

What are the major factors behind the apparent policy failure in relation to the employer role in 14-19 education and training?

Eleanor Margaret Andressen

UCL, Institute of Education

PhD

Abstract

From its origins as an unplanned and haphazard entity, the education and training (ET) system in England has become one of the core policy areas of any government. The role of employers within this, and in particular in relation to full-time 14-19 ET, has proved problematic. This research moves beyond the more usual factors of history, culture, policy and structures to investigate the relatively rarely discussed relationship between employer identity and behaviour and their influence on policy assumptions and outcomes, and system structures. It involved interviewing a number of employers, and a range of individuals and organisations, all of which to some extent represent 'the employer voice', about the employer role in full-time 14-19 ET. Findings include that the multiple identities of individual employers have different, often contradictory and surprising influences on policy, shaping in turn their interaction with system structures in ways that cannot easily be controlled in a voluntarist system. This research proposes practical measures to counter some of these influences. It calls for a greater understanding of how employer identity affects their interactions with the system and for this to be applied to future ET initiatives.

Declaration

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "E. E. Aulup". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent 'E' at the beginning and a long, sweeping underline.

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Introduction

The creation of an effective education and training (ET) system has long been influenced – some might say hampered – by a number of factors. These include its historical roots and the prevailing culture in England, which has consigned vocational ET (VET) to a second class position. Also party political differences, which have pulled it in different ideological directions, regardless of economic and social need, or learner requirements. Globalisation has had an impact on individual skills needs. This, coupled with the international dominance of neoliberalism, has affected the ability of nation states to address their own skills needs.

In terms of ET policy, the thesis explores how New Labour tried to balance its old socialist principles with neoliberalism in the guise of the Third Way – a challenging thing to do, because of the clashes between party philosophy and the dominant global political ideology. Labour had traditionally had a subordinate relationship with business, via the unions, who negotiate pay and conditions for employees. In contrast, the Conservative party, whose influence dominated ET policy under the Coalition, has previously enjoyed a more equal relationship with business, leaving the Government slightly more influential – but still subordinate – in the neoliberal landscape. The state has had very little influence historically over the role of employers in ET, a factor partly attributed to the voluntarist nature of their relationship with the system. This thesis moves beyond this argument to argue, and illustrate, that the behaviour of individual employers, influenced by their multiple identities as members of society, as former subjects of the ET system, ambitious individuals and more, have a considerable influence on the success of policy.

Motivation for the research

When I started this research it was very relevant to my professional background working on the development of the 14-19 Diplomas both as an employee at a Sector Skills Council (SSC) and later as a consultant for the regulatory authority. In these roles I had the opportunity to work closely with employers on various boards created with the purpose of bringing system stakeholders together, such as the Diploma Development Partnership (DDP). Education policy placed employers at the heart of Diploma, designating the process of development and delivery 'employer-led' (Tomlinson, 2004). I witnessed deep engagement from employers in some sectors, who contributed detailed content and opinion about assessment and outcomes, and considerable resource in terms of days. I saw how employers' seniority and level of personal interest affected their contribution, and the damage caused by prevailing attitudes towards VET both in schools and at work. Also, I observed the challenges of producing a 'uniform' product to meet the needs of diverse sectors and industries, and the importance of employer support to the credibility of the final products. The contrast between New Labour's central positioning of employers in 14-19 ET reforms and the absence of employers from many sectors, led me to question why levels of employer and stakeholder support appeared so varied among the sectors. The research has, however, taken on a more immediate significance in the light of current Conservative policy, which places employers at the heart of a different skills solution – an exponential increase in Apprenticeships 'starts' (BIS, 2015) – which also demands a sizeable involvement from a large number of employers to make it a success.

Key research aim and objectives

The early chapters provided the overarching research aim for this thesis: to demonstrate that the relative failure of policy in relation to the employer role in 14-19 ET cannot be explained solely by a combination of its historical and cultural roots, and the policy of successive governments. The number of assumptions on which much ET policy appears to be based, not least in relation to the

differing relative importance of 14-19 ET to the state and employers, appeared significant. Aspects of employer identity drive their behaviours in individual and group situations, such as participation in development groups. The following objectives were therefore identified in support of the research aim:

1. How the contextual history of employers with the state and education informs current relationships
2. The different dimensions of the employer role in New Labour and Coalition policy in a partly voluntarist system, and on what assumptions were they based
3. The extent to which the historical and system tendencies explain the relative weakness of the employer role within full-time 14-19 education and training
4. The behaviours which characterise employer involvement in full-time 14-19 education and training, and the drivers behind them
5. Identification of the changes needed to improve the relationship of employers with full-time 14-19 education and training.

Approach to the research

The research aimed to talk to employers and stakeholders face to face and understand in detail the shape and extent of their involvement with 14-19 ET. Also, whether the historic reasons for the apparently limited nature of this for the majority - and the considerable involvement of a few - still holds true, and how this reflected or challenged the assumptions made by ET policy on their behalf. The intention of the research was to investigate the drivers and influences thought to have shaped the role of employers in full-time 14-19 ET in their capacity as representatives of an organisation or sector; to illustrate that individual employers are more than the sum of their role within an organisation, and the importance of this on the success of 14-19 ET policy.

Selected behavioural theories provided a lens through which to examine the individual employer and their identity outside the workplace, and a basis to argue that this has a significant influence on their inputs - or failure to input - into this area, and finally to comment on the effectiveness of policy which is reliant on employers for its success. This thesis argues that the lack of structure in the relationship between employers - a word used almost always synonymously with organisation - and the state, arising from the voluntarist liberal tradition, has resulted in ET policy-making that is often based on assumptions of what employers - and by extension the economy and wider society – needs from the ET system. These policies then drive behaviours among employers, which appear to be ‘selfish’ and ‘self-interested’. Whilst this perception may be partly true, policy also appears to ignore the fact that ‘employers’ are individuals, whose behaviours are driven not only by policy but by their own backgrounds, experiences and motives. It is this individual who appears at the table if ‘employers’ are asked to contribute – not a faceless organisation.

A limited number of in-depth interviewees cannot provide a definitive picture or resolution of the issue. To consider individuals simply as ‘employers’, however, even when they sit on advisory groups in this capacity, is to risk simplifying a complex issue and perpetuating both embedded assumptions and the cyclical nature of ET policy implementation and failure. What emerged was a wider concept of the employer as an individual, whose interests and motives often lie outside their apparent identity as an ‘employer’. Employers are often the product – and at the very least the end-users – of the ET system. It may be impossible for policy to take into account the preferences of each individual employer; yet these cannot be ignored completely.

Chapter 1: Background and contextual history of the relationship between employers, the state and education and training

Employer attitudes towards full-time 14-19 ET are shaped by historical and system features so ingrained in the English system that they have come to inform the assumptions on which policy is based, regardless of the party in power. In declaring the influence of economic liberalism, the role of the unions and the concepts of class and voluntarism on education and training, it traces the origins of cultural and practical issues which remain unresolved in the English system. This chapter examines the origins of a number of system features and assumptions, which continue to drive behaviours and to shape employer involvement in full-time 14-19 ET. The impact of the most significant of these will be explored in more detail in later chapters.

The latter part of the chapter examines the rise and impact of neoliberalism, and how this ideology influenced the modernisation of the Labour party as it attempted to change its relationship with business. Changes to the Labour party were critical to its evolving relationship with business, and for this thesis, because of the impact of this on ET policy. These important but now historical events within the Labour party allow an explanation of changing governance structures and other impacts with a view to understanding the practical impact of the neoliberal ideology on the management of public services, and ultimately on the ET System under New Labour and the subsequent Coalition government, aspects of which will be examined in more detail in Chapter 2.

Historical context

Issues with the employer role in upper secondary education appear to be inextricable from their historical roots in the industrial revolution. Green (1990) summarised three main causes for what Toqueville (1956) named the 'peculiarities of the English' in relation to the unique development of the state: the dominance of the land-owning classes and their hostility to industry and economic growth; a perceived failure by the rising Middle Classes to impose their own identity (Anderson, 1964; Nairn, 2003; Wiener, 2004); and Britain's unique experience as the first nation to undergo an industrial revolution. This led to what Hobsbawm (1969) termed Britain's 'developmental priority', which caused repercussions upon the then-liberal ideology and on commerce, society and politics (Gamble, 1994; Marquand, 1988).

Green (1990) appraised the minimal protection of trade by the state and lack of investment in the technology and skills needed to ensure long-term success. The industrial revolution practice of free-trade, and the availability of cheap labour – with little European competition - generated great wealth for Britain but, due to lack of planning and investment nationally, the nation was 'taught the wrong lessons' (Marquand, 1998). It embedded the values of entrepreneurship but lacked respect for the 'learned' way of doing things; instead the distinctly British maximum profit, minimum investment style of capitalism dominated. Profitable businesses run by owners who had left school at 14, staffed by poorly or non-educated labour, taught that investment in training and education was unnecessary for success, giving rise to, and reinforcing, the disjointed – and at times unrelated – nature of employer needs and the aims of the ET system

Green (1990) argued that, whilst the Prussian aristocracy used their position to establish an autocratically unifying culture via a network of state schools – Taylor's 'giant engine of conquest' (1982: 37) - and the French formed a centralised system to establish their post-Revolution culture,

critically, both used education as a means to drive forward their respective industrial revolution, through the provision of up-to-date technical knowledge and skills. He dispels the myth that education in England either arose from, or developed as, a purposeful answer to new technical or intellectual demands made by the industrial revolution. He argues that whilst the system appears to have grown in tandem with the industrial revolution, what was being learned bore little relation to the apparent needs of emerging industries. Instead, in both England and the United States of America (USA), where religion remained influential at national and local level, early education of the working classes was seen as a means to impose structures and values on the general population in order to counteract the social and moral issues resulting from the urbanisation caused by the growth of factories and towns.

Artisans, for example, had enjoyed some small degree of autonomy, working from home, within a community, raising a family together and passing on both technical and social skills. Urban working life saw the absence of one or both parents for much of the day and there was pressure on even young children to support the family income through factory work. The Newcastle Report (1861) identified child labour as being both a barrier to attendance at school yet also a necessity for families. Child labour, cheap and readily available, was at least tolerated, if not encouraged, by employers and society as a whole. Although education was seen as a way to impose a new structure and to maintain the fabric of society, the very targets of this social and moral instruction were often absent - an indication of tensions to come.

Some key attitudes towards state provision of education were established at this time. In England, education for society as a whole remained fragmented, without a unifying purpose, and with a corresponding lack of teacher training, teaching, inspection and examination standards. Debate about the purpose of education as a preparation for work, or to instil civic, aesthetic and moral

knowledge, or a combination of the two - has carried over into the 21st Century (Willmott, 1995; Guile, 2002; Furedi, 2007; Abrams, 2012; Wilby, 2013).

The lack of social democratic traditions in England and the consequent *ad hoc* development of a national system of ET have resulted in the dominance of an economic role for education and training. An examination of New Labour and Coalition ET policy in Chapter 2 will consider the role of education in shaping the individual as a member of society as well as a future contributor to economic success. In countries where citizenship has a greater political resonance, the use of ET to maintain societal goals, at least in part, is well-established (Gleeson and Keep, 2004). In England, VET appears to be used as a context in which to deliver citizenship skills in contrast with Germany, for example, which seeks to offer the individual a wider cultural development as a core part of their technical, vocational training, thereby resulting in a more fully-rounded citizen and worker, (Brockmann et al, 2008).

Webb and Webb (1897) describe the apprenticeship system at the turn of the 20th Century as 'undemocratic in its scope, unscientific in its educational methods, and fundamentally unsound in its financial aspects' (in Patel, 2011: 228). These views still resonate today when young people must remain in full-time education until 18, and where, until recently, more than two thirds have taken some form of vocational qualification post-16, many of which have been judged to be inadequate in terms of challenge and progression (Wolf, 2011).

The first half of the 20th Century saw the setting up of junior technical colleges and the inclusion in the curriculum of elements of VET. However, even at this juncture there was already 'employer indifference' (Richardson and Wiborg, 2010: iii). In the post-war period, publicly provided/centrally organised VET was rejected by the Labour Party, as it would have contradicted its aim of providing comprehensive education for all. In addition, the party's heavy reliance on the unions for funding

caused a reluctance to be seen as interfering with the role of the latter in respect of industry-based training (Hall, 1986 in Finegold and Soskice, 1990: 85; Gleeson, 1990). The academic track, represented by the grammar schools, was the priority for the Conservatives and any intervention in the provision of training would have 'violated their belief in the free market' (Wiener, 1981: 110). The lack of regard for skills training and of respect and vision in relation to VET, coupled with employers' reluctance to share technical knowledge for reasons of competitive advantage (Green, 1990; Finegold and Soskice, 1990) provide the nub of much present day debate about the disinterest in England for VET (Hayward, 2004; Stanton, 2006, Hodgson and Spours, 2008).

Liberalism

The concept of liberalism arose from the historical desire to break away from the powers of monarchy, Church and landowners. Whilst Revolutions may have destroyed or recast the powers or very existence of the monarchy in some countries, in England it survived and, with the Church and landowners, continued to wield considerable power over the lives of ordinary individuals. Since these institutions could not be 'wished out of existence' (Crouch, 2011: 4), people sought to separate – liberate – themselves from the worst social and economic constraints wrought by them. The 'liberal' right to own property and bases of economic activity, such as factories, led to new powers over others, for example, that of employers over their employees. Since these workers could do little to separate themselves from this influence, they turned to the state for help. Social reformers, equally concerned at the powers of business and the impact on working individuals, also turned to the state for a 'counterbalancing' (4) influence. Thus the concept of liberalism was divided into two parts: social and economic, a critical division in terms of later debate around the purpose of education.

Classical liberal economic theory posited an environment enabling free trade. It did not view the role of government to be the creator or regulator of the necessary conditions for business success.

However, the economic prosperity of the industrial revolution brought social and cultural changes for the working classes that required support and regulation from the Government. Paradoxically, therefore, the social element looked increasingly to the state to secure their 'rights', whilst the economic liberals - the newly powerful property-owning business classes - allied themselves to their former enemy, the old powers of monarchy, Church and landowners, to secure their new-found wealth and power.

The early 20th Century brought with it the Depression era and apparent proof that the liberal capitalist economy with its minimum of state intervention had failed. There is no room in this thesis to discuss in detail the ideologies of communism, fascism and their post-War fates – but they too made use of the powers of the state in ways not envisaged by their original proponents. In Europe, North America and elsewhere, various combinations of economic and social intervention by a democratic state within a capitalist economy, became the norm across a wide political spectrum. Neoliberal ideology came to dominate many western economies, both social democratic and capitalistic, and the different interpretations of this by New Labour and the Coalition form a key platform of this research.

The role of the state

Over time, therefore, the role of the Government in a liberal economy developed from the negative conception of 'interfering' only in macro elements of society, such as the security of the nation, to a gradually more 'positivist' conception which saw 'public goods' such as health and education, legislated for and managed by the state (Olssen, 2009; Green, 1990), a factor that has come to dominate all party policy manifestos in England. Following the First World War, this was seen as

essential to the mitigation of the effects of a free market in a markedly different world and economic order. The 1940s onwards saw the adoption of Keynesian 'demand management' economics, under which the macro economy was managed through policy responses to the unpredictable outcomes of private sector activity, through means such as increased taxes and reduced public spending in an attempt to avoid 'boom' and 'bust'. The existence of a strong welfare state was also a key element of the response to the issues faced by the post-war society, and of this strategy. However, as the power of big business continued to increase throughout the 20th Century, Keynesianism lost traction as the main beneficiaries of its policies, the 'working classes', began to lose their collective voice to social and technological advances (Crouch, 2011).

