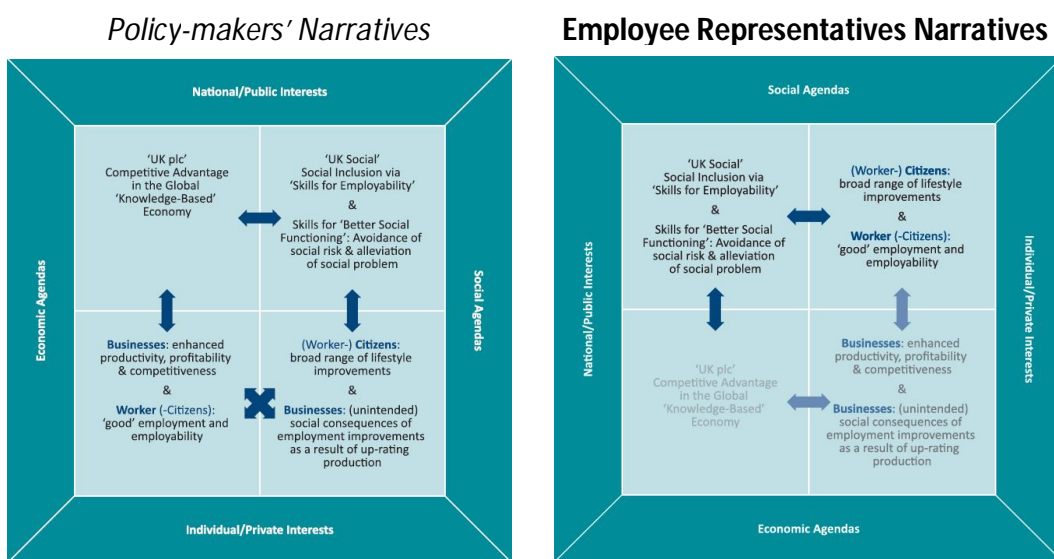
They described policy-makers as *“alive to the challenges facing people most excluded from the system”* (EER1), and as having *“no apologies to make for helping people in work who didn’t have chances, get chances”* (EER1). Therefore, the logic of skills policy was remade as principally about addressing disadvantage and disaffection caused by workplace inequalities in access to training and skills (EER3; EER5). Skills become a way of addressing *“the prospects of the individual [...] the decent experience at work”* (EER3), which employee representatives were also quick to point out should be of concern to ‘good’ employers (EER3; EER4).

By remaking coherence in this way employer representatives were able to construct a case that strongly counselled against losing sight of the priority social ambition. Like employer representatives, they recognise alternative logics and counter-narratives as strategic drift. In particular they warned against a HM Treasury driven *“narrowing of public policy concerns with lifelong learning towards skills at, and for, the workplace”* (EER1). They talked back that too much of a focus on the needs of employers will not necessarily ensure that policy is sufficiently concentrated on addressing issues associated with skill-based disadvantage (social exclusion, intergenerational poverty, health inequalities, and so on) and will therefore be unable to effectively target relatively more disadvantaged groups (EER4).

In summary, again in seeming contrast to VoC accounts of skill governance in LMEs there is little to suggest representatives of employees discover their members have mutual preferences for low level but highly portable skills. Instead they highlight the politics of skill, and support investment in education and training as an issue of both progressive economic modernisation (for better work and workplaces) and social justice in a knowledge-based world. As such they carefully rebuilt the logic for skills around the interests of fairness and social inclusion. Again, in doing this rebuilding work they used -

but twisted and realigned - narratives available in policy. They selected and underscored the discursive threads that run through the New Labour Skills Strategy that supported their interests and arguments (i.e. inequalities of skill and the emphasis on employment quality); repositioning and elevating these interests and arguments in relation to wider coherence (i.e. business productivity and profitability); therefore diminishing and somewhat subverting economic agendas (see Figure 8.2)

**Figure 8.2: Remapping the Discourses of High(er) Skill Coherence: *Social Ambition***<sup>68</sup>



*Source: author's analysis, compilation and design*

Having rebuilt the logic for skills (the formal dimension of policy) as primarily related to the social ambition of improving the employability and employment chances of the most disadvantaged, the next two subsections show how employee representatives used this remade object of governance to stretch and reshape, or resist and restate certain aspects of the operational dimension of policy related to differently imagined workplace. Again, this stretching and reshaping/resisting and restating work was rendered possible by utilising the opaque spaces between the entangled and collapsed, but distinct and

<sup>68</sup> Policy-makers' map of discourses of high(er) skill coherence shown in Chapter 5 as Figure 5.1

contradictory strategies (to be demand-led; to lead demand; and to circumvent lack of demand).

### **8.3.2 Stretching and reshaping skills policy: the 'demand-led' strategy retold**

Having stressed the demand amongst 'motivated' worker-citizens for the developmental potential of skills to enable them to move beyond what they currently do, and unlock genuinely new and improved work and employment opportunities. Employee representatives utilised imagined inertia and deviance of businesses to stretch and reshape the operational dimension of the demand-led skills strategy as exclusively concerned to provide for employees/worker-citizens as customers. Specifically they remade the role of the state in managing the deficiency and irresponsibility of employers as subjects.

#### ***Providing for employees: Disentangling the partner-customer narrative***

Employee representatives interpreted the New Labour Skills Strategy as primarily about providing for and empowering employees to 'unlock their potential' and pursue their goals (EER1) through skills for better employment available in a knowledge-based economy (EER2; EER3; EER4; EER5; TUC, 2005). They highlight that such opportunities are not necessarily related to what they are already doing and are therefore *"not necessarily related to their employer"* (EER3), but are about having capacities – 'knowledge and confidence' - that can be applied in *"wholly new contexts"* (EER1); skills-dependent contexts in which *"their lives are improved, where they're able to achieve their potential"* (EER3). In short employee representatives stretched threads of the agenda of policy-makers as being about skills for new work opportunities and future employment (albeit potentially with the same employer) rather than skills for current employers' current needs (EER4; TUC, 2006; TUC, 2005).

*"I mean our mantra is that it's not just skills for employers, its skills for employment. [...] We support the government's emphasis on skills for employment because we think that is*

*crucially important and it's right. Skills for a particular employer may not necessarily be in the interests of employment." (EER2)*

This stretch from 'demand-led as employer-led', to 'demand-led as employment-led' – specifically employment in new contexts, future and more progressive workplaces - is available within the opaque space between policy narratives for two reasons. Firstly, as the conceptualisation of an 'employer-led' strategy is built on the discourse of mutual higher-skills 'employment' aspirations of employers and employees in progressive workplaces (Chapter 6); and secondly, as within imagined inert and irresponsible workplaces the deficiency and deviance of employers is constructed in such a way as to redirect policy focus from the current needs of 'employer' to the future possibilities for 'employment' (Chapter 7). The consequence of policy opacity is therefore a reshaping in employee representatives narratives of their position as provided for 'customers' within what is meant by a 'demand-led' strategy; which involves government, the skills delivery system and employers in the provision of more and better training and skills possibilities and opportunities for worker-citizens in relation to genuinely new and improved work opportunities. This remaking of the employee position as customers has related implications for how the responsibility of employers is stretched and reshaped by employee representatives.

### ***Stretch responsibility of employers***

*"The responsibilities of employers are obviously to ensure - to provide the time and the money for those employees that need training to get that training" (EER3)*

For employee representatives *"the underlying principle of the whole [skills] strategy is that employers should train their staff"* (EER3). In particular they stretched the narrative available in policy that places a requirement on employers to invest more and train more in higher quality, truly developmental skills and qualifications, explicitly aimed at improving the employability and employment chances of their employees (EER2; EER4;



EER5; TUC, 2007a; TUC, 2007d); the requirement to *“look at the wider employability and future career skills needs of their workforce”* (EER5).

They selectively interpreted policy to be presenting employers as not demonstrating enough commitment to this up-skilling agenda (EER2; EER4). By, utilising the available discursive distinction between ‘enlightened’ and ‘not so enlightened’ businesses (EER1; EER5), they identified and amplified a narrative that places a greater responsibility on those that are, so far, not sufficiently ‘tuned-in’ to their role in skills (EER2). For them this includes most businesses. They challenged the figures employer representatives claim as representing substantial business spend on so-called ‘proper’ training (section 8.2.3 above) as significantly inflated by bogus expenses (such as salary costs, travel expenses and low-level basic induction courses), and emphasised government survey findings that a third of businesses still provide no training at all (EER2; EER5; TUC, 2008).

In short employee representative emphasised the narrative thread running through policy that they identified as aimed at initiating a ‘step-change’ in workplace culture in the majority of workplaces (EER3; TUC, 2007d); the parts of policy that they interpreted as being about *“how you sort of develop more high performance working practices”* (EER5). It is this cultural change that they stretched and reshaped as placing a greater responsibility on employers. A business responsibility to take up and make use of the skills initiatives aimed at overcoming their material and attitudinal barriers to training and skilling (EER2). A responsibility not to expect employees to bear all the risks of personal and professional development, whilst reserving for themselves the right to cherry pick what they want to make use of as passive recipients of skilled workers (EER4; EER5).

In other words employee representatives interpreted a responsibility on employers to engage effectively with the high(er) skills agenda *“bringing with them really dynamic, fresh thinking [about] the productive needs of UK plc. and increased skills investment”* (EER2). Thinking and investment that employers were expected to ‘engage’ and support their employees to participate in, in order to initiate ‘virtuous circles’ (EER1; EER4) of expansive skills development in ever better performing workplaces.

In summary, employee representatives utilised their rebuilt logic for skills to stretch a primary and priority position for employee/learners (particularly skills disadvantaged employees) as customers of a New Labour Skills Strategy. A strategy reshaped as being about managing employer voluntarism as responsabilised partner-subjects of policy, and aimed at improving current and future employment possibilities and opportunities. Again it was this (re)positioning of worker-citizens as priority customers that also provided the foundations for resisting and restating alternative, but entangled and collapsed together, narratives regarding imagined employee inertia or deviance.

### **8.3.3 Resisting and restating skills policy: the strategy to lead demand retold**

Again, this subsection provides the mirror of the subsection above. Highlighting the ways in which employee representatives countered and attempted to close down – resist and restate - identified policy narratives associated with the deficiency of worker-citizens aspirations and behaviours towards skilling. Again, that distinct policy narratives are entangled and collapsed rendered it possible to utilise the opacity of the spaces between them. Where worker-citizens are seemingly depicted as needing to take more responsibility for their skill development employee representatives claim contradiction and therefore incoherence of strategy. Recalling the disadvantages faced by low skills workers in inert and deviant businesses to restate the responsibility of employers and the state. Equally by drawing on their logic for skills associated with social justice, they resisted and restated the relevance of skills targets perceived to be too restrictive to meet real need, and too narrowly focused on inert businesses to meet demands for progressive employment and wider social possibilities.

#### ***Resisting employee inertia and deviance: restating the responsibility of employers***

Employee representatives characterised those they represent within the policy imaginary of 'motivated' worker-citizens convinced by the case for up-skilling, and conversely interpreted employers as needing to increase their commitment to providing proper

training and development to initiate a step-change in workplace culture. As a result employee representatives were able to resist policy narratives that correspondingly and contradictorily construct low-skilled worker-citizens as exhibiting deviant skills aspirations and behaviours, and exhort the need for them to take greater responsibility for their own skills development.