Other countries approached post-war challenges differently. Germany, for example, saw a role for the state in maintaining a market economy. Economists there believed that competition among many companies of different sizes was the answer to a stable economy and maintaining consumer choice. The pitfalls of majority power going to a small number of large businesses - as has become the case under neoliberalism in England and elsewhere - whilst protecting the interests of the middle-class entrepreneur would be avoided. Competition is sustained through limited state intervention, the prevention of monopolies and the guaranteed existence of larger numbers of differently-sized firms. This so-called Ordo-Liberalism has resulted in the on-going - but under pressure - *Soziale Marktwirtschaft* (*Social Market Economy*).

Liberalism has taken on different characteristics in different countries. Both colonial and Cold War history have rendered the USA reluctant to accept 'positive' intervention by government in relation to the provision of public goods such as healthcare, even in difficult economic times. In England, the tradition of individualism and the weak influence of unions in comparison to those in some other European countries, meant that as with social partnership, neo-corporatism did not exist there. The route the state chose was one of corporatist compromise and minimal intervention, erecting a

network of training boards (ITBs) in the major industries staffed by union, employer and government representatives (Industrial Training Act 1964; Finegold and Soskice, 1990: 25). Despite levying and distributing funds the ITBs left unquestioned organisational structures, management and business practices, and analysed skills needs on that basis, thus reinforcing rather than revolutionising the circumstances perpetuating the low skills equilibrium.

In the 1970s and 1980s, both the Labour government and that of Margaret Thatcher abandoned Keynesianism - under which monetary policies aimed to increase employment and business activity - and in the latter case, adopted policies of privatisation, monetarism, lower taxes for the better off and a reduced social state. The neoliberal ideology will be explored in more detail in relation to its specific effects on government policy towards the end of this chapter, but in brief, it is a free-market approach to economics, which prioritises the removal of barriers to economic activity, frequently in the shape of regulation. This grants considerable power to the actors, the organisations and business people who benefit from this. Coupled with the voluntarist nature of the employer role in ET, employers had the ability to wield considerable power even by not acting. There followed nearly 18 years of Conservative government throughout which the influence of neoliberalism continued to grow and into which environment the 'New' Labour government of Tony Blair was elected in 1997.

Trade Unions in England

The development of unions in England occurred not as a result of central political will but from the ground up, with local interests coming first, then later having more centralised representation through the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the Labour Party (Crouch, 1979). This reflects the lack of central ET planning, and the independence of employers within their sector and from any national system of ET. Unions have been complicit in keeping the status and pay of skilled workers – and therefore the available apprenticeship programmes - separate from that of semi- and unskilled

workers (King, 1997). This has perpetuated a supply of highly skilled workers - though lacking transferable, industry-level skills - and limited opportunities for unskilled workers and the unemployed.

Collective bargaining of pay and conditions between employers and unions has rarely encompassed training (King, 1997; Bogg, 2006; Clough, 2007) and a planned balance between supply and demand for training places remains unachieved in England (Ertl and Sloane, 2004). Concerns about the state of unions show them suffering from the effects of 'unfair globalization, attacks on their existence by supporters of neoliberalism, who did not welcome any attempt to regulate training offers, rapidly changing technology in the workplace, undemocratic global governing bodies and expanding informal economies' (IPO, 2007: iii). This seems akin to blaming their ills on the existence of the modern world rather than taking into account their unusual origins in England, which have rendered them less able to respond to these changes. In many industries, their influence was completely destroyed under the Thatcher government, whilst public service, teaching and transport unions, for example, continue to have a notable impact. Clashes with the teaching unions are a feature of policy implementation under both New Labour and the Coalition.

The perception of 'class' in England

The 'class structure' is instrumental not only to the origins of the ET system but to on-going debates about issues such as curriculum content, progression and the perceptions of individuals about the education they - and others - have received (Evans, 2006; Benn, 2012; Jones, 2012). Where these individuals are policy-makers or otherwise wield influence within the system, their own experiences may inform the decisions they make on behalf of those using that system, a factor considered by this research.

The reach of the top public schools and their alumni remains an obvious systemic anomaly in England. Whilst the First World War diminished the influence of the aristocracy and there is greater social equality in England in the 21st Century, class is as much an element of English society today as it was when a national system of education was struggling to become established in the 19th Century. Since 'gentlemanly status was a sufficient criteria for government office' (Green, 1990: 229) there was less pressure on emerging secondary schools to have high academic standards, to measure achievement through examination, or to establish any kind of schooling based on merit. The tradition of class rule survived the emergence of a middle class, and the dynamic of educational change throughout the nineteenth century was spurred on by a combination of 'working-class agitation and middle-class propaganda' (Green, 1990: 53). Working-class families in the first half of the 20th Century fought to enable their children to attend Grammar schools, rather than Secondary Modern or Technical Schools, as these provided the academic learning and qualifications necessary to succeed in the professions. Young people continue to make choices in favour of academic qualifications where possible as they know that employers assume those holding these are the most able, and therefore employ them and pay them better than holders of other qualifications (Stanton, 2006).

Policy discourse tends to deny the impact of power and class relations in the labour market (Gleeson and Keep, 2004). In the 1980s, the Thatcher Government revived the idea of 'liberal individualism', encouraging a view of education as a market commodity over which 'consumers' could choose their 'supplier' on the basis of quality, location and amount, a view based on 'untenable assumptions and oversimplifications' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1995). This condemned education to remain 'a preparation for a class-divided hierarchical society', under which learners destined for 'skilled work' and non-managerial, non-professional roles would receive an inferior education to that offered to those 'destined...for positions of power and influence' (Tomlinson, 2004: 32). The perceived and actual influence of the alumni of fee-paying schools and the school choices of 'politicians-as-parents'

continue to fuel headlines (Daily Mail online, 2010; Daily Mirror, 2013; Daily Telegraph online, 2014).

The concept of individuals making different decisions depending on the capacity in which they are acting – in this as case parent, rather than politician - is critical to this research.

Low levels of social mobility remain a topic for present day government (Milburn, 2013; www.gov.uk, 2014). Gillian Evans (2006) depicted the system as an ‘ongoing relationship between people grouped according to occupational status’ and claims that the ‘basis for differentiation’ is ‘established at school, consolidated in the workplace and finally symbolised by relative wealth’ (10). Even parents who have earned a good living with a trade themselves continue to push their children into University as the best means of earning higher wages and ‘getting on’ in society, rather than encouraging the pursuit of a vocational or technical route. All of this continues to have a knock-on, negative effect on the perception of vocational provision in schools since many ‘good’ schools, fee-paying or otherwise, tend to offer limited if any alternatives to academic provision.

Features and characteristics of the ET system in England

The peculiarly English system that has emerged in response to this background has a number of broad traits: employer involvement in full-time ET exists but it is of a limited nature and appears to remain so, despite regular initiatives designed to increase it through changes to elements of the system. This is reinforced by the ‘voluntarist’ nature of the system under which employers are not obliged by regulation to make any kind of contribution to the education and training of young people. Entrenched prejudiced attitudes towards VET mean that with a limited number of high-quality, localised exceptions, it remains a reluctant second choice for those wishing to progress to employment after compulsory schooling.

The ET system in England has emerged organically. It has not been designed to meet a set of carefully delineated needs; rather it has evolved to cope with changes in politics, policy, ideology,

technology and global and national economics. Since the 1970s, in no area has this been more the case than in full-time 14-19 ET. Successive governments have posited education institutions and qualifications as the answer to all manner of social, technological and economic issues in relation to this.

The term full-time 14-19 ET system implies that a single, stable system exists with which a homogeneous group entitled 'employers' can engage in clearly defined terms, a coherent entity made up of elements whose purpose in relation to each other is clear. In reality, the system, characterised by Keep (2006) as an 'elaborate and entertaining train set' (47), is as complex as the individuals and organisations that constitute the collective 'employers' (Gleeson and Keep, 2004) and equally subject to change from internal and external forces. It is multi-layered and subject to frequent, piecemeal, modification: a fragmented and inflexible bureaucracy made up of elements easily controlled – and therefore drawn upon – by government, such as schools, colleges, funding and qualifications, and elements such as employer input, needed by government but over which they have no substantial influence. However, in the absence of a coherent system 'changes in one part have unforeseen consequences in other parts' (Pring, 2005: 76).

So unwieldy is the system that successive governments appear only to tinker with elements of it, blaming it as a whole (Ball, 1999), and qualifications in particular, for all manner of social, economic, employment challenges and issues relating to individual achievement. Qualifications are redesigned in answer to calls for greater skills supply or improvement of standards (Stanton, 2006), or agencies are merged or reformed in the name of greater independence or lesser government interference, or greater employer influence with standards maintenance, such as the merger of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) with the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) (Tomlinson, 2005).

Whilst the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) had some independence from government, the interests of employer-representative bodies are not always independent of their need for relicensing (Payne, 2008), meaning they effectively work for, rather than with, departments of state. The extent of the reliance on government contracts, for example, is reflected in the organisations making up the employer representatives on the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, such as BAE, Crossrail and KMPG (UKCES, 2014). The decline of older industries, and the rise of trans-national corporations (TNCs) as the main carriers of business interests, has had a number of impacts on ET policy and government relationships with both categories. Older industries may attempt to cling to historic arrangements in relation to the funding and delivery of training, to perpetuate a declining influence elsewhere in politics and the economy. Government itself behaves in this way when policy proliferates around institutions such as schools and hospitals over which it still has considerable control, unlike in other areas such as transport and energy, which have been largely privatised. TNCs can largely dictate the terms of their involvement in national plans, since they are under little obligation – or regulation – to behave differently. A financially and politically powerful individual corporation needs to have its opinion represented and heard by only one or two people at the very top of political and business influence in order for it to be heard and probably acted upon.

A relative lack of opportunity for small business to influence government ET policy and to accommodate apprenticeships and work experience candidates, are factors often discussed in terms of the size of the business preventing engagement for reasons of cost and personnel release. Where TNCs are dictating terms at the highest political and economic level, small businesses cannot hope to have a similar level of influence without being grouped together in associations. However, the potential diversity of ET requires a high degree of consensus for the opinion of such groups to carry sway. Any agreement reached may be so neutral as to render it useless in terms of defining a curriculum or training package. There appears to be a contrast in the motivation behind employer participation in a Trade Association, where the purpose is partly to manage the reputation of the

organisation and the industry as a whole through self-regulation (Tucker, 2008), and the apparent regulation of employer input into the ET system through government-funded intermediary agencies where employer motivation may be at least in part about the furthering of individual or organisational ambition through participation in high profile projects.

Regulation and voluntarism

The lack of regulation in the ET system in England beyond that associated with qualifications dates back to the origins of formal national education in England, which developed piecemeal in the context of both a very successful economic phase and the established class system, acting as a barrier to rational demand and effective supply. From a qualifications' development and teaching perspective, education and training in England can appear to be overwhelmed by regulation. What there is often relates to funding and is controlled by government in the shape of infrastructure, what is taught within it and how it is taught. Accountability for these elements has taken the shape of performance measures - a business-like approach.

The approach to employer contributions to post-16 ET has combined a 'tradition of voluntarism and incentives' with legislation. This ranges from 'exhortation and advice...through financial levers and quality assurance systems, such as Ofsted and Further Education and Funding Council (FEFC) inspection. It also includes the labour market 'licence to practise', a range of criteria recognised by employers - only some of which are related to qualifications' (Hodgson and Spours, 2005: 130). Even with legislation in place it remains acceptable to talk of 'employers' good will' (Huddleston and Laczik, 2012: 403) in relation to their participation. The state has no ability - and apparently no desire (DES, 1991 in Coffield, 1992) to regulate the inputs of employers to the system, particularly given the history of education and the economic culture in England – still less so with late 20th Century dominance of business over the state.

The 'voluntarist' approach cannot be equated with unshackled freedom; employers still need trained personnel. Instead, regulation appears to be patchy in its existence and implementation, arising from fluid practical and political circumstances. Input from employers into the ET system may be characterised as a 'hybrid' of voluntarist and regulated. In the absence of a fully planned, centrally regulated approach to training, 'regulation' may be found in the approach to funding, for example, where an employer provides an input – such as training, a job role or an Apprenticeship place - in return for government funding. Outside of such schemes, employers may choose whether or not to train their staff – and may even choose not to engage with such schemes at all.

Social partnership enables a structure and logic to be applied to skills supply and demand through the continued engagement of partners: government, which informs economic need; employers, who supply labour market information (LMI); and education, which ensures the availability of up to date programmes. There has been endless policy speculation to determine what the extent of their involvement should be, and how best to optimise this in terms of numbers and achieving diverse multiple aims. As with the ET system more broadly, the debate rarely seems to touch on what the purpose of the employer role should be, which might help to address some of the preceding concerns.

The position of business may be characterised as being the object of attempts by government to involve employers in the education of the existing and future workforce, and to sell them the benefits of qualifications which meet unspecified or very broadly defined employer 'needs' (DCSF 2008; DfES 2003; DfES, 2002). The lack of government influence over employer input is evidenced in the language used in the Leitch Report (2006). This calls for a 'something for something' (88) deal, but where employers are *invited (my emphasis)* to sign up to a Skills Pledge and *if* progress is deemed inadequate, *consideration* will be given to the introduction of a statutory entitlement

(Payne, 2008). Terms such as 'employer-led' are used to counter the balder fact that in a voluntarist system, employers may choose whether or not to engage, since many employers 'are able to generate the profits they desire with a relatively lowly-skilled workforce which they treat as a more or less disposable commodity' (Gleeson and Keep, 2004: 46; Brockmann et al, 2008).

This approach to training – and the seemingly upper-hand of the employer - has yet to be fully challenged despite actions in England during the 20th century intended to break the consensus (Finegold and Soskice, 1990; King, 1997), such as the establishment of the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) and other boards and councils. Trade unions representation on these has been largely ineffective in altering the approach, partly due to the decline of the manufacturing industry and the consequent diminishing of unions' congressional powers. Critics held differing views on the impact of the MSC, for example, that it was an 'anomalous, centralist and interventionist' period in British VET policy, or that it marked a 'dramatic increase in voluntarism' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1995). There is evidence that both perspectives hold some truth. In this instance, voluntarism is a phenomenon peculiar to England under which employers choose the extent - or even the fact - of their involvement in a policy initiative. Their involvement is exhorted by policy but not regulated (Coffield, 1992), resulting in many of the issues to be explored in this thesis.

In Germany, the training system, which is regularly held up for positive comparison against that of England, the 'principle of voluntariness' (Ertl and Sloane, 2004: 3) means that no employer is obliged to take on trainees. If a business cannot afford or does not require one or more apprentices in a given year, for example, they demonstrate the business case for this (or indeed for the number of apprentices they will take) and numbers are adjusted accordingly. This results in apprentices having a secure placement and future with an employer. Yet despite arguments made in favour of social partnership in England (Fuller and Unwin, 2003; Hodgson and Spours, 2008; Coffield *et al.*, 2008; Grindrod and Murray, 2011) and examples of the setting up and success of the concept of 'licence to

practise' (Finlay *et al.*, 2007), the nature of the system and the culture from which it has arisen means that the existence of a national, demand-led approach to ET seems as distant as ever.

The creation of National Occupational Standards (NOS) was a form of collective agreement on the skills and training needed by UK businesses, but these were not universally supported (Wolf, 2002), and initiatives such as Public Private Partnership (UK Parliament, 2008) expect both investment and return. Yet regulation remains broadly incoherent and ineffective as it applies only to those elements of the system, such as qualifications and schools, over which government retains control. Governments in England have been unable or unwilling to do more than exhort, persuade or politically position employers to play their part in the up-skilling of the wider workforce beyond the individual organisation.