They talked back wielding policy arguments that the disadvantages faced by low-skilled employees amount to real barriers to engaging with training and learning. Barriers that influence the extent to which employees are able, and should be considered able, to recognise their own skills needs; and are able, and should be considered able, to act on them without substantial support (EER3). Certainly more support than employee representatives argue is available from most employers (EER2; EER3; EER4; TUC, 2005).

*“When you get employers saying ‘well we’ll give you three hours training but two hours is in your time and one hour is in our time, fair deal?’ [...] I mean our argument on that would be well hang about, let’s just look at the kind of people you are talking about. An awful lot of the people who need the training most will be low paid with very demanding environments, you know, challenging circumstances. [...] So the notion that people like that are cheerfully gonna be able to find some more money to do their course fees or suddenly find another couple of hours of an evening, quite often when they’ve got families to go home to and all the rest of it; forget it.” (EER2)*

In other words, utilising policy narratives that depict disenfranchised and vulnerable (as opposed to indolent and disobedient) employees as struggling against significant and multiple disadvantages to developing their skills, especially in the workplace (EER2; EER5; TUC, 2006; TUC, 2005), they redirect greater responsibility for skills development back on to employers and the state, to act on their obligations to address skill inequalities as part of a social justice and social mobility agenda (EER2; EER5). In doing so, they question whether the balance is always right between meeting the needs of business and meeting the needs of worker-citizens when policy appears to privilege employers (EER5; TUC, 2006; TUC, 2007d), leaving employees “*relatively powerless*” (EER4). In particular employee representatives challenged why a “*moral discourse suddenly gets applied to*

*workers, like it's your obligation to pull your weight", when that same moral discourse, applied to the obligation on business to "put something back into the communities that their working in", is being ignored or rejected by deviant businesses (EER2).*

Taking this point about the balance of responsibilities further, employee representatives stress policy narratives that recognise the 'risks' employees can face when they acknowledge their skills needs and request training, particularly in workplaces where deviant employers don't value training and don't train (EER3; EER5). Employee representatives use policy narratives about deviant employers (Chapter 7) 'trapping' their workers in poor work with poor prospects (EER2; EER4; EER5) to further close down narratives of increased employee responsibility for skills. They emphasise the intention for mechanisms of skills delivery to function beyond 'exhorting' the changed behaviour of employers (EER1; EER4) and offer substantial rights for employees, particularly targeted at lower-skilled employees, in order to circumvent the 'bad boss' (EER3; EER5; TUC, 2006; TUC, 2005).

Indeed, employee representatives challenged whether the skills strategy went far enough in offering these rights to employees (EER1; EER4; EER5). They recognised a discourse of emancipation 'behind the scenes' running through policy that positions skills delivery as providing welfare in the guise of the 'ability to adapt to change' (TUC, 2007b), but questioned the extent to which policy-makers acknowledged what this should 'properly' mean in relation to vulnerable employees in a still very voluntarist system (EER1; EER3; EER4; Clough, 2009).

*[Responding to Leitch statement that the best form of welfare is being able to adapt to change.] "Hmmm, well there's an awful lot of truth in it, but like a lot of what's in Leitch it's quite glib. [...] What do you mean by that? It's all very well to say help people adapt to change but whose change and why, and in whose interests, and how do you help them? You certainly don't help them by saying 'look you're gonna be unemployed and out of a job unless you go on this course, and by the way you've got to pay for half of it'. I mean what kind of help is that?" (EER2)*

In summary employee representatives utilised narratives available in policy strategically and selectively to resist and refute images of employee deviance (and to some extent inertia), and instead underscored policy appreciation for the barriers to skills development employees face at the workplace as a consequence of 'bad bosses'. Where lack of proper recognition for these barriers was identified it was presented as a problem of the lack of shared meaning about the nature of the skills project; what counts as support for employees; and therefore the proper role and responsibility of worker-citizens in relation to the notion of 'motivated' skills aspiration and behaviour. In short it was opacity of policy and therefore the contradictions that surround absence of shared meaning about the nature of the problem regarding realising skills development that, for them, resulted in the erroneous perception that there are 'bad' workers.

### ***Resisting inertia and deviance: restating a lack of relevance***

There was also a strong line of argument running through employee representatives narratives' that policy is too prescriptive about what is considered to be 'relevant' skills and training. They recognised, but raised as problematic, government trying artificially and arbitrarily to determine and drive a vision of high(er) skills, which they perceived as consequentially and worryingly dictating and delimit 'the skills that matter' (EER1; EER4).

Drawing on social justice oriented policy logics, and the associated construction of low-skilled employees as disadvantaged and vulnerable (as opposed to inert and deviant), employer representatives argued that the state-led vision and corresponding targets were vastly misaligned with the stated policy focus and aims (EER2; EER4). They exemplified the problem of setting targets and therefore prioritising funding at NVQ level 2, when the people and groups most at need – which employee representatives selectively interpreted as "*what the policy is all about*" (EER1; also Aldridge & Tuckett, 2008a) - have skills well below level 2, or have existing level 2 skills that are redundant (TUC, 2005). They argued that a consequence of misaligned targets is that mechanisms to build up skills attainment towards an eventual NVQ level 2 and train sideways – in short the skills that are demanded

by worker-citizens - have been lost in the rigidity of a system and its audit regime that can't count what isn't within the measurement framework (EER1; EER2; EER5).

Furthermore they questioned what they interpreted to be a target-driven 'narrowing' of the policy focus on skills for employers (TUC, 2007c; TUC, 2005) at the expense of broader skills for employment, skills for personal development and even some apparently *"seriously useless learning with no obvious immediate use value to the labour market"* (EER1); learning for a *"better life"* (EER3). Learning that has a far wider reaching 'social impact' (EER3; EER4; TUC, 2007c) but also a significant impact on productivity and the 'bottom-line' – as a consequence of boosting confidence, raising morale, and the development of so-called 'soft skills' - that tends to be misunderstood and therefore under-demanded by many employers (EER1; EER3; TUC, 2007b; TUC, 2006).

By selecting and emphasising certain narratives available in policy they restated the disjuncture between the narrow specificity of inert businesses skills interests and the developmental and transformative skills that the economy and society needs (Chapter 7). Recognising the broader aims of skills (which they build from an identified policy logic tilted and twisted toward social agendas) they sought to remind policy-makers that *"the things the Leitch Report is about - economically valuable skills - don't have to be narrowly focused"* (EER4), and in doing so they re-imagined what constitutes 'economically valuable' (TUC, 2006). Indeed they restated that too narrow a focus - particular qualifications at particular levels that are in the putative interest of under-aspirational business that don't actually take up these offers and opportunities (EER1) - has the consequence of *"robbing [activities] that are developing people and are actually, if we go by LSC surveys and others, developing their employability as well"* (EER4, emphasis in original; also Aldridge & Tuckett, 2008a).

In other words they argued that narrowing the focus of skills policy has led to a loss of courses and learners – described as *"criminal vandalism"* (EER4) - from *"areas of study that made sense to people"* (EER1); that actually were economically and socially valuable (EER1; EER4). They utilised this argument to resist constructions of imagined inert or

deviant employees, and restate the problem as a lack of relevant skills programmes which has had the effect of *“dampening learners’ own aspirations”* (Aldridge & Tuckett, 2008a:7).

*“We’ve just said bugger individuals judgement, you know, we won’t back that with public money, we’ll back what employers want with public money and then it’s an obligation on you as an individual to go out and look after yourself and become employable.”* (EER1)

Worker-citizens, they restated, want to learn. However, policy-makers need to remember that they enter learning for a complex host of different reasons; need programmes and support to access those programmes to be targeted at their need (often initially below NVQ level 2); want and need to learn skills for personal and employment development; and learn best in different ways (EER1; EER2; EER3; EER4; Aldridge & Tuckett, 2008b). As such, they argued, given employee actual demand for skills is to some extent out of alignment with inert and deviant employers, and governments attempt to ‘lead demand’ (via targets) in response to inert and deviant businesses, rather than being inert or deviant themselves their demand (actually existing aspirational and progressive demand) is being overlooked and ignored in the so-called ‘demand-led system’ (EER3; TUC, 2007c; TUC, 2006).

*[We have]“been concerned that in strengthening the relationships with employers through carrots we seem at the same time to have required individual learners to deal with more sticks, if you like. The public funding has shifted from things that people actively chose to do with some level of public subsidy, towards things that they may chose or not chose to do, mediated through their employers, where the employer has been financially supported to help them to do it as long as it’s those things Government wants doing. So the difficulty is we have wonderful rhetoric about a demand-led system, but actually demand means only those things Government wants you to demand, will it support.”* (EER1)

### **8.3.4 Summary of employee representatives: talking back**

This section has shown how employee representatives engaged with the New Labour Skills Strategy for England to firstly rebuild the logic for skills around a primary and priority social ambition, and secondly stretch and reshape/resist and restate elements of the practices and process of 'doing skills' in relation to this rebuilt logic. Again, what has been explicitly and analytically developed through this section is that the rebuilding - stretching and reshaping, resisting and restating - work is rendered possible as a consequence of the way in which policy-makers entangle and collapse and therefore obscure the lines between the distinct strategies of skills (to be demand-led, to lead demand, and to mitigate/circumvent lack of demand).

As a result of collapsing the lines between strategies employee representatives can selectively and strategically dissect, distil and dislocate available partial narrative threads within policy, stitching them back together in new patterns to reassemble the skills project. Specifically they use partial and re-stitched narratives associated with employees as motivated and employers as deficient/deviant to remake the meaning and nature of the demand-led system as the future and progressive 'employment-led' system (providing for employees as customers and managing employers as subjects); highlight the incongruence and incoherence between a future and progressive employment-led strategy, and a strategy to lead demand according to narrow skills targets aimed at inert businesses; and counter and close down policy imaginaries of deviant employees (highlighting instead the disadvantage and vulnerability of low-skilled workers to restate the responsibility of employers).



## **8.4 Operating in Opacity: the Experience of Skills Delivery**

*“Between the conception and the creation, between the emotion and the response, falls the shadow” (T. S. Eliot: The Hollow Men)*

Having presented employer and employee representatives talking back into policy opacity, this section provides skill delivery representative<sup>69</sup> accounts of how their role and function in doing skills (the operational dimension of skill policy) was experienced in light of both multiple but entangled and collapsed strategies for skills; and the efforts of workplace actor representatives – predominantly employer representatives<sup>70</sup> - to reassemble these strategies through a second level of strategic and partial selection, extraction, and intertwining of available policy discourses and narratives. The attempts to reassemble the New Labour Skills Strategy from within. Given the task at hand, the analysis of skill delivery representatives' accounts to some extent begins the discussion of the findings of this chapter in relation to the empirical sub-question (SRQ3): to understand and explain how employer and employee representatives interpreted and responded to the New Labour Skills Strategy and the implications for skills delivery.

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<sup>69</sup> As noted in the methodology chapter 'skills delivery' is a complex field, and the organisations involved in this research have many and somewhat diverse remits. 1) As strategic bodies, to advise on skills issues. 2) To manage or represent parts of the institutional arrangements (for example, at the time of conducting fieldwork the UKCES had responsibility for providing strategic leadership on skills issues and a role in directing, funding, and relicensing SSCs; the ASSCs was a newly formed body with a remit to represent the SCCs across the UK; the LSC – going through a significant period of change that ultimately lead to the organisation being disbanded – was responsible for planning and funding post-16 provision, whilst the AoC, SFCF and, to some extent, Lifelong Learning UK SSC operated as representative membership bodies for providers in the FE sector). 3) To deliver (albeit it in a strategic capacity) parts of the system (specifically with regard to qualifications: the LSC; QCA; City and Guilds; UKCES and SSCs), for example the UKCES, Lifelong Learning UK SSC, CFA, and UK Skills all had strategic but direct roles to work with employers - and more indirectly employees - with regard to their engagement with skills. Despite the diversity of their roles and some variations between them, my analysis (faithful, data-led and reflective) of their accounts with regard to the research question(s) of this thesis has found within group variation to be less than between group variation.

<sup>70</sup> The focus on skills delivery interaction with employer representatives is largely a consequence of the way in which the New Labour Skills Strategy treats demand-led as synonymous with employer-led on the basis of imagined shared and progressive skills aspirations and behaviours in responsible workplaces, and constructs skills delivery as 'employer-led' in response (Chapter 6).

It is very much in the accounts of the strategic skill delivery representatives, and their depiction of the experiences of the skill providers they manage and/or represent, that the effects of multiple, but entangled and collapsed, strategies for skills (the paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy), and how these multiple but entangled and collapsed strategies are available to be interpreted, reordered and reorganised, are illuminated. As such what follows is a faithful portrayal of the accounts of skills delivery representatives much of which is set in relation to previous analysis, because in doing so this presentational decision accurately reflects the essence and atmosphere of the interviews; the sense of working within and mediating opaque muddle, multiplicity, tension, and frustration, which defined their role and experience at the time.

The section starts with skills delivery representatives' accounts of their distinct roles to be demand-led and to lead demand; their recognition of these roles as in tension, albeit entangled and collapsed; and their description of their attempts to accommodate both. It then goes on to describe and discuss skills delivery representatives' experience of their roles as further complicated - disrupted, disorganised and frustrated - as a consequence of how representatives of workplace actors (predominantly employer representatives) engaged in selectively attempting to reassemble the skills strategy, and therefore reposition and remake the skills delivery system and its function. Firstly, the section discusses their experience of how the demand-led strategy/system - in relation to imagined shared and progressive skills aspirations and behaviours - is contested by representatives of workplace actors (again particularly employer representatives) who engage in using opacity between distinct strategies to trade responsibility for high(er) skills attainment. Secondly, the section discusses their experience of how the demand leading strategy/system - in relation to imagined inert and deviant workplaces and workplace actors - is contested by employer representatives, talking back tension - incongruence and incoherence - in terms of the relevance of state-prescribed skills targets, initiatives and programmes. The section concludes with skills delivery representatives accounts of what this all exposes about skill governance and the role of the state in skills policy in England under New Labour.

#### **8.4.1. Narrating the Roles of Skills Delivery**

Skills delivery representatives recognised their role, and the role of the skills providers they represent, as being simultaneously required to adapt and respond to demand from employers and employees for higher levels of skills to empower their enlightened responsible aspirations for skills-led progress in the context of uncertainty-based complexity, and drive-up demand of employers and employees that exhibit inert or irresponsible demand for skills, thereby either enhancing their aspirations for skills-led progress or emancipating the vulnerable party from the irresponsibility of the deviant other. In other words they recognised the disparate, albeit entangled, collapsed and merged, roles they have to be demand-led; to lead demand; and to mitigate/circumvent lack of demand (see Table 7.1).

##### ***A demand-led role: Adapting and responding to customers***

In interviews skills delivery representatives offered one strategic construction and positioning of their role as requiring them to adapt and react in response to, and therefore on behalf of, both employers and employees as customers in the responsible workplace-led skills partnership (see Chapter 6, Figure 6.2). In recognising this role they articulated a 'demand-led' skill delivery system focused on *"identifying demand in terms of skills needs [...] and being very clear about making sure it responds to that demand"* (SD9). Drawing on narratives of empowering 'voice and choice' they presented themselves as *"talking-up the employer"* and *"being firmly in the employers' camp"* (SD1), but also as *"delivering on that learner voice"* (SD3); as *"strongly focusing on learners needs"* (SD5); and as seeing the learner as being at the *"centre of what we do"* (SD3; also SD11).

##### ***A demand-leading role: Driving up the demand of subjects***

However, as well as needing to be 'demand-led', skills delivery actors recognised themselves as having been given an essential role to 'lead demand' and 'circumvent lack of demand' for more and better skills. They identified this role as requiring them to forge a

state-led skills partnership, driven by a state vision and ambitious framework of targets, with the aim to *“get hold of the agenda and to drive it forwards [...] a very hands-on approach to kick start the skills agenda”* (SD8); a role that also delivers emancipation via skills ‘entitlements’ to vulnerable parties in deviant workplaces (SD9). As such they recognised an alternative construction and positioning of the skills delivery infrastructure in relation to workplace actors as ‘subjects’. They described their role as the *“right-hand of government”* (SD3), and their remit as *“spreading the government message”* (SD11) to businesses and worker-citizens – particularly businesses - about the challenges and threats of failing to embrace their responsibility and upgrade their skills aspirations and behaviours (SD8; SD12).

*Well part of [our] remit don't forget, is also to impress on employers the importance of them taking responsibility for training. [...] You know it's the old thing about if you think training's expensive try ignorance.”* (SD1)

*I would say we're absolutely an employer representative organisation, and we have to be. But I think part of what we also have to do is actually be slightly provocative; perhaps slightly challenging to those employers. [...] I'm not sure if people have registered at all what's going on [in the global economy], but things are changing. Are you ready? What will that mean to you? How does your business need to change? So that's the provocative bit.”* (SD7)

In describing this role to drive up demand, they remade and rearticulated Train to Gain, the Apprenticeship offer, the Skills Pledge, and Individual Skills Accounts from instruments for capturing and acting on demand to *“stimulus mechanisms”* (SD12) for generating and enhancing employer and employee engagement with skills (SD1). A way to deal with historic market failures (lack of demand) and *“stimulate market success”* (SD9); a way to *“persuade employers to do their bit”* (SD8), and engage people in learning for *“a step-change in their own or the businesses circumstances”* (SD10).

### ***The tensions between the roles: Re-narrating opacity***

Although skills delivery representatives recognised the distinctions between their roles to be demand-led and to lead demand, they also recognised the distinctions to be in tension – manifesting as lack of clarity about *“whether the skills strategy is for the sake of meeting the Government targets or really remedying the workplace situation”* (SD4; also SD3; SD5; SD6) - and as entangled and collapsed in strategy. As a result they tended to position themselves (and those they represent) – somewhat uncomfortably and problematically – as having to either merge these roles, or find a middle position between them, in order to deliver on both.

They merged the roles by describing themselves as attempting to *“focus on getting more investment and getting the offer right for more employers to come in on their own terms”* (SD2, emphasis in original). As required to *“very much deliver a demand-led system to achieve those 2020 skills ambitions that Leitch set out”* (SD9); by tackling market failure whilst simultaneously acting as ‘proxies’ for employers (SD3). They described the search for middle positions through their identification of themselves (and those they represent) as having to occupy a space *“sitting between government and employers”* (SD11); to be *“an instrument of government”*, as well as *“employer representative bodies”* (SD11). In both cases the result was that they tended to uncomfortably and problematically re-narrate the opacity between the multiple strategies for skills and their roles in relation.

Having shown how skills delivery representatives identified the disparate roles and positions of skills delivery actors in relation to the multiple strategies for skills, and sought to accommodate and reconcile tensions between them. The rest of this section goes on to describe and discuss how skills delivery representatives experienced the further complication of these roles. The disrupting, disorganising and frustrating of these roles, as a consequence of how representatives of workplace actors (particularly employer representatives) engaged in attempting to reassemble the skills strategy from within, and therefore reposition and remake the skills delivery system and its function.

#### **8.4.2 Disrupting the Roles of Skills Delivery: Trading Responsibility and Relevance**

This subsection describes and discusses skills delivery representatives experience of their already complicated multiple roles as further disrupted, disorganised and frustrated by the tension between the New Labour Skills Strategy (the order and organising work of the state in skill governance); and the strategic reassemblage work of workplace actor representatives (the selective reordering and reorganising of skill governance). It highlights these tensions to pivot on contestation over the meaning – and associated practices and processes - of both demand-led and demand leading elements of policy. It concludes with skills delivery representatives accounts of what this all exposes about skill governance and the role of the state in skills policy in England under New Labour; the limits of state-steered voluntarism.

##### ***The contested meaning of ‘demand-led’: The experience of responsibility trading***

In recognising part of their role to deliver a demand-led system to partner-customers, skills delivery representatives’ highlighted the challenges they faced in positioning themselves in response to the imagined consensus and coherence between ‘enlightened employers’ and ‘motivated employees’ responsible economic and social, and public and private, interests and agendas. Indeed, their experiences led them to identify the imagined responsible workplace-led skills partnership as having little or no “*cultural resonance*” (SD2; SD10). Instead they depicted themselves as walking a difficult line in needing to represent both employers and employees; as experiencing a tension between the economic and the social ambitions in the demand-led system (SD2; SD5) in their attempts to simultaneously “*put the employer’s needs first while they think about the learner and what the learner really needs*” (SD11, emphasis in original). Particularly as the worker-citizen – learner - was perceived to have been side-lined by a skills strategy which – on the basis of shared interests and agendas - treated ‘demand-led’ as synonymous with ‘employer-led’ (SD2; SD3; SD5; SD10).

In walking this difficult line their accounts articulated the experience of encountering the ways in which employers and employees (via their representatives) engaged in reassembling and remaking the logic for skills, by utilising opacity between the multiple narrative threads of skills policy to strategically and selectively emphasise certain available (partial) discourses into new frameworks of policy meaning and practice. They experienced how employer and employee representatives twisted and tilted the essence of policy coherence in order to prioritise either economic or social agendas and interests as underscoring the 'demand-led' system (determining the formal dimension of 'what is to be governed'); and the implications of this for the ways in which they re-imagine and re-articulate the operational dimension of skills governance, specifically 'who is being governed and how' (Carmel & Papadopoulos, 2003).

Put simply, with one commonly repeated example (SD2; SD4; SD6; SD11), they explained this reselecting and reassembling work as experienced where they encountered the problem of reconciling and resolving the ways in which employers and employees are able to draw on different narrative threads of policy to trade responsibility for engaging in high(er) skills attainment (sections 8.2.2 and 8.3.2). Specifically, how they trade the meaning of a responsible 'other'; and the associated ways in which they remake practices and processes of the state and skill delivery to provide exclusively for them by managing the others voluntarism and ensuring the other is led to develop high(er) skills aspirations and behaviours.

*"You get the argument that employers are quite happy for employees to learn so long as they do it at their own cost and in their own time, and employees are quite happy to actually go out and learn if the employer pays the fees and also the time when their learning and gives them, you know, a higher paid job at the end of it. I don't think either of those arguments has yet been resolved in a way that is satisfactory." (SD10)*

What this point, expressed as something of a common-sense and unresolved problem, exposes is that a policy narrative depicting employers and employees as sharing a common and consensual interest in skills, is available to be, and is, dissected and distilled

by employer and employee representatives. With the effect that both can strategically select, dislocate, and use, fragments of this narrative as building blocks to elevate the interpretation of their own position as a provided for - enlightened or motivated - 'customer'. Interpretations and positions which are further strengthened by stitching these selected discursive fragments together with additional available narratives (or partial narratives) of the inertia and deviance of the 'subject' other.