Recently, policy appears to have privileged the employer voice above that of multiple other stakeholders such as parents, learners, schools and universities (Hodgson and Spours, 2008). The perception is that government is obliged to do so as it has no other choice: greater employer involvement is the answer to a number of questions, which are never sufficiently defined, and employers appear to have all the power. Yet if this is the case, either they do not use it to support the creation of a national system that actually meets their needs, or they use it to further their own interests and to maintain the status quo in terms of government funded provision. The haphazard existence and application of regulation may result in organisations and individuals being able to opt out of - or use to their advantage - the regulation that does exist, with no obligation to take into account the impact of their behaviours, an impact which is examined by this research.

Vocational education and training – perspectives

Vocational Education and Training (VET) refers to a spectrum of learning that may be work-based, enabling progression into a specific industry, sector or role. It may be learning provision in compulsory and post-compulsory education, based on being delivered in or using one or more work-based contexts to offer learners experience of a specific industry, sector or role and enabling different pedagogical approaches (Ball, 1999). More recently it has come to mean learning which may engage disaffected or disengaged learners where academic or traditional routes have failed, and risks being equated with failure, (Brockmann et al, 2008). It is a spectrum which has been summarised as both 'strong' and 'weak' (Hayward, 2004; Stanton, 2006), terms which might also be used to accurately describe the extent of employer involvement within it, though not necessarily in a way that reflects expectations. Indeed it is this 'curious absence' (Keep, 2005) of employers from areas where they might be expected to engage fully and the perhaps unexpected extent of or apparent demand for their presence elsewhere which provides some of the context for this research.

In contrast with Stanton's (2006) desire to legally control the definition of vocational, discussions around the term in relation to the 14-19 Diploma developed under New Labour, but were dismissed as 'semantics' - not one set of regulatory criteria for the qualifications contained the word 'vocational' (Criteria for the Diploma Qualifications in Construction and the Built Environment, 2011). The grouping of 'vocational' skills training for the unemployed, together with 'vocationally-related' learning for those in school and 'technical vocational' training for employees or apprentices, has led to confusion about where employer inputs might be most valuably made. This has made it difficult to define vocational learning, increased the lack of clarity around its purpose and aims, and - owing to the generally low value placed on vocational qualifications - means that parity of esteem with other qualifications of a similar level is difficult to achieve (Keep, 2005).

The aims of business remain relatively constant, such as to make a profit, to grow, to reward shareholders and investors, to develop new products or services, to deliver these to some level of quality and to support the national economy - all of which might feasibly be collapsed under the first point. The aims of VET, however, in England in particular, evolve and change to meet the policy priorities of the Government in power, shaped by new and legacy ideologies. Wolf (2011) acknowledged that 'vocational' means many things to many people and avoided defining it, missing an opportunity to raise vocational education out of the 'inclusive and subordinate role' into which it had been forced by selective general education (Hodgson and Spours, 2008: 95).

The 'low employer-participation equilibrium'

A partial explanation for the apparent lack of employer involvement in full-time 14-19 ET draws on the concept of the 'low-skills equilibrium' (Finegold and Soskice, 1990), which asserts that skills development in the UK is hampered by 'a self-reinforcing network of societal and state institutions which interact to stifle the demand for improvements in skill levels' (18). Fifteen years, two governments and a slew of policies later, Keep (2005) observed that large numbers of employers remain 'locked into production and quality strategies that demand relatively low levels of skills, particularly certified skills, from the broad mass of their workforce' (540). Changes to those production and quality strategies would require greater investment in higher-level skills, alternative management techniques and even perhaps acceptance of different reward levels for executive and shareholders to enable the whole workforce to benefit from a new system.

The 'low employer-participation equilibrium' suggests that poor initial design of the ET system in England - or indeed a lack of it - coupled with a prevailing cultural and historical legacy in both attitude and structure, along with ad hoc, politically-driven 'tinkering' to elements of the system, have resulted in barriers to employer involvement and a system which actually needs a radical

overhaul. Employers have failed to appear when they have been given a specific role (Ainley and Allen, 2010), or have moulded a given role to their own ends, whether steering a board to concentrate on their priorities (Finegold and Soskice, 1990), or dismissing an ideology. This might include refusing to acknowledge that a qualification is 'vocational' when their preference is for 'academic' (ITLOLS, 2006), and shaping an outcome to suit their beliefs about the best provision for learners.

Businesses with a strong international, national or local presence may feel with some justification that their reputation alone makes the training offered by them of value even where this may not follow a nationally recognised programme. They may also see Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activity as a sufficient contribution to a local community where they are unwilling or unable to provide apprenticeship places or reliable links with schools. Employers would apparently offer more opportunities to young people if the economic climate were to improve (UKCES, 2011) - yet opportunities for young people have been scarce for decades and had declined steadily well before the current financial crisis. Calling for 'more, and better co-ordinated' (8) engagement with employers at 'different levels' between education and industry, and for the practical changes proposed in its recommendations to take place in 'an environment of effective employer engagement' (37), the report also acknowledges the ineffectiveness of blanket solutions.

Table A below summarises the main elements of the system that arguably conspire to create this low employer-participation equilibrium between employers and full-time 14-19 ET. The features shape the ET system and the resulting interactions of employers with it. For clarity, the elements and the major issues that cause friction within that element are separated out within the table. In reality, however, they are interconnected, and it is how they relate to and impact on each other that results in many of the issues to be discussed. The interdependence of the elements of the ET system and its relationship with wider politics and society mean it is not possible to 'road test' initiatives for

all potential impacts before implementation. Cost and practicality must be taken into account and even the most rigorously tested policy may clash with a later policy. Tomlinson (2005) observed that 'Incoming governments are keen to imprint their ideological beliefs on social policy via legislation' but that there is usually 'a process of borrowing from the previous government when particular policies are strongly embedded, suit future plans or are electorally popular' (29).

Some of these ideas will be expanded in the coming chapters, but the table provides a starting point for discussion. The table represents a rough hierarchy of features, changes to any of which alone will not be sufficient to radically alter the system. In straightened economic times, for example, resources may be cut, or the election of a new government may mean that priority funding is given to colleges or schools rather than universities, but the basic structure remains the same. The unique status of awarding organisations (AOs) in England remains, and changes to funding often focus on its distribution, rather than the medium- to long-term purpose of the outcomes being paid for. Key attributes of certain features, such as the voluntary nature of the employer role and embedded attitudes towards VET, render any 'tinkering' with individual elements even less effective.

Table A. Features of the system (not exhaustive)

| Element | Impact |
|--|---|
| Economy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> globalisation requires acknowledgement of the impact of international economic circumstances and the international ownership of businesses on ET |
| State relationship with business and markets | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the Liberal tradition in England and its 'developmental priority' the all-pervasiveness of neoliberalism requires a particular examination of the relationship between the state, business organisations and markets |
| Attitudes towards vocational qualifications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> social class and established attitudes towards academic learning lack of clear definition of the value of 'vocational' in terms of learning, achievement and progression issues with defining and resourcing effective technical education and training |
| Policy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> lack of central stability in education policy in England: a change of government will result in policy continuity and adaptation, also change policy implementation, teaching and the unions |
| Employer participation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> voluntary nature of employer involvement makes planning and outcomes difficult to predict or secure |
| Regulation and voluntarism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> complexity, inconsistency and absence of regulation allows stakeholders and employers to opt out of or ignore obligations in favour of their own interests and prevents governments from doing more than exhort participation from employers and stakeholders |
| Funding | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> not always transparent or logical dependent on national financial circumstances - supply-led not demand-led |
| Awarding Organisations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> variability in strength of relationships with employers leading to issues of credibility with qualifications essential to the implementation of policy and often to the communication of it to employers |
| CEIAG | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> difficulty of co-ordinating Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) at both local and national levels, advice not always given in the best interests of the learner but of the institution in which they are being educated |
| ET provision | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> training outcomes and learner progression secondary to training business imperatives unrealistic expectations as to what employers can contribute; underestimation of what is necessary to sustain effective relationships |

The significance of policy assumptions and their impact

A number of critical assumptions, stemming from the systemic features outlined above, appear to underpin and justify ET policy in England. These have had a number of broad effects including that their deep-rooted nature prevents a proper overhaul of the system, thereby perpetuating its supply-led nature, a factor giving rise to yet further issues. These include unexpected policy continuity or adaptation by apparently ideologically opposed parties, and at other times apparently unnecessary change, and the inability to examine the purpose and outcome of qualifications and learning programmes beyond rather narrow 'economic' parameters. Government expects or demands that employers play a far greater role in the state than simply education – this is a by-product of neoliberalism, under which business is more powerful than the state but is needed by it for wider investments, fulfilment of government contracts and to 'teach' public service how to be more efficient.

Specific assumptions include, for example, that 'employers', regardless of size, location or other differentiating factors, hold similar opinions about ET both generally and within their sector; and the related assumption that employer representatives speak as – or for – an organisation and not as an individual. This results in contributions from some employers and not from others, leading to a perception that what is valued and contributed by any given employer representative is valued by the organisation as a whole, and by extension, any organisation from the sector within which the contributor is located. Another assumption is that businesses exist for reasons other than – and of equal priority to – making a profit and that they will therefore willingly and voluntarily contribute to ET. This also results in a situation where only some employers make a contribution, but this comes to be seen as 'right', 'valuable' and 'effective' – being the only contribution – perpetuating the idea that what is needed is 'more of the same'. Those who do not contribute are considered selfish rather than having any other reason for not participating. On such bases, policies are created to

exhort or incentivise employers to participate when the answer might be a different solution or one where their participation is not even required.

Custom and practice have resulted in the expectation that government should be responsible for the funding and content of qualifications, and is responsible for training the unemployed and for supplying employers with a skilled workforce. Policy makes a number of assumptions, which provide a very uneven foundation for success. It assumes agreement outside government departments of what constitutes a particular sector and that individual businesses within that would broadly agree what is needed in terms of skills; that employers will contribute for the good of their sector or for reward elsewhere - and that the latter is acceptable when public money is being spent. Lastly, but not exhaustively, it assumes that exhortation rather than regulation will somehow become more effective than it has been to date if one or more elements of the system are adjusted; that it is possible to define the skills required at the relevant levels in a given occupation wherever that is located; that it is possible to match supply and demand in order to fulfil those apparent skills needs and that in a 'voluntarist' system, it is possible to bring together the relevant partners among employers and stakeholders to optimise learning and delivery of them (Pring, 2005).

Policy relating to full-time 14-19 ET appears predicated on the assumption that employers consider this age group to be a priority as future employees. Yet employers have a wide pool of other potential employees with greater life and work experience to draw on therefore the 14-19 age bracket may understandably be a low priority. Different attitudes exist among employers towards training for those in work and state provision of training for the potential workforce (King, 1997). Many of these assumptions drive behaviours that result in differing perceptions about the willingness and ability of employers to play a role in full-time 14-19 ET. Some perceptions need to be challenged: this research aims to do that.

The impact of globalisation has seen a revival of the historic national reluctance by employers to give more than the minimum of training to employees, rather than risk their being poached by a rival firm or having the skills to move between firms (Billett and Seddon, 2006). Some qualifications' policy appears to be based on an on-going assumption that a domestic programme can be created and will receive investment of resources from businesses with no local or national ties. The sale of a British brand such as Cadbury chocolate to the American-owned Kraft conglomerate (CIMA, 2013) may make sense for shareholders and even for short- to medium-term job security, but it may be less likely to provide a sympathetic platform for a boost in local manufacturing skills training. Business confidentiality and the sheer size of many organisations mean that representation of their 'skills needs' to any kind of national project charged with collecting these on behalf of a wider industry, is likely to result in relatively neutral inputs such as general aptitudes, literacy and numeracy.

New policies are implemented, adapted and replaced by successive governments, with evaluation seemingly based as much on their fit with party ideology and their potential impact on future voters, as on their merits as a route to achievement. Such an approach must be frustrating for stakeholders - above all learners - since the value of a product or project as a future educational or training outcome is difficult to predict or quantify. In the case of employers this may cause them to withhold or withdraw support even where the outcomes appear useful: the risk of wasted resource is simply too great. Chapter 2 will examine the impact of these assumptions on 14-19 ET policy under the New Labour and Coalition governments

Neoliberalism

The impact of neoliberalism on the provision of public goods, including education, has been significant. The seemingly complicit relationship between employers and the state in relation to regulation, 'the damaging consequences of compulsion' (DES, 1991: 38), mean that policy initiatives have been unable to change the nature and extent of the employer role. Mickelthwait and Wooldridge (2014) argue that state reform is far more than an organisational matter and that the most efficient technocrats would be unable to save the average state model in the Western world. In their view, the Western state is stuck in a paradox: it has never been so powerful but nor has it been so inefficient and disliked – and attempts to meet the increasingly impossible demands of the electorate have led to micromanagement. This 'vicious spiral' (Loc 3090) is inevitable as the state grows in response to voter demand - a demand which increases as the reality of the intrusiveness of the enacted demands is felt by the individual. Increasing globalisation means that businesses may be based anywhere and employ an international personnel. Technology allows individuals to carry out work – and be paid for it – without entering or leaving a country. National government no longer enjoys the previous level of control over economic activity or the resultant jobs – nor over critical sources of revenue used for the provision of 'public goods'.

Under neoliberalism, the sole aim of business should be the maximisation of profits for shareholders through efficiency gains, as this alone increases the amount of wealth collectively in the economy (Bork, 1993 in Crouch, 2011), with a presumption that 'economic activity is best left to the private sector' (Blair in Mickelthwait and Wooldridge, 2014: Loc 1304). Competition may be maintained between small numbers of very large enterprises and these should be given the 'benefit of the doubt' in terms of their ability and desire to 'fix' markets to their collective advantage (Crouch, 2011). In the public sector in England, this may be illustrated by the dominance of one or two service delivery companies, such as Cap Gemini and Serco, despite competitive tendering.

Since the 1970s, political rhetoric appears to have the state conferring greater individual freedoms whilst in reality increasing centralised control (Tomlinson, 2005). Neoliberal rhetoric focuses on 'individual' consumer welfare although the reality is that a quasi-'collective' increase in the total wealth entering the economy 'for all' is actually passed on to a minimum number of beneficiaries. That the distribution of this wealth is uneven and of little benefit to the individual is of minimal concern to proponents of the theory. The consumer has theoretically 'chosen' this solution through a willingness to support 'efficient' large corporations in the marketplace instead of multiple, differently-sized, 'inefficient' competitors. The minimal market has been falsely created by a small number of corporations acting not in the interests of the consumer but those of their shareholders. Governments have been complicit in the creation of this situation through their granting of favourable - or ignoring of unfavourable - conditions.

Crouch (2011) declared that the 'familiar opposition of market and state is becoming threadbare' (145) since 'market' may now be read as 'corporation', and even those political parties whose ideological origins may lie elsewhere are as likely to be allied to large corporations as those more traditionally associated with them. Antitrust laws have moved away from the core principle of preventing agreements which limit competition. Now, competitors seek to destroy the competition and maintain a more artificial 'market' dominated by large corporations, with customer welfare - as determined by the 'nanny' state rather than individuals - replacing consumer choice as the main aim of both business and government. State intervention to maintain competitiveness rather than allowing a minority to dominate is a theoretical option but viewed as a last resort.

According to Public Choice Theory (PCT) (Buchanan and Tullock, 1999; Crouch, 2011), businesses and their management act self-interestedly. A manager who does not attend to short-term profit maximisation for shareholders will have no 'long-term' to attend to. In these circumstances, for example, standards of customer service, viewed as 'redundant capacity', are allowed to slip in the

medium- to long-term in the pursuit of short-term profits. The provision of public service is arguably simply a way for individuals in power to extend their influence and work in their own interests rather than that of the 'public'. Government intervention to regulate markets has no place in neoliberal theory. No politician has altruistic motives: all wish only to expand the sphere of their influence and material gain.

ET Policy leading up to New Labour

In the 1950s, the Conservative government appeared to move to the left by abandoning free market principles and embracing the Welfare State. Following the collapse of a number of industries in the 1970s, the Thatcher government faced high youth unemployment and the '150 year old dilemma' (Tomlinson, 2005: 104) of funding education for young people who 'might not be economically profitable to society' and who did not fit into 'a human capital equation' (Tomlinson, 1989: 195). The late 20th Century saw a general political move to the right in many established democracies, including Britain (Crouch, 2011).

A national training policy for those leaving education but not entering employment at 16 and a revised apprenticeship system were introduced (DfE, 1981). Concerns were raised about the availability and quality of LMI and the inflexibility of manpower planning in a world in which long-run predictions about occupational needs could seldom be made (Finegold and Soskice, 1990). ET should be adaptable, to give people the general and vocational grounding needed to enable them to move between jobs and retrain. Individuals should also be educated in a manner that encourages innovation and high quality production values: training and qualifications must be recognisable to employers and offer a combination of immediate usefulness and longer-term value. What individuals and society may value in terms of training and qualifications is not necessarily what the market requires.

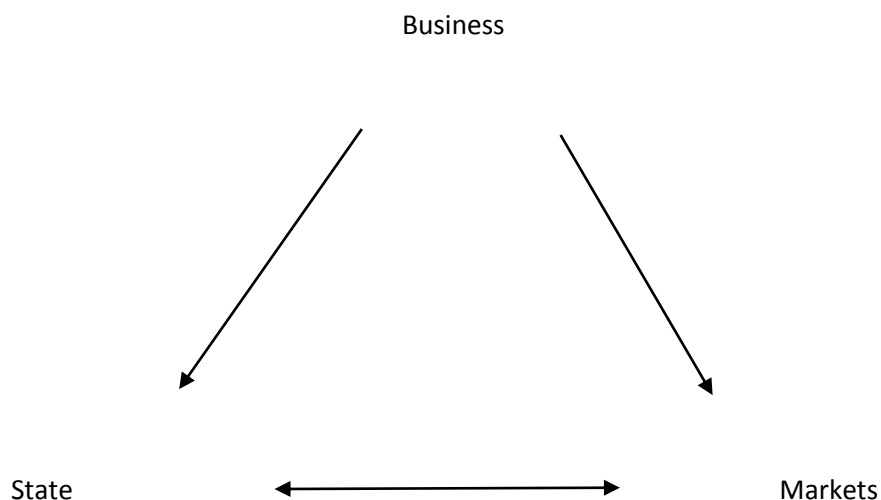
Policy aimed to address how best to fit work-related skills within full time initial education, signalling a recurring feature of ET policy – the expansion of learning institutions, rather than more direct working relationships with employers to address apparent skill shortages in industry. National training policies for 16-year-old school leavers, and revisions to the Apprenticeship system (DfES, 1981), began to place employers at the heart of the system. Policy aims included the creation of ‘the human capital which is the raw material for industry’ (DfE, 1985: 1) and identified industry and commerce as ‘the schools’ main customers’ (1), confirming the marketisation of education and training. The newly formed National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) was made responsible for the creation of National Occupational Standards. The Education Reform Act of 1988 introduced the national curriculum and changed the language of education provision to that of a ‘service’ and a ‘product’ which had been brought into the marketplace by ‘consumer choice’ (Tomlinson, 2005: 51). This neoliberal view of education made the ‘decisive break with the welfare state principles which had underpinned the education service since...1944’ (51).

Forerunners of both New Labour and Coalition Academies, City Technology Colleges were established with hopes that employers would invest in them, but in the end funding came mainly from taxpayers. This may have been partly to do with policies which spoke of educating the ‘bottom 40 per cent’ rather than those most suited to industry, so the idea may have been a hard sell to employers - though reflective of a familiar attitude towards VET in England. It was not that Public Private Partnership intended to provide a return on financial investment, but rather that employers would go from being exhorted to play their part, to effectively being paid to do so – through the creation of a business, rather than social, partnership.

Governance

The 'analytical concept' of 'Governance' became 'the defining narrative' (Rhodes, 2000: 6) of British government at the start of the new Millennium and is described as the co-ordination of 'economic activity that transcend the limits of hierarchy and markets' (Newman, 2001: 11). At a time when the state can 'no longer assume a monopoly of the expertise or resources necessary to govern' (11) it must instead draw on 'a plurality of interdependent institutions and actors' (12) within and beyond government: 'services funded by the state need not be run by the state' (Olssen *et al*, 2004: 211). Governance extends well beyond government financial decisions into general principles which cement business as the dominant element of the State-markets-business equation (Newman, 2001; Crouch, 2011), as illustrated by Figure 1.

Figure 1. Business domination of the state and markets



A number of general issues within an unregulated system are compounded by the use of New Public Management (NPM) techniques to impose control. Outcomes are based on government policy and ideology - rather than on business strategy, in which the measures have their origin - and in the case of education and training, on solutions that individuals believe will resolve skills shortages rather than increase profit. However, there is little evidence for the effectiveness of this. Examples include

the contracting of private businesses to deliver 'public' services and the creation of government funded agencies and authorities to implement government policy. Where influential business voices are heard, their solutions may not fit wider industry or economic need.

Effective skills development and supply requires new levels of networking, partnerships, and autonomy of providers. Interdependence between organisations and trust were required for success (Rhodes, 2000 in Olssen *et al.*, 2004: 212) - although ideological clashes were provoked such as the desire to give schools more independence whilst requiring increased co-operation between all children's services. NPM transformed the relationship between state and citizen to one of provider and consumer (Crouch, 2011; Biesta, 2009; Dore, 2000). Private sector contracts put a distance between the final provider and the user, the latter a member of the 'public' who may have paid taxes, which are ultimately being used to fund the contract. Even at the point of 'choice', that is, the time at which the state appoints a contractor to deliver a public service, the 'customer' or member of the public has no choice in that appointment. Beyond that, identifying who is responsible for any contract failure is challenging since the organisation that wins the contract is likely to subcontract many responsibilities to different, smaller organisations. In these circumstances, accountability is unclear and the 'consumer' suffers poor service without course to redress.

The emergence of New Labour

Labour traditionally had a weak relationship with business but neoliberalism was an ideology dominated by it. This dominance had started under the Conservatives but Labour had to offer different solutions to ensure election, reflecting the general move to the centre by many mainstream political parties to address global, rather than local, political interest. This was led by Tony Blair, a man who 'rarely talked about left and right' (Rawnsley, 2010) rather about 'past and future' (6), but as he moved his party towards the political centre to appeal to those who had

benefited financially from 'popular capitalism' (Mickelthwait and Wooldridge, 2014: Loc 1304). On being elected, New Labour were faced with Nye Bevan's choice between 'image and audience' (cited in Foot, 1966, 130-31), forced both to court 'Old' Labour supporters and to respond to the demands of 'social change and electoral imperatives' (Steinberg and Johnson, 2004: 9) in the shape of 'aspirational' voters (Rawnsley, 2010: 7) - what Hall (2006) terms their 'double shuffle'. Blair's government also pursued the neoliberal policies already dominating both UK and global politics (Labour Party Manifesto, 1997; Ball, 1999; Newman, 2001; Gilbert, 2004; Coates, 2007; Ainley and Allen, 2010).

The continuation of policies from Conservative to New Labour governments was characterised by Ball (1999) as 'local manifestations of global policy paradigms' (196). One key factor here is a 'convergence' of social and economic policies across parties and within countries with very different political and social welfare histories (Ball, 1999: 98). The Third Way, the political route taken by New Labour (Farnsworth, 2010; Rawnsley, 2010), may be seen both as a creative way to achieve a balance between the inevitable continuation of Thatcherite policies (Gilbert, 2004) and a genuine desire to 'modernise' social democratic ones. The Third Way is a form of 'centralised progressivism' (O'Brien, 2003) by which New Labour sought to bring together market principles and social democracy. This compromise reflects a 'modern' version of the Liberal split between economy and society, one of a number of tensions to shape and characterise the ET System in England. It may also be seen as a compromise under which all parties are disappointed.

Party modernisation was necessary for a number of reasons, but the dominance of business rather than any other single aspect of globalisation forced Labour to carve out a new relationship with employers - a potential partner over which it had previously had little influence - and to accept the new dynamics (Wolf, 1998; Newman, 2001; Clarke and Newman, 2004; Steinberg and Johnson, 2004; Tomlinson, 2005; Hodgson *et al* eds, 2011). Modernisation or reform is synonymous with

marketisation (Hall, 2006): against social democratic expectations, New Labour marketised the state, allowing private sector practices and capital to permeate all levels of government.

New Labour policies were both meritocratic and neoliberal (Paterson, 2003), Blair's 'liberal instincts' inclining him to '...competitive individualism, real partnership between public and private, and using the State only where necessary but – unlike the New Right – certainly where necessary' (103). Whilst this may seem fitting for a nominally social democratic party, Thatcher also used the state, resulting in the paradox that the neoliberalism of the 1980s and its concomitant individual and institutional freedom actually resulted in greater centralisation of control in education (Taylor, 2005), an area that still remained under government, rather than business, control.

New Labour introduced business practices to the heart of public services, which were still a feature of Labour policy. It also tried to address the requirements of business, individual learners and job-seekers in an age of increasing technological expansion, migration and overseas ownership of commercial enterprises. An inevitable consequence of the domination of business was the need for government to use 'new techniques and tools to steer and guide' (Stoker, 1998: 18). This saw a Labour government looking for efficiency gains in public services, contracting them out to - or treating them as - private companies, and setting up new forms of governance to manage their activities, thus heralding the wholesale adoption of performance measures - introduced under the Major government.

New Labour sought ways to monitor the performance of - and relationships between - elements of the system, and to drive new routes of information, such as channelling the 'employer voice' through the network of newly created Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). Under the 'competition state', policy and services were increasingly contracted to private and voluntary sector organisations with funding tied to pre-specified outcomes (Newman, 2001; Fuller *et al.*, 2010). This led to a

proliferation of smaller organisations, accountable to government departments, using practices of ‘new managerialism’ more commonly associated with the private sector, for example assessment against pre-defined outcomes, league tables and employer engagement targets (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Stewart, 1998; Newman, 2001; Jessop, 2002; Payne, 2008).

The purpose of SSCs was to engage employers with government policies and to give both existing and emerging industries an equivalent voice, by creating a single channel through which employer input would be co-ordinated during a time of changing levels of influence between sectors and TNCs. In many industries, Trade Associations (TAs) continued to exist alongside the SSCs and some bodies representing business have been characterised as ‘weak, poorly resourced and not necessarily very representative of their members’ views’ (Huddleston and Keep, 1999). SSCs were to be ‘employer-led networks’ through which employer skills’ needs would be identified and delivered (Payne, 2008: 2). SSCs were the latest incarnation of the employer-representative body – an intermediary with several incarnations under successive UK governments, such as Industry Trade Organisations (ITOs) and National Training Organisations (NTOs). Being partly reliant on funding from the government, these type of organisations served two masters – the government, and the employers whose views they were officially supposed to represent. Their limited size and reach, often impacted by the limited amount of funding they received, and an inability to gain real financial support from employers – the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) being the possible exception to this – rendered the influence of such organisations weak at best. This situation was made worse by the regular changes to their constitution and the negative impact this had on communication with employers. The short-lived nature of some of these organisations, of which participants in initiatives promoted by them would be aware, may also have engendered a ‘short-term gain’ attitude among those contributing. TAs may be considered to have greater independence than the publicly funded organisations described above, and a longer life span. Tucker (2008) positions employers and organisations as managing their reputations through collective action in the context

of TAs since 'a firm's reputation is also affected by stakeholders' perceptions of the common attributes of the industry or groups to which the firm is a member' (4).

The importance of skills to employers is more of a state construct than a reality (Gleeson and Keep, 2004) and the designated role of employers - and the ability of many organisations to fulfil it - is the subject of no little debate (DfES, 2002; Stanton, 2006; Payne, 2008). Many of the organisations that contributed to ET policy through SSCs were TNCs, such as Microsoft and IBM, which were already influential in the heart of government, having senior representation on boards and committees. Not all sectors had such influential representation, and concerns were raised about the reliance on the input of a 'steadfast minority' (Payne, 2008: 109), employers who were easier to engage than the majority SMEs (Laczik and White, 2009).

SSCs could only exhort, not demand, input, despite attempts to give them a central position in defining employer needs (Leitch, 2006). This reflects a wider issue in terms of the on-going effectiveness of democratic institutions and the influence of non-elected bodies and intermediary organisations such as quangos, sector and industrial bodies, political advisers, private consultants and policy think tanks. Whilst governments continue to adhere to the principles of neoliberalism, political power has come under an increasingly centralised grip in the late 20th and early 21st century. SSCs were hampered in their work by the stringent requirements attached to their licensing - and core funding - by government, resulting in 'engagement' with employers that in some cases had a high numerical value for performance measures but little impact on the depth or understanding of the input required from individual organisations (Payne, 2008).

Conclusion

This chapter set out the main historical and cultural background features in which the current ET system is rooted, how these continue to influence its shape, and the relationships of employers and

stakeholders with it. The on-going influence of the voluntarist nature of the system demonstrates a clear link between historical features of the system and issues with it in the present day. This is rooted in the attitudes of employers who had access to plentiful cheap labour to serve their business needs from the time of the industrial revolution, and who were never really challenged by the limited amount of regulation applied by a largely disinterested government. This link is also seen in the firmly established principles of individualism stemming from the liberal economic ideology, which remain a strong theme not only in the behaviour of employers but in the execution of VET policy, which provides training in areas with no proven economic need, rather than responding to demand. Unlike in those countries where successful revolutions recast society, England has remained relatively stable, along with the role of workers within it, and ultimately national expectations and responsibilities in terms of education and training. Success was linked to the individual business rather than the overall economy and society. Features such as class and the aristocracy survived, and trade unions were shaped by existing strictures rather than emerging with a centrally conceived purpose and remit. This compartmentalisation is reflected in current ET system structures. Trade Unions should have been a key social partner for both New Labour and the Coalition - and indeed earlier administrations - in terms of informing the system of both future training requirements and those of people already in employment. New Labour tried to engage with the unions but treated them – along with many other stakeholders – as second class partners, viewing employers as the priority.

In the late twentieth century, the on-going voluntarist nature of the employer role, coupled with changing global and national influences on policy, and the advent of Neoliberalism, meant that the state had to change its relationship with business – the now- dominant influence. Under New Labour, employers were granted a central role in ET policy creation and implementation despite there being no way to regulate or enforce it. This gave rise to new networks of intermediaries tasked with achieving these inputs, although having no greater influence over employers than those

that had gone before. Through the concept of a low-employer participation equilibrium, this chapter has sought to demonstrate how known macro- and meso- level factors at an international, national and local level have conflated to prevent large number of employers from supporting policy apparently focussed on their needs. This conspiracy of tangible elements preventing the existence of an effective system is underpinned by a legacy of poor attitudes towards VET, ideologies which promote individual choice and business success above collective societal or economic needs, and a lack of will or ability to enforce involvement from players considered essential to successful policy implementation. Combined with more recent governance approaches, which have unwittingly driven poor behaviours within elements of a system concerned with performance and accountability, it might be easy to conclude that these factors alone explain the relative failure of ET policy.