The effects of this second level of strategic selecting and assembling work was described as experienced by skills delivery actors as disrupting, disorganising and frustrating the delivery of their policy-given role in relation to being 'demand-led'; responding to shared and progressive high(er) skills aspirations and behaviours. Skill delivery representatives described skills delivery as *"playing its part"* (SD3). For example, listening out for the 'voice and choice' of 'enlightened' employers (SD3; SD8), but finding employers in return refusing to *"do their bit"*, being *"quite two-faced"* (SD8), with regard to their engagement with skills. As one skill delivery representative commented, despite the onus on employers to 'get involved' and employers claiming to be engaged *"there's still an expectation that people will come with all these things ready formed"* (SD3); that skills will be done without them but for them (SD8). In short they experienced employers as still not seeing - or refusing to see - developing people as a fundamental part of their role in the strategy (SD1; SD3); especially where that developmental role extends beyond providing skills for immediate task competence and requires employers to develop employability skills which are about 'potential' and 'progression' (SD2; SD8).

In summary, skills delivery representatives described experiencing this second level of strategic selection and reassemblage of policy meanings, practices and processes, as a further fundamental tension (SD2; SD6; SD10). Disrupting, disorganising and frustrating their required role to deliver a responsive 'demand-led' strategy, (that assumes progressive skill aspirations and behaviours of partner-customer), on both economic and social grounds and on the basis of imagined coherence between the interests and ambitions of enlightened businesses and motivated worker-citizens (Chapter 6).



*“If you’re an employer-led organisation, supposed to be doing the right thing for people in work by their employers, then to suggest that actually more attention should be paid to work place learning culture, time off - those aspects which are there in policy-making with time off to train, flexible working, you know - that’s a tension.” (SD2, emphasis in original)*

Beyond the experience and effect of the contested meaning of ‘demand-led’ in the New Labour Skills Strategy, skills delivery representatives additionally identified further complications to the tensions associated with delivering their role in relation to the strategy for leading demand.

### ***The contested meaning of demand leading: The experience of relevance trading***

As discussed above (section 8.4.1), given their different positioning and therefore different roles in the multiple strategies for governing skills, skills delivery representatives described experiencing tensions and contradictions associated with reconciling their requirement to on the one hand respond to demand; and on the other to lead demand/circumvent lack of demand through encouragement and exhortation of changed skills aspirations and behaviours (SD4). However, interviews with skills delivery representatives additionally exposed how their efforts to manage tension/contradiction were further complicated by the way in which employer and employee representatives utilised the opaque distinctions between the strategies, to remake the demand-led system; and disrupt the system to lead demand or circumvent lack of demand. The way in which they dissect, distil, dislocate, and strategically and partially select from within available narratives associated with responsible workplaces – narratives about enlightened and motivated high(er) skills aspirations and behaviours, an empowering state, and a skills delivery system that responds to that demand via mechanisms of voice and choice – and use these to counter and attempt to close down narratives about inert and deviant lack of demand.

What skills delivery representatives articulated is therefore more than just the problem of trying to reconcile a paradox. That a ‘central’ or ‘top-down’ state-led agenda (SD3; SD4;

SD6; SD8) - *“drilling down into everything and dictating [need]”* (SD5); that *“isn’t really about what learners or employers want”* (SD5); or *“reactive to local demand”* (SD3); or at least has been designed by government to solve a particular construction of the ‘public’ problem for which there is isn’t a corresponding and compelling ‘private’ concern (SD1; SD2; SD3; SD4; SD5; SD6) – cannot amount to a ‘demand-led’ or more specifically ‘employer-led’ strategy for skills (Payne, 2008:106).

Although this paradox was explicitly, and repeatedly, described as apparent and problematically experienced:

*“They [policy-makers] talk an awful lot about having a bottom-up approach and having demand-led, but it doesn’t feel like that at all. It feels like it’s all [...] driven by government priorities and government stated needs [...] so we pay a lot of lip service to ‘we need to meet demand’, but that top level feels like what drives it.”* (SD5)

For example, in one account a skills delivery representative explained a conversation with a policy-maker in which the discrepancy between what government and employers want in terms of a skills product was discussed, and the Ministerial view offered was that employers needed *“leading towards an understanding of the benefits”* (SD10). Resulting in them perceiving their role in the skills strategy as to *“go out there and convert them [to] promote, as part of their employer focusing, the government agenda”* (SD10). In other words, they identified their role to ‘align’ employers with the government agenda (SD3) and deliver *“demand-led so long as it fits within this national system”* (SD5; also SD6).

However, beyond the experience of this paradox what they also articulated is how this paradox, and the contestation it produces, has come about. Specifically, they described the consequence and effect of entangling and collapsing multiple but distinct strategies for governing skills aimed at differently imagined workplaces, such that the opacity between the narrative threads of policy creates spaces for employer and employee representative to creatively reorder, reorganise, and reassemble policy meaning and the associated processes and practices of ‘doing skills’. For example, they highlighted how

policy narratives that employer and employee representatives identify and recognise as imagining their lack of demand are bounced back, by deploying the strategic partial selection of available narratives that tell of institutional barriers that enlightened and motivated customers experience in their attempts to engage with skills. In short they experienced how employer and employee representatives use – albeit very differently - narratives regarding the problems of prescribing skills need and the mistakes of a rigid supply-led system in relation to responsible workplace aspiration, in order to claim that targets for encouraging and exhorting higher levels of skills ambition (aimed at inert and irresponsible workplaces) lack relevance and recognition of their actual skills aspirations and behaviours; and fail to place proper responsibility on the deficiencies and deviance of the offending other.

They articulated how employers complain that skills providers – required to meet targets for higher levels of qualification attainment - are misrepresenting their demand and trying to ‘sell a product’, by drawing on policy narratives that privilege employer ‘voice and choice’ in an empowering demand-led system (SD3).

*“The complaint I hear sometimes is: ‘you’re trying to sell us what you think we need, you’re not asking us what we do need” (SD2, emphasis in original)*

*“We did a consultation on how you could best do [change to apprenticeships]. First of all there was massive resistance to doing it at all which was quite interesting. You know people say they want them but then they say ‘well look, no. You’re putting stuff artificially into my qualification. This is a government agenda. [...] I don’t want to be paying for this’. You know all this kind of stuff comes out.” (SD3)*

They articulated how employers use the privilege afforded to their ‘need’ to resist measuring skill by qualification targets rather than competence to do a job (SD1). Strategically and selectively extracting and stretching partial policy narratives associated with their position as customers in the demand-led strategy, and using them to subvert and silence policy narratives associated with the strategy to lead demand and raise skills ambition.

In short, skills delivery representatives describe themselves as caught in the opaque space between the multiple strategies for skills aimed at differently imagined workplaces and workplace actors, which are apparent – albeit entangled and collapsed – in policy, and the ways in which they are reworked; in particular by employer representatives (SD1; SD3; SD5; SD6; SD7; SD12).

*“You spend an awful lot of time saying [to employers] this is the Government’s response to an employer driven strategy, and this has been developed over time apparently in collaboration with employers and by employers - that’s always the strap line isn’t it? This is ‘with and by’ employers - and yet they’re like ‘well I’m an employer. It’s not what I need. It’s not what I want’.” (SD5)*

In summary, skills delivery representatives again described experiencing a second level of strategic selection and reassemblage of policy meanings, practices and processes, as disrupting, disorganising and frustrating their required role to deliver a demand-leading strategy (Chapter 7).

#### **8.4.3 Governing High(er) Skills: The limits of state-steered voluntarism**

As the earlier sections of this chapter (8.2 and 8.3) have shown, by collapsing distinct strategies for governing skills, policy creates opaque spaces for employer and employee representatives to engage in second level strategic selection of available policy discourses. Dislocating partial and fragmented narratives and stitching them back together to reorder, reorganise and reassemble policy logics and practices. This section has so far shown the ways in which skills delivery representatives experienced this as further disrupting, disorganising and frustrating their roles and functions to be simultaneously both demand-led and demand-leading.

In an attempt to manage the tension and disruptions of their many given and contested roles, they described themselves as actively engaged in negotiating, mediating and

attempting to reconcile between the multiple strategies as they are being discursively and materially reassembled. As engaged in finding 'workarounds', 'fixes', or 'backdoors' (SD2; SD5; SD10), to deliver their disparate roles by lessening the variance between the points on which contestation over policy meanings and practices pivot. What 'demand' means (to policy-makers and to employers and employees), and what counts as 'demand' (SD1; SD3; SD5; SD6; SD7; SD12); a term which they identify as being *"flung around quite easily [but] quite hard work to pin down"* (SD2). They describe themselves – in different circumstances - as either *"making that argument [for the government agenda] and they [employers] kind of start to understand why they need it"* (SD3), or as *"saying [to employers and learners] 'don't worry about the fact that this has changed slightly, it doesn't actually matter, you'll still get what you need in the end'"* (SD5).

As a result of how they experienced the strategy – its remaking by the representatives of employer and employees – and therefore their negotiating, mediating and reconciling roles and functions within it, skills delivery representatives recognised the New Labour Skills Strategy as falling well short of presenting a radical challenge to voluntarism. Indeed they described the strategy as effectively *"kicking [issues with] voluntarism into the long grass"* (SD6) - endlessly deferring deadlines and retreating from the threat to reconsider forms of (employer) compulsion (SD2; SD3; SD6) - and they recognised this as a political choice. However, their accounts did not conflate this lack of radical challenge to voluntarism with a straightforward identification of the strategy as non-interventionist 'business-as-usual' for skills policy in England. As amounting to 'leaving employers alone' with regard to how they develop and utilise skills (see Chapter 2; also Hoque et al, 2005; Page & Hillage, 2006).

The distinction they identified between the New Labour Skills Strategy and 'business-as-usual' voluntarism hinges on the very essence of the analytical focus of this thesis. The identification of multiple, albeit entangled and collapsed, discursive constructions of what is being governed - economic and social agendas; public and private aspirations and behaviours; and workplace partnership (see Chapter 5) - and how, through skills. As one skills delivery representative expressed it, the opaque distinction between a demand-led

strategy and a strategy to led demand raises *“interesting questions about what your level of intervention is as a government. [...] Whether it’s only at the level of the stuff you fund or whether it’s much wider than that?”*, going on to note *“at the moment it’s a little bit wider than that”* (SD3). In other words, skills delivery representatives recognised the New Labour Skills Strategy as an attempt to steer good vs. bad voluntarism of workplace actors’ skills aspirations and behaviours. They note the strategy as attempting this through the construction of favourable and unfavourable subject positions (enlightened/motivated vs. inert/deviant) and encouraging and nudging workplace actors towards making good skills choices for themselves (SD6; SD12).

*“Government thinks that employers should do more to invest in the skills of their workforce, but Government isn’t going to compel employers to do so, it’s going to encourage them.”* (SD6)

*“I think [Government] believes that it should encourage, mainly by carrots but occasionally by sticks, the development of skills in the marketplace. [...] I think it sees itself as having some macro policy [...] I think it sees itself as putting the lines and the numbers on the painting for paint by numbers. So it says ‘this is where the lines are and this is the colour you’ll do’ and the employers have actually, you know, got the paint brush and the paint pot and fill in the boxes.”* (SD10)

There was a general sense that this constructing of good vs. bad subject positions and encouraging workplace actors to manoeuvre themselves accordingly, is the *“way government acts now”* (SD6). That compulsion and other strong interventions in the market are too far off the agenda, but that *“it doesn’t mean to say you can’t nudge people in those sorts of directions. I mean you can send signals, can’t you, about what’s desirable, about what’s sensible”* (SD12).