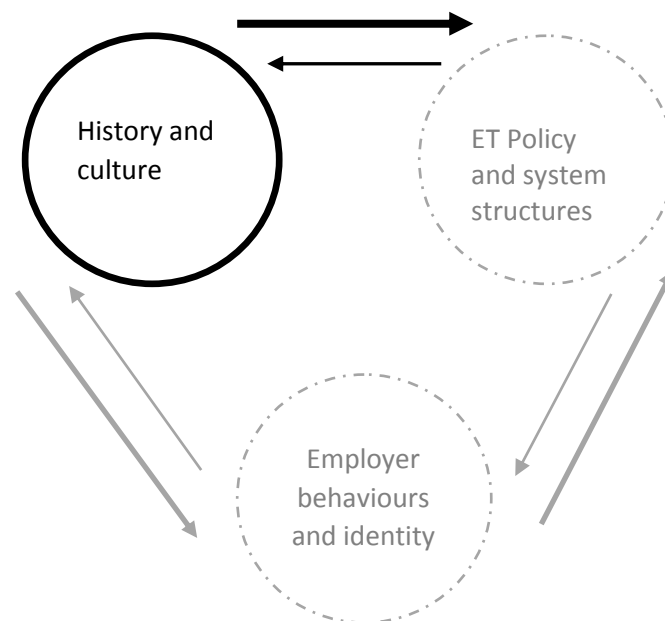


Figure 2. The place of history and culture within the Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 was created by the author to represent, at the highest level, the key topics of the thesis, bringing together those covered by the literature review and the focus of the original research - the headline factors influencing the shape of the ET system. It also illustrates the different relationships

between the three, and the relative strength or weakness of these. Two further versions of the diagram appear later. Here, it therefore also provides a first illustration of the conceptual framework, within which the differentiated impacts of history and culture, ET policy - the drivers and barriers this creates, and the assumptions on which it is based - and the identity and behaviour of employers are brought together to answer the main research aim. Although employer behaviours have not yet been examined in depth, it is possible to indicate at this stage that simply by virtue of the fact that employers are themselves products of the education and training system, history and culture may have a potentially strong influence on their reaction to, and implementation of, ET policy, despite an already significant number of potential explanations for its relative failure arising from this first chapter. It also indicates that employers have an impact on ET structures, as well as policy, and that their relationship with ET is influenced by them.

Chapter 2: The role of employers in 14-19 education and training policy under New Labour and the Coalition

Introduction

This chapter examines the on-going influence of the historic and cultural factors discussed in Chapter 1 on the full-time 14-19 ET policy of New Labour and the subsequent Conservative-led Coalition. The administrations shared a narrative around the link between standards and structures as a way to drive or justify policy, whilst voluntarism and social conscience (Hayward *et al*, 2006; Hodgson and Spours, 2008) remained the model of involvement with ET for employers. Many of the assumptions that influenced and shaped New Labour ET policy continued under the Coalition. Chapter 2 therefore sets out the central role of education to the economy and society under New Labour. Policy drivers are identified, as too is the part played by the widely-defined concept of skill on employer-needs and ET policy, the approaches taken to infrastructure reform by both administrations, and whether, despite its 'purer' interpretation of neoliberalism, the Conservative-led Coalition was as employer-friendly as Conservative history might at first suggest.

The thesis originally focused on qualifications aimed at those in full-time 14-19 ET but moved to encompass wider elements such as apprenticeships, infrastructure and Careers Information Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) – topics which arose during the initial research interviews when questioning employers about full-time 14-19 ET. It was therefore necessary to spend time looking at the issues that had been raised in relation to these. The research found that employers were keen to talk about apprenticeships, as it was through the delivery of these that many of them encountered young people and the issues that both they and the wider employer community face when working with them. Infrastructure was one of the main tools for change under both New Labour and the Coalition. Its relevance to employers lay not only in the qualifications delivered to young people

within the different types of institution, but also their relationship with the funding and sponsorship of certain models, the wider marketisation of education and training, and in the attitudes towards employers and VET displayed by the institutions themselves. Finally, the sometimes misleading role of CEIAG, its purpose, and responsibility for its currency and accuracy, were matters of importance to employers and stakeholders in this context.

The wide-ranging topics covered by this chapter serve to illustrate the complexity of the ET system and how changes appear to be made to many different aspects of the system without a coherent, strategic view of what the overarching aim or goal of the reforms is intended to be – or at least how each reform will contribute to an overarching goal. Instead the volume of policy and reform appears to have attached to it a hope that sufficient policy of any kind will drive the changes and outcomes required by the state. Whether they chime with those of other stakeholders, specifically in this case employers, does not seem to be properly understood by policy-makers. The final part of the chapter therefore reiterates the impact of ET policies on the employer.

The central role of education to the economy and society: New Labour's vision

There were clear similarities between the 1997 Conservative and Labour education manifestos (Tomlinson, 2005). Hodgson and Spours (1999) noted the differing positions taken by New Labour in their early years in power in relation to compulsory and post-compulsory education. The former approach demonstrated a continuation of Conservative policies to centralise, regulate and control, whilst policies post-16 (DfEE: 1999) seemed more cautious and voluntarist. The latter may be partly explained by the school-leaving age of 16 years old, which gave government greater control of education up to this age. Blair claimed the knowledge society and education as the best economic weapons (Lloyd and Payne, 2002; Ball, 2008), but a continued lack of influence over business and the concern with social inclusion distracted his government from providing a high-quality work-based route (Fuller and Unwin, 2003: 5), all the more critical as the New Labour citizen was expected to

access society through work. Wolf (2002) questioned the sense of relying on education as an economic panacea, an idea promoted by Blair into his third term, and which was challenged as 'naive' by Mayhew and Fernandez (2008, in Keep and Mayhew, 2010: 566).

New Labour wanted to 'address the low participation and retention rate' (Pring, 2005) and make closer links between 'the system of education and training and the economic needs of the country and individual learners themselves' (81). Despite a visible growth in professional and managerial work, Pring *et al* (2009) dismiss Blair's claim as a 'mirage' and 'illusion', pointing to the large number of low-skilled, often unemployed workers (Ainley and Allen, 2010). Yet education remained under state control and was therefore a potential tool and policy lever to enable government to react to the impacts of globalisation (Green, 1999; Hodgson and Spours, 1999, Priestly, 2002) even when this resulted in little of concrete value, simply policy 'busyness' (Hodgson and Spours, 2005; Coffield *et al*, 2008), or what Lumby and Foskett (2007) referred to as 'turbulence masquerading as change' (163).

A flurry of ET policy in the first term of New Labour government saw the introduction of a number of measures aimed at meeting economic need and growth - many of which were formulated to include employers - whilst balancing this with a commitment to social justice, leading to policy clashes (see Tomlinson, 2005; Newman, 2001). DfES' (2002) vision was hampered by a number of factors: the complexity of the system inherited by New Labour; the clash between policies of collaboration and those around funding, which encouraged competition between institutions and, most damningly, the lack of a clear educational aim for young people - the emphasis appearing to be on the relationship between learning and utility (Ball, 2008; Pring, 2009).

In the second term of New Labour, the privatisation of welfare provision increased despite evidence that the introduction of market forces, competition and privatisation was resulting in greater

inequality in education, society and the economy (Pantazis and Gordon 2000; Ball, 2003, Tomlinson, 2005). With NPM techniques such as performance measures failing to achieve better standards, education was placed at the heart of policy (Ball, 2008) with the aims of achieving economic success and a fair and harmonious society. Education was seen as essential to the creation of the 'flexible and autonomous' (Johnson and Walkerdine, 2004: 114) subjects who would take advantage of the changes wrought by the knowledge economy and impact of technology on international communication (Rose, 1992; Johnson and Walkerdine, 2004). Under New Labour it seemed 'impermissible for the citizen to be anything other than successful' (Bradford and Hey, 2007: 595) with descriptors such as 'Beacon' and 'Leading Edge' defining aims for schools.

The reform and provision of education was required to 'provide a compensating environment' (DES, 1967: 67; Lloyd and Payne, 2003), so that education could give stability to civil society by 'inculcating norms of trust and responsibility' (Olssen *et al*, 2004; 275); but it is how those norms are transmitted – through parents (Lightfoot, 2009; Whelan (ed.) 2007), teachers or the actual syllabus (Crick, 1998), which has caused so much contention in English education. Every Child Matters (TSO, 2003) illustrated some of the ideological tensions faced by New Labour, caught between wanting to give schools more operational independence, whilst requiring co-operation between all children's services. New Labour was still faced with a hybridised approach to training (Clough, 2007), a class-system both driving and colouring the implementation of social and educational policy (Tomlinson, 2005; Ball, 2003; Commission on Social Justice, 1994), and - despite well-supported calls to bridge the academic-vocational divide (RSA, 1995; White *et al.*, 1995; DfEE, 1996) - an on-going lack of enthusiasm for VET among much of society (Tomlinson, 2005), illustrating the long reach of historic influences.

New Labour sought to reform qualifications and ET infrastructure to meet their political aims of transforming the opportunities of young people through education and training – and through

them, society and the economy. In order to achieve this, they tried to work in partnership with stakeholders. They believed employers held the key to the creation of an ET system – or the modernisation of the existing one – that could reflect the needs of a world reliant on technology, knowledge and globalised levels of competition. The resulting triple-track offer available to those in full-time education – academic, schools-based vocational and apprenticeships - was criticised on the basis of ‘status, clarity of purpose and brand recognition’ with employers, and because learners were ‘lost in an apparent jungle of qualifications’ (DfES, 2003; 11).

Increased participation in full-time 14-19 ET was accompanied by a reduction in employment opportunities for the upper end of this age group. Issues with finding high-quality work placements meant that only a minority were catered for by the work based route (Unwin, 2002). These difficulties helped to drive the policy of increased access to HE and the reframing of vocational skills and knowledge as something to be studied through education rather than achieved through work-based training, with a reliance on colleges to expand further to accommodate this (Hodgson and Spours, 2003). New Labour attempted to reshape the qualifications landscape for this age group (Tomlinson, 2004) to offer a greater range of opportunities for learning and achievement, and to address issues arising from factors as diverse as the impact of globalisation and the existence of a core of young people labelled Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET).

The state promoted the now-familiar solution that ‘vocational education including workplace experience’ would be of ‘enormous value’ to those ‘disaffected’ with the traditional curriculum (HCEEC, 1998: 37). Many social partners were consulted and included but the voice of the employer was ‘privileged’ (Hodgson and Spours, 2003:131), positioned at the heart of policy reform, despite their ‘curious absence’ (Keep, 2005: 533) in practice. The intention was to create a coherent 14-19 ET strategy, which would enable learners to pursue academic or vocational pathways of equal esteem in the eyes of stakeholders. The ‘attitude and involvement’ of employers was considered

‘crucial’ to the success of 14-19 plans, with government intending to approach ‘employers’ organisations...and...employers themselves’ (DfES, 2002: 79): the importance to the success of government plans of the ‘new dynamism’ in the employer-education relationship ‘cannot be overstated’ (30).

New Labour pronounced that the ‘artificial divide’ (DfES, 2003: 29) between the worlds of work and education could no longer be afforded in a 21st Century demanding a highly-skilled workforce. The Government agreed ‘with the TUC and the CBI’ about ‘how important employers are to the 14-19 phase’ (29). To fulfil their aim of using ET to transform, and engage young people with, wider society, New Labour attempted to join up wider aspects of policy, calling for ‘collaboration’ with employers (DfES, 2002: 76). Local partnerships between employers, schools and colleges were proposed, focused through initiatives such as Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) and Education Action Zones (DfEE, 1997). The role envisaged for employers was as local partners providing work placements and as a main informer of the shortcomings of the existing system, ensuring the rigour and relevance of vocational provision for young people and their support in communicating this to the learner. The state could not regulate these inputs, simply call for them and hope that some employers would heed this.

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) describes qualifications at nine levels. It was intended to enable a clearer understanding among employers, stakeholders and those holding a qualification of its level and comparability with similar ET provision (Lester, 2011). However, over time equivalences based on time studied, rather than on an understanding of what is needed in terms of content or assessment for successful progression, resulted in some qualifications being devalued and manipulated to fit the framework criteria. This mirrored concerns and findings about the accuracy of claims in relation to higher standards of achievement.

Qualification reform

Both New Labour and the Coalition pursued a familiar avenue in ET policy in England: the use of qualifications and the wider ET infrastructure to try to bring about education, social and economic reform and improvements. Education reforms in England appear to assume that qualifications, as opposed to any other part of the system, such as lack of incentives, poor organisation, institutional arrangements and policy contradictions (Hodgson and Spours, 2008; Paton and Bryant, 2012; Vasagar, 2012; Young, 2012) are to blame for any system shortcomings. Further, that their reform will deliver the necessary outcomes (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1995; Hayward, 2004; Stasz and Wright, 2004; Stanton, 2005) and that it is possible and educationally valuable to assign an outcome to all vocational knowledge and skills. Consequently, discussion is trapped in the 'impoverished language' (Pring, 2005: 84) of qualifications, failing to address either pedagogical or systemic issues (Stanton, 2005). Qualification reform under New Labour took place for a number of oft-competing ideological reasons including concerns from employers that young people were not 'work-ready' on leaving school, that drop-out rates from current routes were too high and that subject matter was too exclusive.

Blair (1994) questioned whether the A-Level system, 'which condemns two-thirds of pupils to vocational courses deemed second class', was compatible with modern needs and argued that learners should be offered 'an opportunity to balance general and vocational study', ending the 'old and unwarranted prejudices against academic and vocational learning' (DfES, 2002: 40). New Labour intended to create learning opportunities with 'higher standards, greater social inclusion and economic relevance' (Pring, 2005: 84), through 'broader A-Levels and upgraded vocational qualifications, underpinned by rigorous standards and key skills' (Labour Party, 1997), setting in motion what was considered by some to be a wilful destruction of an established and successful - if imperfect - system (Woodhead, 2009).

Curriculum 2000 aimed to develop 'new partnerships with employers to support the greater emphasis on work-related learning both within the institution and through work and community placements' (32) and to ensure that vocational programmes had sufficient currency with employers. It resulted in significant changes to A-Levels to enable greater accessibility to - and parity between - subjects, and greater flexibility and breadth in choices of study and qualification (Dearing, 1997; Lawton, 1994), including the introduction of AS levels, modular learning and multiple opportunities to repeat assessments. Vocational GCSEs were also created in some subjects. Employers had relatively little knowledge of the new qualifications and attributed a low value to them, preferring to work with more familiar qualifications such as NVQs and BTEC, and to base recruitment decisions on work experience and interviews (QCA, 2002). Policy assumes the immediate recognition and successful impact of new initiatives when in reality they may take many years to embed and may be replaced before this has had chance to happen.

The Department for Education and Skills sought to 'match employer recruitment practices to their stated needs' (DfES, 2003: 30), again assuming that it is possible for these to be stated and that they are sufficiently common among employers to be of transferable value at least within sectors. Employers tend to support new developments whilst continuing to employ people on the basis of long-established, familiar qualifications. Part of the solution involved addressing issues around the status of vocational provision among employers and other interested parties. However, as Stanton (2005) observes '...there are considerable sectoral differences in the extent to which a vocational qualification can be designed without distortion to meet the needs of both employers and higher education' (15).