The limits of this role of the state in skill policy – to steer voluntarism – has its basis in the contestability of the strategy. The ability – given in opacity between a demand-led system in relation to responsible workplace actors; a demand-leading system in relation to inert workplace actors; and a system to circumvent lack of demand in relation to deviant

workplace actors – for employer and employee representatives to strategically and selectively unpick and unmake the attempts to steer them. The possibilities to extract, re-reflect, and elevate partial available narratives associated with their enlightenment and motivation and stitch these together with dislocated partial narratives of the deficiency and deviance of the other, to reassemble the skills strategy. This complicates – disrupts, disorganises and frustrates – skills delivery, further blurring the lines between meanings, practices and processes of ‘doing skills’ – the ordering and organising of skill governance - in perhaps unanticipated and therefore unexpected ways?

*“At a recent meeting a very senior civil servant said – when the discussion was going this way – that he found it frustrating because ideas that they’ve got, which were really quite simple propositions, suddenly seemed to get very complicated when they were actually released, and I can see things from that perspective. But I think it is [pause] if you look at [...] the amount of stakeholders and interests that they actually have to bring into some sort of community, and then gain agreement, and then make progress; that’s difficult. There are just a lot of interests.” (SD2)*

### **8.5 Discussion and Concluding Reflections**

Contrary to VoC, and to some extent existing PRA informed theorisations of the governance of skill in England, this chapter has shown a politics of skill (struggle over ideas, meanings and effects for the political ordering of social relations at the workplace, and between the workplace, state and arrangement of the institutions of skill delivery) that is taking place, and is available to take place, within the parameters of the New Labour Skills Strategy; within the parameters of paradox between a ‘demand-led’ strategy for skills and a state strategy to *lead demand* in the *context of voluntarism*. The previous two chapters explained and accounted for this paradox by analytically explicating three distinct but entangled and collapsed strategies for high(er) skill governance. Firstly, the demand-led strategy, premised on imagined responsible workplaces, an empowering role for the state and a demand-led role for skill delivery adapting and responding to mechanisms of customer ‘voice and choice’. Secondly, a strategy to lead demand, premised on imagined

inert workplaces, requiring an enhancing role for the state and a skills delivery system that leads demand through targets to encourage and manage the skills aspirations and behaviours of workplace subjects. Thirdly, a strategy to mitigate and circumvent lack of demand, premised on imagined deviance of employers ('the bad boss') and employees (the 'bad worker'), that requires an emancipating state to exhort changed behaviours or exclude deviance, and a system of skills delivery that practices exhortation through practice or emancipates the disempowered through support 'behind the scenes'.

This chapter has shown how employer and employee representatives interpreted and responded to the New Labour Skills Strategy for England. Or more specifically, how they interpreted and responded to the distinct but entangled and collapsed strategies to be demand-led, to lead demand and to circumvent lack of demand. How, given the entanglement of discourses about the high(er) skills project, they used the opacity between policy meanings, practices and processes to stretch and reshape and resist and restate aspects of the strategy, and the implications for the ordering and organising of skills delivery. Again the advantages of taking an interpretive approach to analysis - that is focused on meaning-making, meaning reproduction, and in this case meaning translation and remaking - is apparent in what it exposes about struggles over the objects of governance and objectives of policy.

This chapter shows that when non-state skills actors (employer and employee representatives) engaged with policy and policy debate it was not necessarily with a straightforward and possibly openly antagonistic prescription of how to meet their need. A normative wish list which they hoped would meet with a favourable policymaking elite. Instead they engaged, in a rather more complex and subtle way, with what was made available in policy. What was rendered possible by a state strategy (or strategies) seeking to manage their aspirations and behaviours and steer their voluntarism, by attempting to construct a shared system of meaning about the logic for high(er) skills (progress in partnership), and how high(er) skills are to be governed in relation to this logic depending on how workplaces are imagined.



This chapter has shown how both employer and employee representatives' engaged in twisting and tilting the logic of high(er) skills towards priority economic or social agendas respectively. How, having reemphasised and remade the priority logic, employer representatives used the construction of enlightened employers to resist counter-narratives of inert or deviant business, whilst employee representatives used the construction of motivated employees to resist counter-narratives of inert or deviant worker-citizens. How they both used images of the inertia and deviance of the other (the 'bad boss' or the 'bad worker') to restate their vulnerability and need for support from the state; and how they both used the ways in which policy images of the responsible workplace constructs employers and employees as 'partner-customers' of the skills system to resist narratives of the need for their skill demand to be led and regulated by a state vision and state targets. They depicted the skills delivery system as continuing to sell a product rather than adapting and responding to their voice and choice, and as such they legitimised any putative lack of voice and choice on their part as not an instance of their inertia or deviance but as a breakdown of shared meaning about the proper roles, responsibilities, and relationships between the skills actors and the institutions of delivery. They therefore ultimately place fault for any putative lack of demand on their part with a persistently supply-led skills system that lacked relevance; recognition of their actual demand; and the ability to address the inertia and deviance of the other parties in the skills project.

In short this chapter shows how employer and employee representatives used entangled and collapsed and therefore opaque distinctions between the multiple strategies for skills (based on differently imagined workplaces to be acted on and governed in terms of their degree of responsible skills aspiration and behaviour) to disrupt, distil, dislocate and strategically and selectively reassemble the meanings and practices of a skills project. Specifically the chapter has shown this disruption, distilling and dislocating of policy meanings, practices and processes, by employer and employee representatives, and strategic reassembling of the high(er) skills project and strategy, to have taken place around two critical junctures or tension points.

- o The trading (off-loading) of their members' *responsibility* for high(er) skills by stretching and reshaping meanings, practices and processes of the demand-led strategy
- o The trading (off-loading) of the *relevance* of policy for their members by resisting and restating meanings, practices and processes of the strategy to lead demand

In trading responsibility and relevance – stretching policy narratives of the responsibility for the other party to raise their demand, and resisting policy narratives of the relevance for them of raising their demand – employer and employee representatives utilise policy opacity, 'select' from within an available repertoire of easily disconnected and dislocated contradictory discourses and narrative threads, and rearticulate and reassemble the skills strategy from within. By drawing on the synthesis of CPE and critical governance studies that provide the theoretical grounding for the analytical approach of this thesis, I have conceptualised this activity as meaningful second level strategic selection. Whereby actors - using the discursively authorised positions from which to speak that they are afforded (are made plausible) in policy narratives of both economic and social priorities, enlightened employers and motivated employees - extract, re-inflect and elevate parts of the skills policy discourse to reorder, reorganise and reassemble meaning, practices and processes of both the formal and operational dimensions of skill policy. Where CPE theorisation of the strategic selection of meaning focuses on the macro level of regime ordering and policy objectives, my analysis has shown the relevance of looking below this level. This enabled me to capture how the actual lack of ideational unity at the macro level allows actors targeted by the objects of governance to engage in a second level of selective reassemblage of the policy project. In other words, this second level of meaningful (semiotic) strategic selection is made possible as a consequence of skills policy being, to borrow again from Clarke (2004b2) "*more than one thing at once*", without being reducible to radical contingency. Furthermore, this selective and meaningful reordering, reorganising and reassembling of policy, has real (material) implications and effects for the delivery of skills.

The accounts of skills providers presented in this chapter highlights that the discursive struggle over policy meanings, practices and processes matters, as it - in real and felt (material) ways - disrupted, disorganised and frustrated skills delivery in England under New Labour. For example, skills delivery actors spoke of encountering the effect of employers distilling, dislocating and reassembling (partial) discourses and narrative threads in order to connect their stretched and reshaped entitlement as customers (within a tilted economic logic for skills) with a raised and restated responsibility on inert and deviant employees. A process which in turn served to reorder, reorganise and remake the meaning and practice of skills provision. Splitting 'listening' to employers from 'raising their demand' for skills, in a new narrative told by employer representatives that resisted their positioning as partner-subjects in relation to progressive social ambition.

To some extent this point about the disruption, disorganising and frustration of skills delivery echoes the well-established criticisms of voluntarist systems of skill formation. As discussed in Chapter 1, previous analysis of the New Labour Skills Strategy in England has highlighted skill delivery actors as experiencing a critical source of tension and contradiction in their role and function associated with the extent to which a putative 'employer-led' agenda amounts in practice to a 'state-led' agenda (Payne, 2008:106; Keep, 2006). However, the source of this tension/contradiction remained somewhat under-developed in this previous analysis. Largely put down to the inherent problems of voluntarism: that without mechanisms to effect 'private' skills demand and utilisation states are left with few levers at their disposal with which to regulate change and are reduced to tinkering with the supply-side (Grugulis *et al*, 2004; Keep, 2006; Lloyd & Payne, 2006); and the inability of policy-makers to properly reflect on "*why employers do not always behave in the way that they expect them to*" (Payne, 2008:110). In seeking to offer a richer empirical and conceptual explanation of the dynamics at play that produce this tension/contradiction, this thesis makes the analytical claim that the 'employer-led' vs. 'state-led' paradox can be understood as a consequence of the opaque distinction made by policy-makers between multiple strategies for skills. On the one hand a skills strategy – demand-led strategy – framed as responding to the high(er) skills aspirations and behaviours of imagined enlightened/motivated partner-customers; and on the other *two*

skills strategies framed as conditioning the high(er) skills aspirations and behaviours of imagined deficient/deviant partner-subjects.

The difficulty for providers seeking to lead raised demand for skills, are two-fold. Firstly, demand-leading strategies remain 'soft' forms of discursive regulation, albeit meaningfully creating subject positions and subjectivities taken seriously and struggled over by skills actors. As shown in the way in which these subject positions and subjectivities frame the topics of discussion within the strategic conversation about high(er) skills set by policy. Secondly and perhaps more significantly, that demand-leading strategies are entangled and collapsed in an opaque policy that is easily contested; disconnected, dislocated and reassembled from within. In essence, state work to signal, encourage and nudge 'good' vs. 'bad' voluntarism, meets employer and employee work to remake, rearticulate and jostle for position in the 'good' camp, whilst relegating the other party to the 'bad' camp. Skills delivery representatives then portray themselves and their sector as predominantly engaged in negotiating, mediating and attempting to reconcile/lessen the variance between, points over which contestation of policy meaning, practice and process pivots.

In conclusion then, this thesis has shown that within what was depicted as a 'coherent approach' to skills policymaking there were three strategies for high(er) skills, distinguished by how workplace skills aspiration and behaviour was imagined in proximity to the established logic for high(er) skills in England; the object of governance as 'progress in partnership'. These strategies were however entangled and collapsed, rendering the distinctions between them opaque. Including, and in particular, the dissimilar subject positions and subjectivities policy created and sought to empower, encourage or challenge and emancipate. It is this opacity in relation to different subjects of governance that can be used by skills actors - engaged in a second level of strategic selection of meanings, practice and processes - to 'talk back' and disrupt, disorganise and frustrate the functions of skills delivery actors. This manifests for skills delivery as a struggle to manage the tensions between their roles to be demand-led and to lead demand through encouraging and nudging high(er) skills aspirations and behaviours. Overall therefore, the central argument of this thesis is that the governance – ordering and organising – of skills

policy under New Labour can be explained and understood as an attempt at 'state-steered' voluntarism to affect high(er) skills and dislodge the low skills equilibrium in England, and that this thesis presents the limits of such a project.

## 9. Conclusions, Contributions and Implications of the Study

### 9.1 Introduction

In the beginning this thesis identified a paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England, captured in the tension between a so-termed '*demand-led*' strategy for skills, and a strategy wherein *demand is to be led by the state* in the *context of voluntarism*. This tension was unable to be fully accounted for as a straightforward continuation of the 'chronic affliction' that besets skills policymaking in the UK/England; that successive governments have constructed the role of education and training in service to the needs and demands of the economy, whilst privileging private (meaning market) managerial prerogative to make decisions regarding skills development. Such an analysis of continuing – 'business-as-usual' voluntarism - problematically writes-off the inflection in New Labour policy that constructs and carves out a role for the state in skills to lead demand.

Writing this state role back in, this thesis offers an explanation of the source and cause of the paradox as 'created' by a state project seeking to discursively manage voluntarism. A project to retain the private prerogative of managerial and individual training and skilling decisions so long as they are the 'right' decisions, based on an ambition of 'progress in partnership'. If not, a project to steer the aspirations and behaviours of skills actors through encouragement or exhortation or, if all else fails, through emancipation of the vulnerable party (support behind the scenes for those disempowered and denied productive or labour market competitiveness by the skills deviance of the other). In offering such an account of the source and cause of paradox this thesis has explained the governance – ordering and organising - of skills policy under New Labour as an attempt at 'state-steered voluntarism'.

In addition this thesis has shown the limitations and limits of state-steered voluntarism. It has shown that in the attempt to discursively retain *and* regulate subjects towards 'good' voluntarism (through the coexisting *demand-led* and *demand-leading* strategies), policy constructed the very weapons actors needed to fight back. Simplistically speaking the tools to use (parts of) the *demand-led* system to disrupt and relocate (parts of) the *demand-leading* system; tools that afforded actors the ability to use (parts of) one strategy as an escape route from (parts of) the other. Therefore, in conclusion this thesis suggests that the tension between demand-led and demand-leading strategies produced a struggle for the right to define the meanings, practices, and processes of governing skills, from *within* the policy. As such, New Labour created a paradox - as a result of an attempt to regulate good voluntarism – which it was unable to reconcile and resolve.

Having arrived at this main conclusion in response to the central research question, the remainder of this chapter takes a step back to recall and develop how this conclusion has been reached with respect to the empirical sub-questions that informed the development of the thesis. It does this by firstly reiterating the location of the research and research design, and secondly summarising the findings (section 9.2). I then present the theoretical and empirical contributions of the thesis and the policy implications (section 9.3), before reflecting on the potential for future research agendas building from, and developing, this study (section 9.4).

## ***9.2 Summary of the Research Aims and Findings***

### **9.2.1 Research Aims and Approach: Locating the Thesis in a Paradox Unsolved**

This thesis set out to explain and understand the source and cause of paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England; the existence of both a '*demand-led*' strategy, and a state strategy to *lead demand* in the *context of voluntarism*. It was guided

by the following overarching research question (RQ) and three empirical sub-question (SRQ):

**RQ:** How can the governance – ordering and organising – of skills policy under New Labour be explained and understood?

**SRQ1:** How did New Labour establish the logic for, and give meaning to, a high(er) skills project in England?

**SRQ2:** How was the logic for a high(er) skills project used to order and organise skills policy in England?

**SRQ3:** How did employer and employee representatives interpret and respond to the New Labour high(er) skills project for England, and with what implications for the ordering and organising of skills delivery?

The identification of these research questions came from a concern that both the existing analysis of New Labour's skills policy (outlined in Chapter 1), and the underpinning theoretical perspectives that have sought to explain the governance of skill formation in the UK/England in the context of voluntarism (reviewed in Chapter 2), were seemingly unable to account for and explain the paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England. As a consequence, existing analysis of New Labour's skills policy tends to retreat to positions that read the New Labour Skills Strategy for England as suffering from a naive misunderstanding about, and/or unwillingness and/or inability to affect, the skills choices of private actors (especially employers) in the context of voluntarism. Misunderstanding, unwillingness, and inability are all conclusions about policy inflections that '*demand is to be led by the state*', available to be reached through Varieties of Capitalism (VoC) or power and politics informed (for example PRA) analytical frameworks for theorising the governance of skill in the context of (liberal market) voluntarism. Indeed, both perspectives struggle to reach any other conclusion about this (historically) incongruous inflection (Chapter 2).



Taking an alternate approach to policy analysis by redirecting away from an investigation of policy outcomes that leads to explanations of 'misunderstanding' (approaches that effectively require the writing-out of policy meanings, practices and processes associated with the role of the state in leading demand, and which cannot therefore adequately explain and account for paradox), this thesis focused on the strategic and selective normative dimension of skill governance – the ordering and organising of 'doing skills' - and its remaking by skills actors (representatives of employers and employees), that leads instead to explanations of 'understanding'. Explanations better able to account for the relationship between policy meanings, practices, and processes and their contestation, and that can better explain and account for paradox.

To achieve this redirecting of analysis, the thesis draws on a synthesis of critical political economy (CPE) and critical governance studies, to develop the conceptual approach to practices and processes of state work, and policy as intersubjective meaning-making. This is a synthesis that enables a critical analysis of the role of semiosis in institutionalising the logic of the regime, as well as being able to account for ambiguity and contestation of meaning-making (without reducing to radical contingency). This is a synthesis that highlights state work as attempts to align and assemble ill-suited meanings, practices, and processes - claimed to amount to a coherent agenda (Newman & Clarke, 2009a) - and the ability for these efforts to be undone and remade (Chapter 3).

Given the ontological and epistemological commitment to understanding and explaining the strategic and selective realm of meaning-making in the conceptual approach, the research was conducted by employing a faithful and reflective interpretative policy analysis (Chapter 4) of key documents and interviews with elite skills actors. The combination of conceptual and methodological approach enabled me to address the research question of this study: *how can the governance – ordering and organising – of skill policy under New Labour be explained and understood?* The main findings and conclusions are summarised in the next section in relation to the three empirical sub-questions.

## 9.2.2 Main Findings and Conclusions

The main findings and conclusions of this thesis are presented in this section under each of the three empirical sub-questions that, together with the research question, guided this study.

### ***How did New Labour establish the logic for, and give meaning to, a high(er) skills project in England??***

Chapter 5 presented an analysis of policy-makers narratives that identified the logic for high(er) skill as built on mitigating economic and social uncertainty-based complexity. By presenting the production and employment environment of businesses and worker-citizens as framed by the difficulties of a particular (selected and privileged) imaginary of a highly competitive and technologically advanced and advancing knowledge-based economy and post-welfare society, policy-makers were able to construct the only possible meaningful remedy to be the pursuit of more and better skills (the 'high skills rhetoric').

Specifically, the requirement for more and better skills as a coping mechanism in the dynamism of the global economy was intrinsically linked to the ability of businesses and worker-citizens to be flexible and adaptable to putatively rapid change. As such, beyond extolling the alchemical qualities and virtues of high(er) skills for securing on-going business and worker-citizen prosperity, policy-makers' narratives declined to specify the actual skills needed. This decision was presented as to be taken at the workplace (by individual businesses or worker-citizens) to address their particular and changeable requirements. The implication was the establishment of a logic where high(er) skills for flexibility and adaptability to change were to be governed through policy – attempting to discursively regulate to support or shape the market toward progressive aspirations and behaviours - but where determining what constitutes the high(er) skills for flexibility and adaptability was a private (workplace or individual business/worker-citizen) decision.

In addition policy-makers' narratives constructed the logic for high(er) skills as built on their depiction of inherent coherence between multiple interests and agendas, brought together in a skills partnership (government, business and worker-citizens). Specifically policy presented a fundamental synergy between the national economic and social skills ambitions of UK plc. and UK social, the public and private skills interests of government and businesses/worker-citizens, and the mutual skills concerns of employers and employees interacting at the site of the workplace. The chapter presented how the forging of this inherent coherence of interests involved state work to produce intersubjective meaning associated with an economic and social imperative, by 'speaking out' and 'speaking about' shared agendas; again, seeking to govern (steer and manoeuvre) workplace actors into alignment through the attempted discursive regulation of private interests.

In conclusion, this chapter highlighted the role of semiosis in construing and constructing the 'object' of governance (Jessop, 2008; Jessop, 2009) and the objective of skills policy in relation to the wider paradigm of the global knowledge-based economy and post-welfare society. It found that New Labour established the logic for, and gave meaning to, a high(er) skills project in England by meaningfully determining, and seeking to bind and fix, 'progress in partnership' as the object of governance and the objective of policy. Constructing the logic for high(er) skill in this way involved state work to discursively set the terms of the conversation about skills more widely, and regulate workplace actors (businesses and worker-citizens) with regard to both the meaningful nature (if not the specifics) and degree of privately-held 'responsible skills aspiration and behaviour'.

### ***How was the logic for a high(er) skills project used to order and organise skills policy in England??***

This question was addressed in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, and presented as the relationship between the 'formal' ('what was to be governed') and 'operational' ('how skills are done') dimensions of policy. (I borrow the terms and distinctions from Carmel & Papadopoulos, 2003). Taken together the analytical work of these two chapters explained

and accounted for the paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy - both a 'demand-led' strategy, and a state strategy to *lead demand* in the *context of voluntarism*.

This thesis showed that within what is framed as a "*coherent approach*" (Foreword by Tony Blair – PIU, 2001:3) to skills – addressed at solving the low skills problem in England - New Labour constructed three distinct operational strategies for governing skills. These distinct strategies were determined, in the first instance, by the degree to which imagined workplaces were perceived to have internalised the logic for high(er) skills, and exhibited skills aspirations and behaviours based on pursuing skills-led progress in partnership. These three strategies were termed:

- The demand-led strategy
- The strategy for leading demand
- The strategy for circumventing lack of demand

Further to this, the thesis presents how the strategies were further distinguished by the imagined relationship between employers and employees at the site of the workplace, the constructed responding form and role for the state, and the meanings, practices and processes underwriting the organisation of the institutions of skill delivery:

- *Demand-led strategy* - responsible workplace, shared progressive enlightened/motivated skills aspiration and behaviour of businesses and worker-citizens, empowering role for the state, demand-led system of skill delivery to respond to partner-customer 'voice' and 'choice' (Chapter 6, Figure 6.2)
- *Strategy to lead demand* – inert workplace, shared deficient skills aspirations and behaviour of businesses and worker-citizens, enhancing role for the state, skills delivery system to lead demand by driving the state vision and targets (Chapter 7.2, Figure 7.1)
- *Strategy to mitigate and circumvent lack of demand* – irresponsible workplaces, deviant lack of skills aspiration and behaviour of businesses ('bad boss') or worker-citizens ('bad worker'), emancipating role for the state, skills delivery system to mitigate and circumvent lack of demand through exhortation in practice and support for the vulnerable party 'behind the scenes' (Chapter 7.3, Figure 7.2)

In short, this thesis argues that these identified distinct skills strategies for England represented state work to create different images of workplaces – subject positions and subjectivities – that justified different governance strategies. State work that involved rearticulating and reassembling the component parts of the skills project into distinct architectures of high(er) skills governance by the state. The bringing together and sequencing of linked ideas, images, actors, institutions, technologies, techniques and tools of skill delivery, that ordered and organised the governance of skills policy in relation to how the problem of low skills was perceived. (I borrowed the concepts of ‘articulation’ and ‘assemblage’ from Newman and Clarke, 2009a).