Despite the findings of Tomlinson's (2002) inquiry into A-Level standards, his recommendations for a radical alteration of A-Level provision (2004), and public criticism of them (BBC, 2003; Curtis, 2009; The Economist, 2009), A-Levels were kept but reformed (Ball, 2008). This left the increasingly

fraught question of how to address the educational needs, or otherwise occupy the time, of those not suited to academic study – a continuation of the ‘150-year-old-dilemma’ (Tomlinson, 2005: 104). Under New Labour this took the - at times - divergent path of marrying the concepts of social justice with the educational excellence perceived to be the future of a successful knowledge economy (DfES, 2003; Blair, 2005 in Ball, 2008: 12), whilst persuading the voter that any new qualification would be equal in value to the very one the Government refused to abolish (Dearing, 1996; Tomlinson, 2004; LoLS Languages, 2009).

Tomlinson (2004) sought to address the on-going problem of vocational provision for this age group and issues with GCSEs and A-Levels, proposing a framework intended to break down the barriers between academic and vocational provision. Recommendations included that qualifications such as GCSEs, A-levels, and NVQs ‘should cease to be free-standing qualifications in their own right but should evolve to become components of the new diplomas’ (23). These would come about through ‘a managed evolution, not a revolution’ (1), and would contain both existing academic qualifications and newly created sector-based qualifications alongside more generic learning. The resulting qualifications, the 14-19 Diplomas, would be ‘the most sophisticated manifestation of employer engagement to date’ (Laczik and White, 2009: 401).

The 14-19 Diplomas built on the regional partnership model to enable national entitlement requirements and delivery resources to be available to all. However, the push for a schools-based qualification to be ‘all things to all people’ (Smithers and Robinson, 2008: ii) caused confusion and devaluation. The normally central awarding organisation role was reduced to that of one of a number of stakeholders, as SSCs were put in charge of co-ordinating inputs from the entire stakeholder base, emphasising the central role of the employer. The role played by AOs, and the design and purpose of many qualifications, are critical to the issues encountered within the ET system; yet the wisdom of handing parts of this role to yet another fragment of the system was

questionable – and reversed by the subsequent government. As Stanton (2006) starkly suggests, these organisations ‘would have gone bankrupt’ (5) had they made similar errors to the agencies created and tasked by government of doing a ‘better’ job. Assumptions were made that 14-19 Diplomas would fit within mainstream provision with minimal changes to the system and would be accepted as equal to existing academic qualifications in terms of value and progression by parents, learners, HE and employers. Further, that all institutions would be equally capable of resourcing them despite local differences and inequalities, and that full-time, schools-based education could successfully include vocational provision. Also, that the new qualifications would be valued by employers solely because they had contributed to the content (Hodgson and Spours, 2007).

It was not questioned that the 14-19 Diplomas and other ‘alternative’ provision would be publicly funded. Politically, curriculum reforms were not considered to have any direct resource implications reinforcing a lack of willingness to use other elements of the system to drive reform (White, 2004). Yet Tomlinson was also offering a political solution – a unified system of qualifications - to an educational problem – the weakness and divisions of provision for 14-19-year-olds (Young, 2011). Education was still positioned as a ‘service’ in contrast with the marketised language used in and around the Act – education as a ‘product’ bringing it ‘into the marketplace by consumer choice’ (51).

Reflecting the tension between the desire to reform all provision and a fear of changing the flawed but successful A-Level route, the subsequent 14-19 Implementation Plan put the Diplomas firmly back in their place, qualifying a reference to A-Levels with the phrase ‘...which will remain a cornerstone of post-16 learning’ (DfES, 2005: 39). GCSEs in vocational subjects would provide ‘a more applied approach to learning’ and continue to exist as free-standing qualifications. Specialised - subsequently titled simply 14-19 - Diplomas appear separated from existing academic routes, with ‘...a stronger practical component and...larger programmes of study containing other qualifications or units, including, *where* [Diploma Development Partnerships] *DDPs choose (my emphasis)*, GCSEs

and A levels' (DfES, 2005: 37). DDPs were made up of stakeholders and employers, obliged to include a trade union member and were administered by a lead SSC charged with defining and where necessary – in the absence of employer input - writing the qualification content.

The failure of the Government's response (DfES, 2005) to accept Tomlinson's (2004) recommendation to review all relevant qualifications, allowing it to leave aside the academic GCSEs and A-Levels, meant that assumptions were made about the on-going suitability and effectiveness of one part of the system. Further, that the element under review would again have to fit into existing structures and creeds rather than becoming one part of a newly considered and planned whole. Social policy appears to have increased variability between sectors despite attempts to make provision look the same across the board.

Investment in the 14-19 Diplomas perpetuated the strongly contested political position (Woodhead, 2009) that learners are all capable of achieving the same - and that a single qualification can enable this. In less straightened economic times, the development of a parallel stream, such as GNVQ and the Diplomas, has been part of the political answer to systemic and social problems, despite historical evidence that 'ideologically inspired educational reform...does not work' (62), and that compromising the aims of a qualification to make it fit for all usually results in it being accepted by none (Savory *et al*, 2003; Hodgson and Spours, 2008).

Under Gordon Brown, there appeared to be a resurgence in support for Tomlinson's approach (Balls, 2007) with the creation of new Diplomas in the academic subject areas of Science, Humanities and Languages. Yet, whilst hailing them as a potential bridge to the long-standing academic/vocational divide, in his speech at the CBI the Education Secretary signalled a more measured approach to their promotion making clear their position alongside well-established qualifications and the power of market forces saying that they would succeed through the 'demands of young people, schools and

colleges' (Balls, 2007). Following £114 million development costs (Paton, 2009) the 14-19 Diplomas fulfilled their 'predictable demise' (Ainley and Allen, 2010: 40), losing their 'national entitlement' status under the Coalition, although both the Construction and Engineering sectors have modified and continue to endorse elements of their respective qualifications.

Apprenticeships acquired a significance for this research mainly in relation to Coalition policy, but it is worth setting the scene here, as they were also the target of policy reform under New Labour. Apprenticeships, which had suffered from a reputation for poor pay and conditions, required a stronger relationship between employers and apprentices to be successful (DfES, 2002), with an apprenticeship place becoming an entitlement for 16-17-year-olds with five passes at GCSE - including Mathematics and English - qualifications usually taken at 16 in England by those in full-time ET. An employer-led Modern Apprenticeship (MA) task force increased opportunities for young people and ensured that the design and content of the qualifications met the needs of both learners and employers. Even outside full-time provision, there was an assumption that the modification of apprenticeships 'as and when [the Government] sees fit' (Fuller and Unwin, 2003: 8), rather than on the basis of sound LMI, could produce valuable learning and certification. Parallels exist between the 'patchy' (7) involvement of employers in the development of MA frameworks in those sectors with less of a tradition in the provision of apprenticeships (Fuller and Unwin, 2003) and the lack of employer input to many of the 14 -19 Diplomas. Low and stagnant completion rates caused the Apprenticeship Task Force (2005) to question how much longer such provision could be sold to young people and their parents as a high-value, alternative route.

Policy drivers

Policy reform was beset with instances of contradiction and tension, adding to the difficulty of one set of reforms having multiple aims. The Government sought to minimise the amount of additional

work to be undertaken by employers whilst '*ensuring that young people are properly safeguarded*' (my emphasis, DfES, 2002: 76). This research will show the differing impact of those few words on employer attitudes towards the provision of opportunities for young people in terms of work experience and even apprenticeship placements. Elsewhere, the narrative of equal opportunity appeared to generate as many issues as access. If particular knowledge or skills identified by an employer as essential to the value of the qualification could be rejected on the grounds that it excluded some people from accessing the qualification, the justification for an employer-defined curriculum may be called into question. It becomes not what is needed but what can be delivered to cost and be equally accessible to all, even if this skews the purpose and outcomes of what is being learned.

It is difficult to critique the examinations system in compulsory education under New Labour without denigrating the achievements of young people who did no more than they were asked by the system. Yet it is equally difficult to wholly deny findings such as those reported by Coe (2013), which argue that any improvements in standards and achievement claimed during this time were largely illusory. Whilst there was obvious and extensive investment in ET resources under New Labour, even this seemed insufficient to explain the contradictory results of increased numbers of young people achieving the highest possible grades and a rapid fall down the PISA international league tables (OECD, 2012). The causes of grade inflation were complex and not simply down to easier assessments or increasingly excellent teaching or improved intelligence, although debate in the media was gradually reduced to the simplistic: more learners achieving higher grades signified easier to achieve qualifications. None of this helped to establish better progression into employment. Concerns about standards of academic achievement in England grew throughout the administration and were hotly debated both before (Daily Mail, 2008; Institute of Directors, 2008) and after the Coalition came to power, with the reputation of GCSEs having 'collapsed' and been 'devalued' (Daily Mail, 2013; Daily Telegraph, 2013), the extent of grade inflation described as 'jaw-dropping', and any

remaining myths about the prowess of the English system finally dispelled under the Coalition (Catchside, 2012).

The performance measures attached to ET policy drove questionable behaviours among all stakeholders. League tables were introduced in 1992 to record the percentage of learners to have achieved five 'good' passes, that is, graded A-C (A*-C from 1994), in any subject at GCSE. League tables ranked schools by their achievement of five 'good' passes at GCSE and drove schools to behave in the interests of exam results rather than educational outcomes, something noted by QCA as early as 2002 (Wolf, 2011), and AOs to make their syllabuses 'more accessible', there being 'massive pressure on the boards to reduce their standards' (Mansell, 2009) to enable them to compete for schools' business. Critics view performance measures and the assessment of personal performance as simplistic tools. They argue that reform is hampered by a lack of trust in the professionalism of teachers, and believe that calls to raise standards within unrealistic timeframes are governed solely by political motives, such as the electoral cycle, rather than educational ones (Bates, 2012). The imposition of business practices assumes that all children – and therefore teachers and schools – are starting at a similar level of ability and achievement and does not account for the well-documented individual needs of children, with the need for additional time or other pressures that these bring to bear. Until policy and the system are able to account for these, objections to performance related pay, for example, are likely to remain in schools which have a less academic intake than others (Paton, 2014).

Evidence suggests that New Labour was sincere in its efforts to increase retention and provide alternative study routes for the high numbers of young people choosing to leave full-time education at the earliest opportunity (Tomlinson, 2004). However, A-Levels continued to be the entry standard of choice for many pre-1992 universities. The combination of high youth unemployment, higher grades and increased access to HE – and the resulting glut of graduates - meant that employers

were able to demand increasing levels of qualification on entry into employment. The issue was exacerbated by a number of schools choosing to pursue a more traditional curriculum even to the extent of rejecting A-Levels in favour of alternative qualifications seen as more academically demanding such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) or the Cambridge Pre-U (CIE, 2013). Thus an existing gap between the achievement rates of some schools widened further despite considerable investment in infrastructure and resources.

The concept of skill

A key driver of education policy and practice under New Labour was 'to secure the basics' (DCSF, 2008: 13) through the route of formal certification. Education and economic policies moved ever closer, at least in rhetoric, to emphasise the collective good (Ball, 2008; Keep, 2011), reflecting the apparent ends of neoliberal policies – although both appear to result in many individuals being worse off. New Labour reforms to qualifications often clashed, hampered by their own attempts to balance multiple aims – social, economic and educational reform – within a 'single' tool, which could not hope to address all the underlying issues. The diversity of meaning links back to issues arising from the multiple interpretations of VET: defining what constitutes a skill is challenging, as is the meaningful teaching and assessment of them in a way that confers a similar level of esteem as technical skill.

It is possible to see that, when policy-makers are attempting to address the skills shortage, they may be talking about very different skills from each other and fellow stakeholders, and that a single qualification – often the solution mooted in England – may fail to address all the needs identified. This may result in qualifications which either attempt to address to diverse a skills portfolio, or which are unable to address the specific 'skills' needs of those who assume an understanding of 'skill'. Maths and English were considered 'basic' and 'crucial to success in life and work' (DfES, 2005: 2).

The Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills Framework captured skills considered to be 'essential to success in learning, life and work' (QCA, undated), whilst referring to English, ICT and Mathematics as 'functional' skills. VET also continued to address technical skills. The implication for qualifications, and those using them either as learners, developers or recruiters, was confusion.

The committee of the Board of Education reported in 1906 that employers sought mainly moral qualities from the products of higher elementary schools: they should 'possess habits of discipline, ready obedience, self-help, and pride in good work for its own sake' (Simon 1965: 265, in Richardson and Wiborrg, 2010: 4). Demonstrating the lack of movement in the debate around the purpose of education, Payne (2000) observed that attempts to identify a set of transferable 'skills' across the ET spectrum for all to learn, resulted in the meaning of 'skill' broadening until it was indistinguishable from 'an attempt to construct a particular work-subject replete with certain desirable values, attitudes, behaviours and dispositions (356). This differed from earlier clear associations with craft workers and technologists (Ainley 1993, Keep and Mayhew 1999) and even with a specific culture (Sennet, 2008).

The relationship between employee 'skills' and the success of an individual business remains disjointed. Whilst there is evidence that businesses choosing to pursue higher value-added product markets come under pressure to upskill their workforce, there is still a tendency to deskill the workforce or to minimise the number of highly skilled workers needed to execute the strategy, (Sung et al, 2009).

Tomlinson's (2004) use of the word 'skilled' retains notions of occupational skill, whilst Brockmann et al (2008) observe that other European countries have a broader and more holistic concept of skill than in England. In England, employers have a very narrow conception of 'skill' relating to a job role rather than an occupation. The emphasis on knowledge acquisition is far smaller than in other

European systems and employer defined qualifications such as NVQs reflect the desire of those contributing to their definition to maintain a low- or narrowly-skilled workforce, (Brockmann, 2008; Sung et al, 2009). Employers appear to have been instrumental in both narrowing the conception of vocational qualifications whilst rejecting the resulting outcomes as being too narrowly focused on skills, (Lum, 2015).

Employers have different notions of skill, indicating the difficulties faced in trying to define a curriculum appropriate to a sector or a context in which to acquire the 'Key Skills', upon which the majority of employers from even one sector would agree and calling into question their role as a 'unifying device' (Payne, 2000: 361). New Labour - and later the Coalition – were accused of creating ET policy that ignored the background and context that has shaped the system in England, devaluing existing good practice and discounting theoretical perspectives, leading to an over-reliance on 'superficial, skills-based approaches' (Coffield, 2012; Bates, 2012: 95).

Key Skills were intended to counter apparent employer concerns that whilst young people may have many qualifications on paper, they were not able to function appropriately in the workplace. These 'transferable' skills were becoming critical to success in a global, knowledge-based economy, under which new working models, enabled by technology, required the ability to work innovatively in a number of contexts, some virtual (Guile, 2002). Significantly, employers look for a wide range of skills, attributes and attitudes, which cannot wholly be represented by qualifications, rendering the relationship between employers and formal certification weak in some cases (Pring *et al.*, 2009). 'Skills' encompass employability, functional, key and other 'soft' skills (Tomlinson, 2004; Yeomans, 2002; O'Connor, 1997) but it is difficult to develop such generic skills even through work experience (Guile, 2002) and the changing meaning of 'skill' has the potential to be confusing and devaluing (Payne, 2000). This research found that apprenticeship frameworks and individual qualifications

limited in subject matter by the funding to which they are tied, exacerbate issues linked to specific industry skills needs.

The DfEE (1998) identified numerous categories of skill: basic, employability, technical, management and key. The Moser Report (1999) made the critical link between poor literacy and numeracy and wider social issues existing when New Labour came to power. The resolution of educational issues at the most basic level supported the party aim of achieving social justice as well as educational excellence. One fifth of adults were found to be functionally illiterate. Ambitious targets were set with the aim of 90-95 per cent of functional literacy and numeracy among 19-year-olds by 2010: more than five times the number of people achieving the desired levels to date would need to be successful to meet these. There was an assumption that these were the skills valued by employers (Henry, 2001; Unwin *et al*, 2000), although research elsewhere showed that this may not actually have been the case (QCA, 2000). The limited amount of funded learning taking place on employer premises - a location considered essential to effective skills development (Billett, 2004; Hodgson and Spours, 2008) – called into question whether employers would value or use the outcomes the Government was so keen to measure.