In the different strategies – which make-up and imagine different workplaces - the role of the state changes as the workplace is differently aligned with state projects to ‘support’, ‘shape’ or ‘emancipate’ production and labour market competitiveness and better social functioning (in the context of the paradigm which frames the logic for skills, Jessop, 2002; Cerny, 2010a), and with it the nature of the relationship between actors and the state in the ‘skills partnership’. In effect partners encounter a different ‘type’ of state and state work. Highlighting modes of governance as discursive regulation and distributional devices, determining who does what, gets what, and how.

The analysis provided in response to this empirical sub-question, interested in the relationship between the logic (meaning) and practices/process of ‘doing skills’, benefitted from taking an approach informed by the combination of CPE and critical governance studies. This approach enabled the findings to reveal the relationship between policy meanings, practices, and processes. It does this by highlighting the role of semiosis in construing and constructing the objects and subjects of governance, as well as the modes and mechanisms of governing (Jessop, 2009); in this case ‘demand-led’ or ‘demand-leading’ skills strategies. Beyond this the findings show how producing meanings and practices/processes of governance is on-going, as well as fragile and incomplete, as a consequence of repeatedly (re)making, (re)producing, and disrupting discursive and material alignments and alliances to reframe the skills strategy and the nuances of what and who is being governed, and how. The findings of these two chapters end by

recognising that the fragility and incompleteness of state work to govern skills is exacerbated by the entangling and collapsing of the lines between the distinct strategies for high(er) skills in England.

***How did employer and employee representatives interpret and respond to the New Labour high(er) skills project for England, and with what implications for the ordering and organising of skills delivery?***

This question was addressed in Chapter 8, which starts from the recognition that although the analytical work of the thesis had been to explicate the distinct strategies for governing skill in England under New Labour in order to explain and understand the paradox - both a *'demand-led'* strategy and a state strategy to *lead demand* in the *context of voluntarism* - the distinct strategies coexisted, were entangled and collapsed, in policy discourses and the narratives of policy-makers. The chapter showed how the entangling and collapsing of strategies creates opaque policy. Policy that is able to be treated as a repertoire of available, but contradictory and disconnected, narrative threads that can be strategically selected - dissected, distilled and dislocated - and stitched back together (assembled) into new skills projects and patterns for skill governance, by skills actors. Based on analysis of interview material and key documents, the chapter therefore showed how employer and employee representatives - utilising (but twisting and tilting) the authorised positions from which to speak that they are afforded in policy - can be understood as engaged in second level strategic selection to extract, re-inflect and elevate parts of the skills discourse, and rearticulate and reassemble the high(er) skills project from within.

One key contribution of this thesis is to show this second level of strategic selection activity that is missed by CPE, as a consequence of it being a theory of the macro-economic semiotic and extra-semiotic order (Jessop, 2009). By adopting an approach influenced by other critical governance theories, this analysis of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England captured the level of policymaking below the surface to reveal the lack of ideational unity within broad policy meanings and practices, and the nature of the

high(er) skills project as nuanced - "more than one thing at once" (Clarke, 2004b:2) – and therefore easily contested and disrupted (Newman & Clarke, 2009a; Newman, 2007).

The chapter also showed the implications of this second level strategic selection work by skills actors (made possible by policy opacity), that sought to disrupt and remake – rearticulate and reassemble - policy meaning, practices and processes from within, for skills delivery. In highlighting the implications for skills delivery of both the ambiguity and opacity of policy and the struggles over meanings, practices and processes that take place between representatives of skills actors and the state, the chapter has shown that discourse matter. That discursive attempts to 'claim truths' (Clarke & Cochrane, 1998; Clarke, 2004a; Ball, 2007; Ball, 2008a), and governance as 'political communication' (Bang, 2003b:7) to produce intersubjective meaning associated with socially constructed imperatives, has material effects (Jessop, 2004; Jessop, 2008; Jessop, 2009).

Skills delivery encountered the struggle over meanings, practices, and processes of 'doing skills' as further disorganising and frustrating the tensions in their role and function to lead demand and be demand-led. In particular the chapter highlighted the tensions skills delivery experiences around the contested 'trading' of responsibility and relevance within the skills strategy. They described encountering the disruption of demand-led strategies as skills actor representatives sought to trade responsibility for who should be listened to, and whose demand should count. They described encountering the disruption of demand-leading strategies as skills actor representatives sought to trade the relevance of the skills targets driven by a government vision. As a consequence they portrayed their activity as mainly engaged in negotiating, mediating and reconciling/lessening the variance between points over which contestation pivots. Essentially, as mediating between attempts by the state to encourage, nudge and steer skills actors towards 'good' voluntarism, and attempts by skills actor representatives to redefine such an agenda.

### ***Answering the Research Question***

How then can governance – ordering and organising - of skills policy under New Labour be explained and understood? Overall, this thesis finds that within what was depicted as a ‘coherent approach’ to skills policymaking, there were three distinct architectures of skills governance: the demand-led strategy; the strategy to lead demand; and the strategy to circumvent lack of demand. The three strategies were distinguished by how workplace skills aspiration and behaviour was imagined in proximity to the established logic for high(er) skills in England; the object of governance as ‘progress in partnership’. These strategies were however entangled, and collapsed in policy discourse and policy-makers’ narratives, rendering the distinctions between them opaque. Including, and in particular, the dissimilar subject positions and subjectivities policy created and sought to empower, encourage or challenge and emancipate. It is this opacity in relation to different subjects of governance that can be used by skills actors - engaged in a second level of strategic selection of meanings, practice and processes - to ‘talk back’ and disrupt, disorganise and frustrate the functions of skills delivery actors. This manifests for skills delivery as a struggle to manage the tensions between their roles to be demand-led, and to lead demand through encouraging and nudging high(er) skills aspirations and behaviours.

The thesis concludes that the governance –ordering and organising - of skills policy under New Labour can be explained and understood as an attempt at ‘state-steered voluntarism’ in England, and that this analysis highlights the limits of such a project.

### ***9.3 Contributions and Implications of the Thesis***

Having summarised the research findings in relation to the empirical sub-questions that guided this thesis and answered the main research question, this section highlights the main theoretical and empirical contributions of the study, and discusses the implications that emerge for skills policymaking in England. The thesis then closes by considering future research agendas building on, and developing aspects of conclusions reached.



### 9.3.2 Theoretical Contributions

This thesis makes a number of theoretical contributions to studying skill policymaking in the UK/England. Most particularly, the thesis makes a strong argument for the need to take an approach to the analysis and evaluation of skill governance in the UK/England informed by a conceptual and methodological commitment to taking the role of meaning-making in construing and constructing the objects of governance and the objectives of policy seriously. An approach which this thesis argues has the advantage of being able to account for, and explain, the paradox at the heart of the New Labour Skills Strategy for England, by avoiding the pitfalls of both functionalist and PRA-informed approaches to theorising the governance of skill that tend to read policy intentions back in a straight-line from policy outcomes. The approach taken in this thesis can explain a logic for high(er) skills that recognises a seemingly interested state operating in complex relation to partisan interests.

Adopting a CPE-informed conceptual framework, the thesis highlights the “performative force” (Jessop, 2008:20) of the strategically selected imaginary of a global knowledge-based economy and post-welfare society, as constituting the ‘logic of possibility and limitation’ (Brown, 1999) that framed the New Labour high(er) skills project. Furthermore, by combining CPE with critical governance studies the analysis has explored below the surface of the macro level of regime ordering and policy objectives, to consider how meanings produce policy and policies (re)produce meanings. In particular meaningful subject positions and subjectivities authorised and validated to speak and act, or not.

Taking this approach to studying governance – employed as an “analytical concept” (Newman, 2001:11), for exploring “changes in political practices and their implications for the political rules of the game” (Kjær, 2004:10) – the analysis has been able to account for the nuances and complexities in the iterative relationship between policy logics (meanings), and policy practices and processes. Specifically, the relationship between the ‘formal’ (‘what was to be governed’) and ‘operational’ (‘the doing of skills’), dimensions of policy (Carmel & Papadopoulos, 2003).

Drawing on the way that many critical governance studies scholars theorise the nuanced and complex relationship between formal and operational dimensions of policy is important. This is because more abstracted perspectives, that tend to zoom out in search of sweeping descriptors to account for how logics relate to policies – such as the state/market relationship (Brown, 1999:241), or in Jessopian terms the ‘structural coupling’ of the accumulation regime and the regulation regime (Jessop: 2002:3) – miss the ambiguity and messiness of state projects and state work (Newman & Clarke, 2009a; Clarke, 2005b; Clarke, 2004b; Carmel & Papadopoulos, 2003; Newman, 2001; Fairclough, 2000).

Given the scope of this thesis, it is essential not to under-theorise the ambiguity and messiness of state projects and state work. Indeed any endeavour to engage with New Labour’s contribution to skill policymaking must be understood as framed within a broader (party political) ideological commitment to a hybrid ‘Third Way’ and a ‘language of reconciliation’ (Fairclough, 2000; Newman, 2001); and open to the ways in which rhetorical claims of policy ‘coherence’ mask the incoherence of political rationalities (Newman, 2005). In short, by adopting a conceptual framework for analysis informed by CPE and critical governance studies, this thesis contributes a theoretical approach to studying skills policy in the context of successive New Labour administrations that can understand and explain paradox, rather than correct for it by writing it off or sorting it out. It offers an empirical instance of theorising state work as discursive regulation. In particular it offers an account of how the complex and multiple narrative threads of an idealised model of good aspiration and behaviour – ‘good voluntarism’ – are articulated and assembled into policy projects and used to contrast and dissuade bad aspiration and behaviour – ‘bad voluntarism’.

### **9.3.1 Empirical Contributions**

By taking an interpretive approach to analysing the relationship between policy meanings, practices, and processes, this thesis offers several contributions to the empirical analysis

of skill policy in England, during the New Labour period of government. Notably, the findings offer an explication (from within a so-heralded 'coherent approach') of three coexisting strategies for skills, that articulated and assembled the component parts of the skills projects into distinct architectures of skill governance; the entangling and collapsing of these three coexisting strategies into an opaque policy for high(er) skills; and the utilisation of this policy opacity by skills actors to remake and 'talk back' policy meanings, practices and processes, disrupting and disorganising skill delivery.

Of particular significance is the empirical contribution this thesis makes to understanding and explain how skills actors, as a consequence of policy opacity, engage in a second level of strategic selection of meaningful discourses. Disconnecting certain narrative threads within policy from their sequencing in differently assembled skills strategies and stitching them back together to rearticulate and reassemble the high(er) skills project into a remade and seemingly coherent new order and organisation. This empirical contribution is both a consequence of, and has implications for, the conceptual and methodological approach to analysis taken in this thesis.

Conceptually the thesis begins to offer an explanation of how actors act in the context of opacity that is neither overly structurally determinist, nor reduces to radical contingency. That neither assumes skills actor interests (a normative and openly antagonistic wish list), nor ignores the more complex and subtle ways in which the normative goals of policy are pursued. The thesis arrives at this empirical contribution as a result of an IPA-informed methodological commitment to taking the voice of skills actors to be the unit of analysis. This methodological commitment has allowed the thesis to engage with and bring together skill policy (the starting point), skills actors, and the practice and process implications of the conjuncture of the two for skill delivery. In doing so the thesis has been able to take seriously, and identify how, skills actors act from within policy and with what implications.

### 9.3.3 Policy Implications

The thesis concurs with Gleeson & Keep (2004) when they argue that one of the central problems of skill policy under New Labour (indeed, one of the central problems of skills policymaking in the UK/England in the historical context of voluntarism) is the lack of properly defined rights and responsibilities of employers (also employees). However, the thesis argues that this is not because the exercise of defining rights and responsibilities is omitted from policymaking, and rights and responsibilities were not inscribed in policy; they were. In many cases there were whole sections of policy dedicated to detailing the rights and responsibilities of skills (workplace) actors (DfES, 2006; Leitch, 2006; DIUS, 2007a; DIUS, 2008b). Nor is the problem solely that these ascribed rights and responsibilities amount, in practice, to little more than hopeful conjectures in the context of 'soft' regulations; after all speaking rights and responsibilities is not the same as enacting them, and writing 'strategy' is not the same as achieving policy goals.

Although this is a strong criticism of skills policymaking in the UK/England; one that belongs to a body of work that has identified the politics of skill (see Chapter 2) to favour the interests of employers in the capital-labour relationship as a consequence of a lack of 'hard' regulation. In making this point these literatures, cannot account for inflections in policy that the state should lead demand, and tend therefore to retreat to the position that policy misunderstands, or is unable or unwilling to affect, the skills decisions of private actors (Avis *et al*, 1996; King, 1997; Gleeson & Keep, 2002; Keep, 2004; Keep, 2005; Payne, 2008).

In not reading policy intentions back in a straight-line from policy outcomes, this thesis makes the distinct claim that the main problem with skills policymaking under New Labour was that skills actor rights and responsibilities - to have demands met, or to raise demand, or to overcome a deviant lack of demand - were differently ascribed in the distinct strategies for governing skills. Furthermore, although distinct these different rights and responsibilities were entangled and collapsed in policy, rendered opaque, and in being so,

easily dislocated from their sequencing in the differently assembled governance architectures; contested, disrupted, and powerfully rearticulated.

The implications for policy of this thesis are therefore associated with the 'problem of opacity', and in the context of policy opacity, the limits of state-steered voluntarism. This thesis urges the recognition that state policies to 'support', 'shape', and 'emancipate' economic competitiveness and better social functioning, firstly have many meanings/interpretations, even within the 'performative paradigm' or imaginaries (Jessop, 2008; Jessop, 2009) of the global knowledge-based economy and post-welfare society; and secondly, are different projects and should be treated as such. Even if we accept the broad contention that high(er) skills are to be about the flexibility and adaptability to cope in conditions of economic and social uncertainty-based complexity; the logic of the high skills rhetoric (Crouch *et al*, 2004). An acceptance replete with all the problems of who and what this logic privileges, particularly given the inequality of starting positions. Then entangling and collapsing the normative distinction between the 'good', the 'bad', and the frankly 'ugly', skills actors (workplaces) disrupts and derails policy intentions. In terms of policy implications my thesis shows that this 'really' matters because skills providers experience this disruption and derailment in practice. This then is the limit and limitation of New Labour's version of skills policymaking in England – 'state-steered voluntarism' - as an effective solution to the low skills problem.

#### **9.4 Future Research Agendas**

This thesis opens up a number of future research agendas to build on and develop the main contributions of the findings. Firstly, the empirical contribution of this thesis offers a novel conceptualisation of the way in which (state and non-state) actors act within policy, in conditions of policy opacity. To develop the analytical application and sharpen the theory here developed, research would first be extended to consider and compare the governance of skills under the current coalition government.

Since taking office the coalition have disbanded the Train to Gain initiative and promoted apprenticeship in 'partnership with employers and individuals' (BIS, 2011) as the main route for workforce development<sup>71</sup>. Although some of the policy tools and techniques of governing skill have changed, extending the application of the conceptual framework, which offers a sophisticated device for looking below the surface of policy to explore underpinning and normative dimension of meaning-making, would enable continuities or discontinuities with the New Labour period to be revealed. This research agenda would therefore be guided by the question 'to what extent is skills governance in England under the coalition government continuing in the legacy of 'state-steered voluntarism?' In addition to addressing this question, applying and extending the conceptual framework within the field of research would enable the theory of skills actor second level strategic selection within policy to be further empirically tested and refined.

A second future research agenda that emerges from the findings would develop on the theme of asymmetrical balance of power between employer and employee representatives influence over the ordering and organising of skill governance, that whilst outside the scope of this study to measure, has been flagged throughout. (For example, in the treatment by policy-makers of the demand-led system as synonymous with an employer-led system on the basis of how the workplace partnership was imagined in 'responsible' workplaces.) In other words, one future research agenda would be to determine to what extent the New Labour Skills Strategy (or indeed the coalition skills strategy) functions as a 'power resource' for different actors. Another benefit of developing this line of research would be to move beyond the voice of employer and employee representatives, to explore what the implications of struggle over skills discourse, practices, and processes were at the level of the workplace (narrowed by region or sector or policy intervention). This research agenda would therefore be guided by the question(s): 'who took up skills interventions, and why; and with what implications for policy as tool to pursue interests at the workplace?' In providing the framework from

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<sup>71</sup> it is worth noting that these policies were established in the Conservative Party plans for education and training prior to them forming the government and embarking on the current programme to reduce levels of public spending across the board

which to develop this future research agenda this thesis provides the starting point from which to investigate a politics of skills happening inside and from within policy. A politics which is important, because in how the 'doing of skills' is ordered and organised lies what is at stake for both employers and employees at the workplace.

## Appendix 1: Thematic Guide to Interviews with Elite Actors

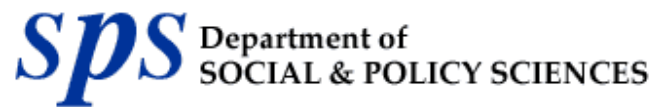
<b>Topic 1: Role, Interests and Perspectives regarding Skills</b>	
Questions:	Probes:
Role in Skills Strategy?	What is your role? What does your organisation do with regard to skills and the Skills Strategy? How do you work with other stakeholders? Why do you work with these stakeholders: do you share interests or have different interests? In what ways do you share or have different interests?
What are your interests in Skills and the Skills Strategy?	What is important to you about skills and the Skills Strategy? What concerns do you have about the direction of strategy?
What do you think is the purpose and main aims of the New Labour Skills Strategy?	What do you consider to be the aim and purpose of government/policy-makers? Do you agree with the aim(s) and purpose(s)? Do you disagree with the aim(s) and purpose(s)? Do you have different aims and purposes?
Are there any issues to do with skills, or more broadly labour market relations, which are not addressed within the Skills Strategy?	What else would you like to see included/or given more priority within the Skills Strategy? What would you exclude or alter in terms of priority?
<b>Topic 2: Logics (principles and priorities) of the Skills Strategy</b>	
Questions	Probes
What is driving a focus on skills?	What is behind a focus on skills? Why is there a current focus on skills?
Do you think the needs of the different stakeholders are addressed equally through the Skills Strategy?	What does the strategy seek to do? How do you perceive the strategy to be meeting your needs/ the needs of those you represent? In what ways does the strategy not meet your needs? Why do you think the strategy does or does not meet your needs?
The strategy mentions partnership working, is this taking place?	Do you work in partnership with government and other actors? What is your perception of partnership working?
The strategy mentions the need for reforms, what do you think is being reformed?	What aspects of skills policy have been problems previously? Do you think there is agreement about these problems?



<b>Topic 2: Logics (principles and priorities) of the Skills Strategy Cont....</b>	
Questions	Probes
Do you think the Skills Strategy is being de-politicised [ <i>Quote from Leitch, 2006</i> ]?	Do you think skills are a consensus issue? What is the consensus? What are the different opinions?
<b>Topic 3: Rights and Responsibilities</b>	
Questions	Probes
What do you perceive to be the responsibilities of employees?	What should employee/learner be doing with regard to skills?
What do you perceive to be the rights of employee/learners?	Do employee/learners have a right to skills? Under what conditions if any? What should employee/learners be entitled to? What are the difficulties that employee/learners face with regard to gaining skills? How does the strategy seek to overcome any difficulties?
What do you perceive to be the responsibilities of employers?	What should employers be doing with regard to skills?
What do you perceive to be the rights of employers?	Do employers have rights to expect certain things from a Skills Strategy? Under what conditions if any? What are the difficulties faced by employers? Does the strategy seek to overcome these difficulties?
What is the role of the state?	What is the responsibility of the state/government? Does the strategy go far enough? Does the strategy go too far, intervene too much?
What is the role of the further education sector/VET providers?	What is the responsibility of providers? Does the strategy go far enough in addressing the responsibilities of providers? Does the strategy go too far? Do providers have any rights, and if so how do you understand the rights of providers?
Do you think that the Skills Strategy addresses voluntarism?	Can and should voluntarism be tackled? If yes, how? If no, why not?
<b>Topic 4: What is meant by Skills?</b>	
Question	Probe
What are the skills that are sought through the skills strategy?	In your opinion what kind of skill do we lack currently? Does the strategy seek to address the skills shortages you identify? If not, why? What is prioritised? What is the aim and purpose of skills targets?

<b>Topic 4: What is meant by Skills? Cont....</b>	
Question	Probe
Do all stakeholder benefit from these types of skills?	Do you benefit from these types of skills? Do others? What should be prioritised?
Does the Skills Strategy focus on certain types of qualification outcome?	What is your perspective of qualifications? Do you think there is enough focus on qualifications? Is there too much focus on qualifications? Which qualifications would you prioritise?
<b>Topic 5: Relationship between Skills, Employment and Welfare</b>	
Questions	Probes
What is the purpose of skills?	How do skills support business? How do skills support individuals?
What is your view of a dual economic and social agenda?	How does/should the Skills Strategy support economic agendas? How does/should the Skills Strategy support social agendas? Are they equal agendas? Which is prioritised and why? Should a Skills Strategy support either? What should a Skills Strategy do?
What is your view of the statement that “the best form of welfare is to ensure people can adapt to change” [ <i>Quote Leitch Report</i> ]?	Do skills support people/businesses adapt to change?

## Appendix 2: Letter of Introduction



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### LETTER OF INTRODUCTION – SKILLS STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

#### **Who I am & my research interest:**

My name is Hannah Durrant and I am undertaking research for a PhD within the Department of Social and Policy Sciences at the University of Bath. The focus of my research is the current and on-going development of the Skills Strategy, and specifically the perspectives and roles of different groups of stakeholders in policy design and delivery.

Prior to commencing my PhD studies I worked for 5 years within the Further Education sector as a Projects Manager; my role was primarily concerned with developing innovative approaches to service improvement. As a result I was fortunate to work in partnership with many organisations from the public, private, and third sector. It was primarily this experience, the successes and lessons learnt, that inspired my interest in the current research project.

#### **My research approach & why I would like to speak with you:**

In order to conduct my research I am keen to explore how employer and employee/learner representatives, the Further Education sector and the Government, have interacted to define and implement the Skills Strategy. I would therefore welcome the opportunity to speak with you about your involvement with the skills agenda. I anticipate the interview lasting approximately one hour, to be conducted at a time and place that is most convenient to you. During the interview I will provide you with a short research summary, and following the interview I would be more than

happy to provide you with a copy of the transcript and a brief report covering my main research findings.

If you feel that you would be able to assist me with this research project, or would like to know more about my work, please contact me, either by e-mail or telephone, (contact details above). Thank you for taking the time to read this letter of introduction and for any support with my research project you feel able to offer.

I look forward to speaking with you.

Kind regards

**Hannah Durrant**

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