The language of the Moser report (1999) is that of entitlement and personal choice rather than obligation. Emphasis is placed on the transferability of skills, a characteristic which would gain in importance in an increasingly flexible labour market. Opportunities to be assessed on ability and need would be available to the unemployed, but ‘...whether they decide to participate is of course up to them’ (<http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/mosergroup/>). Such language and ‘choice’ belies later New Labour education policy which steered the engagement of individuals with society through work and education. The concept of IT as a basic skill would later become important not only in employment terms but as the means to access government services through technology. Employers were made responsible for ensuring that the basic skills’ needs of their employees were assessed

and addressed as necessary and unions were granted a role, presumably in part to ensure that no worker was penalised for a discovered lack of skills.

Any government policy based on assumptions that business organisations exist primarily or even in part to develop skills, rather than make a profit, is necessarily flawed, as is the mantra that upskilling is critical to the competitive success of all employers as well as the wider economy (Gleeson and Keep, 2004; Young, 2011). This attitude also partly explains the on-going low-skills - and low-participation - equilibria (Finegold and Soskice, 1990), and the challenges faced in engaging employers with a system which may reflect the needs of government, state, society and even the national economy, but not necessarily those of the individual organisation. This is increasingly the case in a globalised business world.

Figure 3 shows some of the numerous interpretations of the word 'skill' used in ET and the workplace and how they relate to each other, serving also to illustrate the challenge of defining the term. It shows 'hard' skills, which can be specifically taught and 'soft' skills, which might be considered be part of a person's character to be enhanced through workplace experience. Hard and soft skills are linked and interchangeable with 'key' and 'basic' skills.

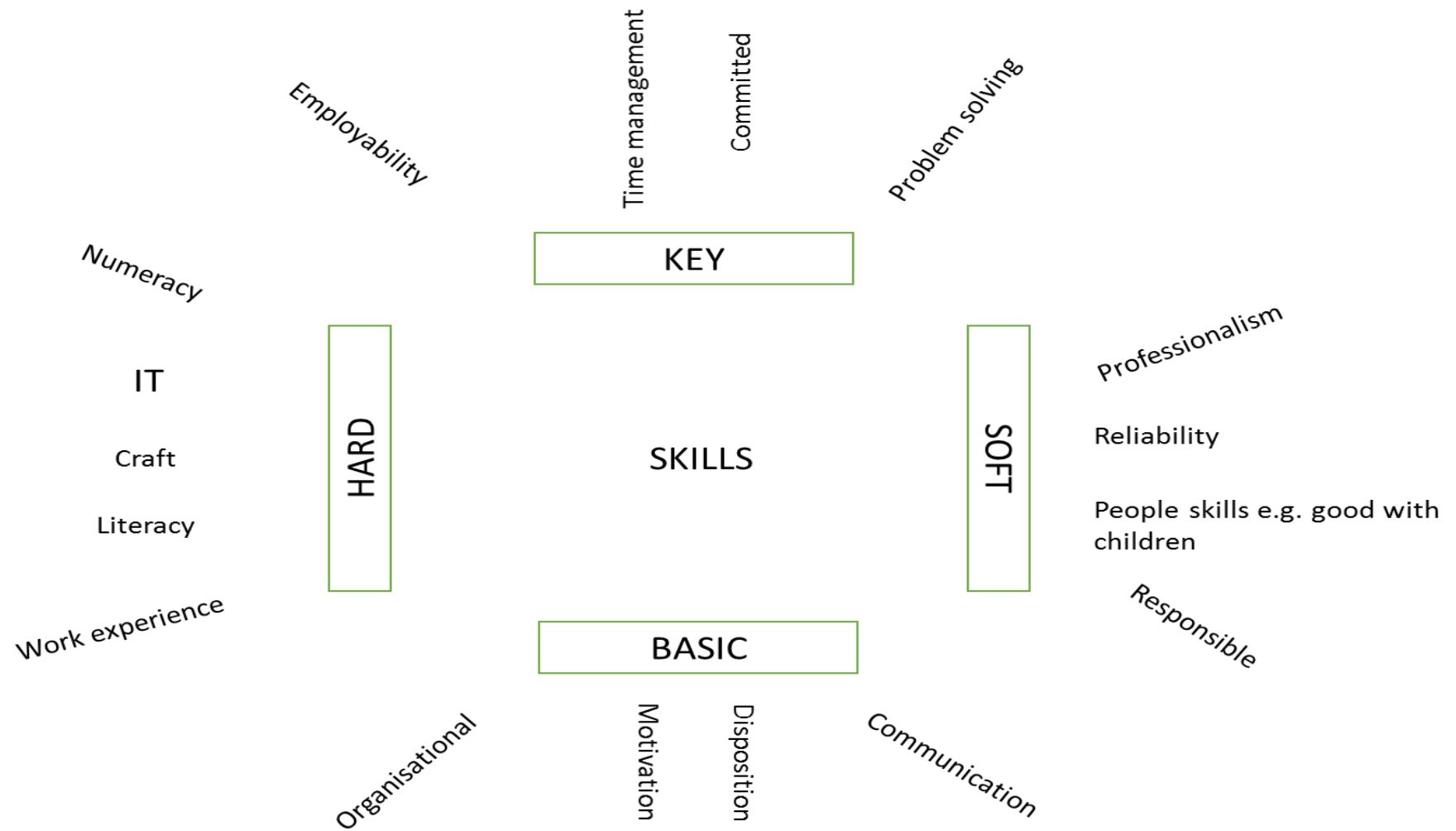


Figure 3: Skills

Infrastructure

The schools' infrastructure is another area over which government has sufficient control to make changes. Under New Labour, the related employer role was that of employer-investor, furnishing resources and funds under the terms of a Private Finance Initiative (PFI). Building Schools for the Future (BSF) (2003) was intended to provide sufficient funds – more than £50 billion - to renew or refurbish the entire secondary schools' infrastructure in a rolling programme over 10-15 years. It aimed to transform both school buildings and the learning experience, moving away in part from traditional classroom-based teaching, and was reliant for successful delivery on investment from the private sector in partnership with local councils and the school itself. There were many success stories but in spite of these there was criticism about the use of private funds to deliver one of the most universal public services, and concerns about the ability of schools to maintain and repurpose buildings when control lay elsewhere and profit was a motive for investment.

PFI contracts were too heavily weighted in favour of the investor, resulting in greater profit for the business, a long-term financial draw on local council funds, sometimes poorer quality buildings and a lack of accountability among the parties involved. Yet, if private sector investment is to remain a cornerstone of any government funding model, the state will need to answer satisfactorily the question posed by Stanfield (2012), as to whether the country is open for business or whether education is to remain 'one of the least attractive service sectors in the UK for private investment and entrepreneurial talent' (1).

Under New Labour, City Academies were intended to bring education reform much closer to the business agenda (Ball, 2007 in Bates, 2012: 94). This apparent freedom from local control may also be viewed as a way to centrally control resources (Campbell, 1987). Academies were intended to replace failing schools and to provide investment in education for the most disadvantaged children

in the country, reflecting the party's early intentions to make a social as well as economic impact with education and training. *Choice and Diversity* (DfE, 1992) required employers to be sponsors, to set up and run schools through a private company with charitable status, and to contribute around one fifth of capital costs. In reality, capital investment, even where promised, proved difficult to realise.

A proliferation of new types of ET institution emerged under New Labour and later the Coalition, illustrating the extent of the move away from comprehensive schooling towards schools with a distinct purpose or ethos, often accompanied by a significant investment strategy. Despite welcome modernisation of buildings and equipment, and changes to teaching methods, assessment, curriculum and qualifications, the purpose of education and training for those in full-time ET and the type of qualifications valued by the public and employers remained stubbornly static.

Academies are often held to have higher education standards than alternative models, although there is little evidence to support this claim. It is easy to attribute such improvements to 'greater autonomy' and to claim other consequences, such as improved teaching and learning, on the basis of apparently improved results. Supporters of Academies claim they produce better results and even boost the performance of neighbouring schools (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2014), or at the very least that they have no negative effects on achievement (House of Commons, 2014). However, the relative freedom granted to such schools enabled them to change both their intake and their examination offer - to favour the middle-classes whose children had often been better supported outside school (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2007; Hatcher, 2011). Ironically, some Academies viewed employers as a source of money rather than a partner in education and training (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2007), resulting in employer disengagement. Some schools became

distinguished by subject specialisms, such as Languages or Business, and rarely now 'comprehensive'.

New Labour used elements of the IT system to bring about wider societal and economic reform. Employers were a critical partner to the shaping and funding of these reforms, but the unregulated nature of their role meant that results were uneven at best. New Labour involved employers at many levels in policy, from detailed curriculum input to large scale sponsorship. Qualification reform experienced tensions between the desire to raise achievement for all (DfES, 2003), the maintenance of standards, and entrenched beliefs about the purpose and content of learning, even among those tasked with carrying out the reforms. Further tensions were evident in relation to infrastructure reforms. New Labour was reliant on business to finance educational improvements for all young people, especially the most deprived. The lack of regulatory control over this key partner, and the impact of unfavourable contracts with private companies on the provision of what were still public services, continue to make their impact known.

New Labour created a vision for society and the economy at the heart of which was education and training. They invested enormous sums of money in improving the infrastructure, creating physical schools, educational models and school-partnerships intended to afford learners previously disadvantaged by their socio-economic background or location the opportunities enjoyed by some of their peers. The success of much of the system was predicated on comprehensive employer involvement, either in the creation and support of new qualifications or investment of private capital in the schools of the future. This involvement was subject to market forces, in particular the latter, and, as with so much ET policy, clashes between intention and actual outcome often resulted in disappointing results. This did not prevent the incoming Coalition from continuing aspects of New Labour policy, whilst giving them a largely Conservative emphasis.

The Coalition

ET policy proved to be as much of a priority for the Coalition as for New Labour, but following the election of the former there was an immediate shift in emphasis away from vocational provision in schools towards a strengthened academic track and calls to grow the numbers of Apprenticeships. High youth unemployment was a major factor for both administrations in a society where 'education no longer simply marked people's social status but increasingly determined it' (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2014: Loc 947). Coalition reforms to full-time 14-19 ET were important as they affected the way in which employers engaged with this phase. Although debates about the purpose of education and training may have taken on a different character under the Coalition, what did not change was the need to understand the purpose and effectiveness of a role for employers within it. For four years Coalition policy offered a single – if at times controversial - vision provided by the same Secretary of State for Education, the Conservative Michael Gove. For this reason the Chapter will often refer to 'Gove' and 'the Conservatives' rather than the Coalition since ET policy was overwhelmingly Conservative rather than Liberal Democratic in nature. Where this is not the case it will be made clear.

Governance

The Coalition interpreted and applied neoliberalism differently from New Labour – though with less decentralisation than intention or perception may suggest. Governance structures saw the public sector expand rapidly under New Labour though, according to the Office of National Statistics, productivity in the private sector rose by 14 per cent between 1999 and 2013 yet it fell in the public sector by 1 per cent between 1999 and 2010. Whilst private business expansion is usually accompanied by economies of scale, state expansion seems to be accompanied by increased complexity, regulation and inefficiency. The state is not kept in check by the disciplines that apply to the private sector, namely loss of customers or the threat of bankruptcy. Due to the global financial

crisis, government had to reduce public spending, choosing to pursue an economic policy of austerity to achieve this and to meet the challenges of the shifts in the global availability of credit and funds for investment. It reduced the size of the state with a vision to increase the number of jobs provided by the private sector. Economic recovery has been patchy across England, with London proving an apparently successful economic exception to the rule.

Whether this ‘bonfire of the quangos’ (The Guardian, 2010; The Independent, 2012) was a success is debatable (Tonkiss and Dommett, 2013). Many intermediary agencies remained, with all the implications for governance that accompany them, including a lack of a clear business case for the existence of some organisations, and blurred lines of responsibility. Also, the need to win contracts to remain solvent - even if the organisation itself did not have the experience or knowledge of how to carry out a role - and initiatives were introduced without thought to the legislative or practical clashes that might ensue, since there was often no direct working relationship with the Departments creating and implementing policy. The motivation behind the apparent ‘bonfire’ was as political as it was financial (Hodges, 2014), enabling as it did the incoming government to regain influence through changes to personnel and remit as well as ostensibly demonstrating to voters that the Government was able to steer the country through the worst economic crisis for decades. An early victim was the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA), with its previous regulatory duties already passed to the newly-formed Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), signalling a move away from centralised control of some aspects of the curriculum and prevailing practices in relation to the creation, content and control of curricula, qualifications and standards. Whilst the reduction in jobs at Local Authority (LA) level might be viewed as a positive result in relation to the Coalition promise to cut public spending (HM Treasury, 2010), the loss of these roles – the ‘glue in the system’ (Woods, 2014: 2) - arguably led to the

decimation of knowledge and experience in LAs, and a lack of accountability in terms of the day to day running of schools at a local level (APPG, 2011).

In reducing the state and announcing welfare cuts, the Coalition sought to pursue a purer neoliberalism (Hall, 2012; Wiggan, 2012). However, the 'collectivist liberal' model with public responsibility and accountability for social problems, represented by the 'Big Society', proved challenging to implement under conditions of austerity (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012). The narrative of empowerment through individual choice masks a shift towards individual rather than state responsibility for social problems through the 'logics of the market, responsibilisation and self-esteem' (Wright, 2012: 280). There are limited opportunities for 'participation in dialogue and social integration' under neoliberalism: society divides and becomes more self-interested (Bates, 2012). Marketisation requires social policy, not only to combat the negative effects of markets, but also to support the market with things it cannot provide for itself. Crouch (2014) observes, however, that marketization and social policy are usually seen as opposed projects.

Some Coalition reforms initially faced relatively little opposition as many of them could be characterised as 'non-ideological' such as the proposed sharing of facilities between councils (Local Government Group, 2011). There is an obvious pattern to some state domination of the economy in areas that are more resistant to productivity improvements, such as health and education. Efficiencies are possible but unrealistic performance measures, which do not take into account the full circumstances of a situation, will eventually see a decline in quality. The continued 'ring-fencing' of the NHS budget was criticised in the face of 'radical' reforms to education which allow institutions to appoint and manage their own staff, for example (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2014). Yet it might also be true to say that to society as a whole, rather than government, the principle of having some universal public goods appears to be as valuable as the tangible resources invested.

The issue is not whether the public or private ownership of strategic national assets is more appropriate, rather concerns about the impact on investment in training as a result of the unregulated growth in foreign ownership of England-based businesses. The difficulties in collecting the taxes from these corporations (BBC, 2012) has a direct impact on the provision of training and the funding of any public service more generally. Yet as Micklethwaite and Wooldridge argue, rules should also prevent ‘crony capitalism’ (Loc 3189) where the state is under the control of ‘countless thousands of client groups’ (Loc 3115). In relation to ET policy, ‘client groups’ might include those wishing to set up a Free School, for example, or those who sit on the board of quangos such as UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) board or contribute to a Diploma Development Partnerships (DDP), and whose companies benefit from publicly funded contracts. It is questionable how representative of an industry the input of a small number of companies benefitting from public money and personal profile is, yet such ‘vested interests will always be able to frustrate the pragmatic reformers if these continue to hold the moral high ground’ (Loc 2988). This research illustrates both how powerful and how contradictory these organisations can be.

In its first year, the Coalition introduced fees for University students. This was seen as a way to reduce the number of young people pursuing degree courses considered to be of little value in the jobs market, cut public spending, and control immigration. The policy signalled a clean break with that of the previous government, which had encouraged as many young people as possible to pursue Higher Education (HE): the new aim was apparently to discourage many from doing so. In relation to full-time 14-19 ET, it was one of a number of changes in emphasis in terms of provision and progression at a time when the state of the job market meant that fewer young people were able to access graduate-level jobs, or to count on any stable employment. Coalition reforms combined with high youth unemployment reduced opportunities for progression for young people,

but arguably resulted in some improvement in the quality of degree-level courses as market forces demanded proof of their usefulness in relation to employment.

According to a report by the UKCES (2011) into employer perspectives on tackling youth unemployment, the characteristics of this had evolved over the previous decade. In addition to credentialism, not only did young people face limited job opportunities, but the nature of those had changed. Also, not only the poorly skilled found it difficult to secure employment; graduates also struggled to find employment of a level normally associated with that level of qualification. Instead, under-employment and temporary contracts are common meaning that social gains often associated with a graduate job such as the ability to buy or even rent a home, for example, are often not an option. Whilst more young people are entering further and higher education, there are also simply fewer jobs available for them.

In the Construction sector, the relationship between the 'employer' – that is, the overall provider of the work in terms of a 'site' – and that of the sub-contractor, and their sub-contracted labour force may be so distant as to be meaningless. The responsibility of a large employer towards those employed on site may extend to little more than ensuring that they can safely work there and are qualified to do so – and even those things will be assured by the third party sub-contractor. In terms of skills training or lasting job opportunities, that is in the purview of the sub-contractor, which may equally feel little obligation beyond supplying the immediate work opportunity.

At first, application numbers to university apparently fell 10 per cent in England (UCAS, 2012; Harrison, 2012), but quickly recovered (Segdhi, 2013). The rise in undergraduate numbers is considered a contributing factor to the decline in technical skills since those who might have pursued short, technical courses were now funnelled into four-year Bachelor degrees, some of

questionable worth. As the Member of Parliament Dominic Raab stated more prosaically, New Labour policies to increase access to HE 'led to Mickey Mouse courses at mediocre institutions' (Hansard, 2013). The picture remains complex even when measures are taken to level the playing-field: criticisms of apparent exclusivity must be balanced with the tangible negative effects of credentialism caused by higher numbers of graduates (Resnick, 1987). As it became clear that many graduates would never repay their loan, university became in part an entitlement to be paid for by the taxpayer rather than the choice and responsibility of the young person pursuing the degree. This research found evidence that some employers believe that apprentices should pay for their own training, making the case for free HE more questionable still.

Policy and qualification reform in full-time 14-19 ET

Coalition reform initially focused on raising academic standards and how vocational provision might be improved, what the role of employers could be in relation to ET and how arrangements for developing qualifications might look in the future, 'including who bears the cost' (Gove, 2010). Wolf (2011) repositioned education as being for the good of the individual as well as the economy, declaring that no learner should be steered onto a course – academic or vocational – that is 'dead-end' (8). Deep-rooted concerns that VET in England is not just thought of as being for those who are not academically able but for those who were in general lacking ability are again addressed, though with limited impact (Wolf, 2015). The report recommended a reduction in the number of vocational qualifications available at Key Stage 4 – ages 14-16 - and a review of flexibility, progression and regulation and wider programmes for those aged 16-18 (Key Stage 5). An extension to the school-leaving age allowed young people to pursue an apprenticeship post-16 or a part-time course of accredited learning if they are employed or volunteer for more than 20 hours per week, providing opportunities for employer involvement.

Qualification reform was once again put forward as the answer to many system failures, reinforcing assumptions that such tinkering would improve system effectiveness, resolve issues around international competitiveness and result in more effective employer involvement. A more traditional academic curriculum was envisaged and a different purpose for vocational qualifications. These were interpreted more 'traditionally' as the basis of a trade or stepping stone to progression in a technical subject rather than an 'alternative' route for the less able or a way to develop future citizens - except in the broad sense pursued in Germany (Wolf, 2011) - resulting in a different role for employers in full-time 14-19 ET. A-Levels were also in Gove's sights and government called very early on for HE support (Benn, 2012; Garner, 2012) in the determination of content and progression for the academic route, despite private businesses being mooted as the answer to reducing unemployment. This suggested that employers - at least those with a voice, which tend to be larger employers - might be willing to let HE define content in terms of what is required to progress onto a degree course, rather than having specific requirements of their own.

Gove's approach to the academic curriculum was grounded in comparisons made with what is taught in other European countries. Wolf (2011) argued that, in Germany, employers are not interested in the training provided in schools, but the general educational level of the young people available to them: they want to do the work-related training themselves. In Austria, the social partnership model keeps the balance between employers wanting more organisation-specific skills and the desire for transferability among trainees (Schweighofer 2013). Both the involvement of employers and striking the right balance of interests are considered key to the success of the system. Around 40 per cent of young people in Austria attend VET schools and they are considered to be a great success, preparing young people for work but also for progression to HE.

Finegold and Soskice (1990) had already noted that ‘there is some agreement that successful retraining depends on a high level of general education and also on previous vocational training’ (38). Even in countries with a reputation for high-quality vocational provision the majority of training is carried out post-Key Stage 4. Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany and France have a stable curriculum to the age of sixteen: ‘transferable’ skills and competencies such as problem solving and teamwork are not singled out to be delivered apparently ‘context free’. It is believed that a knowledge base of this kind provides a common cultural foundation for all citizens. Where alternative, vocationally-based provision has been trialled it has been dropped, as neither learner nor parent welcomed this difference (Wolf, 2011).

Wolf (2011) failed to acknowledge the difference in the German system between the high-quality, often three-year Apprenticeship programmes and the ‘soft’ provision of a *Hauptschule*, which fulfils a similar purpose to the ‘alternative’ provision in England, dismissed as ‘dead-end’ in her own report. Whilst the dual system may have provided a distinct occupational and social identity for the lower classes in Germany, (Brockmann et al, 2008) , children in the three-tier system in some German states are judged at the age of nine on their capability to complete the A-Level equivalent - *Abitur* - and are streamed into senior school at this age, when children in England are still pursuing a primary curriculum. It is not possible to ‘improve’ and switch streams: their fate is largely determined after only three years of schooling.

Critics of Gove’s proposed return to linear teaching and examination of a subject accuse him of class bias in wanting all young people, whatever their ability, to be subject to a ‘liberal’ education. Young (2011) argues that whilst ‘the social origins of subjects do not preclude their universalising educational potential’ (276), Gove’s universalistic principle that a common curriculum treats all subjects equally is marred by the reality of state provision in a capitalist society, which sees an

unequal distribution of access to that knowledge, since better qualified teachers will normally be drawn to better-performing schools.

Young (2011) criticised Gove's interpretation of 'trade' curricula as narrow and outdated, and his vision of technical skills defined and taught as 'practical activities in some kind of intellectual isolation' as 'fantasy' (272). Gove's arguments for a defined vocational curriculum were doomed to failure as many 'trades' are subject to rapid technological advances requiring adaptive knowledge. These trades include hair, beauty and photography, which satisfy consumption demands but do not stimulate production, whereas the latter is what is needed for jobs (Young, 2011). The 157 group – a consortium of the UK's largest FE colleges - claims a common consensus on 'the critical link between educational performance and economic growth' (Sedgemoor, 2014, news.tes.co.uk), despite counter claims that there is no evidence of a causal relationship between the provision of technical education and economic growth, boosting the argument for a common curriculum to 16 (Resnick, 1987). Where this appears to be the case, for example in Asia, VET has responded to demand – not been used to stimulate – as in England (Young, 2011). An extensive report into the future of A-Levels revealed that employers value practical assessment for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects and that young people lack 'practical, investigative and analytical skills' (Ofqual, 2014: 36), concerns shared by HE. The tension between theoretical knowledge and practical application is as much a product of the class system in England as it is of any occupational need or technical impact, (Lum, 2015).

The removal of Mathematics and Sciences from league tables under New Labour diminished achievement rates in them, eventually leading to a shortage of teachers qualified in those subjects (Young, 2011). Many young people have come through that system without the knowledge base to enable them to become future teachers of these subjects. Both the funding system and compliance

were ‘pushing in the wrong direction’ (Gove, 2011: 4). The static state of social mobility and the lack of Maths and English qualifications, for example, which led to the exclusion of many children from a number of potential progression routes, appears to support these concerns. Gove observed that ET policy and its implementation ‘actively discourages’ 16-19-year-olds from continuing with Maths and English (Wolf, 2011: 5) - a progression requirement for many employment and HE opportunities and therefore a significant barrier to future achievement. Others observed that If these de facto measures of standards [league tables] were used, they would provide perverse indicators to boards to reduce the standards they set (Cresswell in Mansell, 2009).

Both Ofqual and the AOs strenuously denied such accusations but the change in government - and in Ofqual leadership - drove a change in view (Shepherd, 2012). A rationalisation of the National Curriculum was proposed with GCSE assessment to occur ‘typically’ ‘only at the end of the course’ (49). This was intended to combat the trend of learners being entered for examinations multiple times during Key Stage 4. This resulted in far fewer 15-year-olds being entered for the examinations with only the most able taking them at this age (Ofsted, 2014). The number of 16-year-olds entered remained relatively stable and in line with expectation. Coalition reforms drove changes to the entry and achievement profile: the rules of the game and patterns of behaviour had altered.

Since employers seem to have suffered one of the biggest impacts from this cycle of behaviour, it should be no surprise that some of them appear reluctant to play a part in it. A recent report from the CBI (2014) found that only 3 per cent of employers they approached were involved in the process of developing the new Tech-levels, which will lead to a TechBacc certificate for 16-19-year-olds, recognising achievement in a high-quality vocational qualification equivalent to an A-Level, a maths course and an extended project. Only 9 per cent of employers considered themselves aware of this initiative. Despite the reforms, Ofsted (2014) remains concerned that providers are still not

offering programmes that meet the requirements for 16-19-year-olds in terms of qualification and progression.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships were an important topic for employers in this research. Whilst reforms and a more central position for the qualifications were cautiously welcomed, policy remained flawed.

Wolf(2011) reflected on apprenticeships and their suitability together with a widening of responsibility for their definition and management away from the with Sector Skills Councils and their focus on current needs, towards potential future needs. Apprenticeship frameworks were criticised for their narrowness even as employers were exhorted to offer them in increasing number (www.conservatives.com, universities and Skills, 2012; Richard, 2012; www.apprenticeships.org.uk, 2012), as ‘...the one form of vocational training visible to the electorate’ (Keep and James, 2011). However, in the supply-led structure of VET in England, these came in many guises, and did not necessarily result in medium- or long-term employment, or financial gain. Quality has been criticised for a number of years (Nuffield 14-19 Review, 2008) and at times responsibility apparently abdicated altogether (Dolphin and Lanning (Eds), 2011; Guardian, 4th June 2012; BBC, 2012). Cameron (2012) wanted to make them the ‘gold standard’ for young people, using language normally reserved for A-Levels, emphasising the vision for a true vocational alternative to traditional routes.

Neither vocal New Labour nor Coalition support for the importance of apprenticeships to future economic success has significantly altered the ‘local’ nature of planning for apprentice numbers. Employers continue to link apprenticeship numbers to individual organisational need rather than political demands for a manifold increase. In the rush to see results, apprenticeship places were demanded in quantity by the Coalition rather than in terms of quality and progression, leading to the view that they were to be done ‘on the cheap’ to get numbers up, causing considerable reputational

damage to the qualifications in the early months of the new government. This seems to have receded to be replaced by an enthusiastic embracing of apprenticeships by many firms that would previously have recruited more graduates, such as Golman Sachs and Pricewaterhousecoopers (Evening Standard, 2013). Concerns remain both about the funding of apprenticeships, with funding models continuing to exclude smaller employers, and a lack of regulation to enforce minimum standards among those employers who take on an apprentice, through financial penalties or other forms of regulation. (Dolphin, 2014). Despite a significant rise in both take up and places offered, as recently as 2010 only 8 per cent of employers were involved with this route (London School of Economics, 2010). In England 74,000 applicants were unable to find apprenticeship places in 2009. The youth labour market continues to be unregulated with few sectors demanding a 'licence to practise', which some believe might help to raise the status of vocational education, if coupled with higher quality apprenticeship placements (Hodgson and Spours, 2008).

With only 10 per cent of employers delivering apprenticeships and 90 per cent recruited and delivered by TPs, concerns have been raised that SMEs will become disenfranchised and that there will be an 80 per cent drop in provision. The policy seems to be based on the assumption that employers will simply come forward or that they will be recruited by the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) or similar body, although in fact no statistics are kept on how productive either of these options is (Hyde, 2014). Proposals to limit the availability of apprenticeship funding to those aged 23 or below (Dolphin, 2014) would bring apprentices more in line with post-graduates who are expected to fund further degrees independently.

Whilst on one level this is to be welcomed, the motives behind this apparent move away from graduate recruitment deserve consideration. These businesses all have close relationships with the Government, providing an illustration of why the motive behind certain provision is not entirely

altruistic or even based on an ET - related business case. However, whilst it would be easy to dismiss the offering of apprenticeship places rather than graduate schemes as a gimmick or a cheaper way to employ high-quality personnel – and these points may even be true - the practice has also had a positive impact on the perception of who can be an apprentice (Evening Standard, 2013), something this research will show is needed among employers.

Infrastructure

Under the Coalition, the academy model moved from ‘take-over’ to ‘start-up’ resulting in competition between new and existing schools rather than improvements to the latter (Astle, 2008). Investment in schools to become academies under New Labour became a ‘reward’ for already outstanding schools in the shape of academy status (Benn, 2012).

Increasingly centralised control also removed one of the political barriers that prevented CTCs from becoming successful under the Conservatives: Labour controlled LAs blocking the setting up of CTCs in their Districts (West and Bailey, 2013), rather contradicting the Prime Minister Cameron’s (2009) statement that local government was the most efficient and cost effective element of administration and decentralisation the best way to save considerable costs.

Since the introduction of the CTC programme in 1986, the schools’ system has undergone a transformation from being locally administered through the democratically elected, publicly funded LAs, to being a largely national system centrally contracted to the Secretary of State for Education with increasingly privatised provision (West and Bailey, 2013). ‘Transformation’ has become synonymous with ‘raising standards’, a very narrow definition reflecting the trend of developing new qualifications to resolve complex political and societal issues (Bates, 2012). Despite the differing

ideological motives behind the reforms, Gove also tackled system issues through changes to the schools' infrastructure, leading Morris (2014) to claim that 'good teachers can make almost any structure work and no school structure can guarantee success', mirroring criticisms of the habitual 'tinkering' with qualifications as a method of reform: similar treatment of the infrastructure achieves little on its own. Some of these changes created new opportunities for employers to engage in full-time 14-19 ET. As all schools were encouraged to apply for academy status with the aim of freeing them from LA control, the DfE struggled to resource this centralised administration. The BSF programme was halted, with money apparently no longer available for investment owing to the wider economic financial situation - although funding was soon made available for the setting up of free schools. Free schools illustrate the 'purer' interpretation of neoliberalism of the Conservative-led Coalition.

The Coalition extended the provision of UTCs and Studio Schools, and introduced the more controversial model of Free Schools, allowing interested parties, including groups of parents and others not necessarily experienced in education, to administer the provision of schooling. Such schools were able to set up in existing buildings, not designed for educational use, further contrasting with the investment in new infrastructure under New Labour. Although based on similar models in Sweden and Charter Schools in the US, free schools have been dismissed as 'vanity project for yummy mummies' by Hunt (2010).

Free schools are subject to fewer constraints in terms of teacher qualification and acceptance of union conditions, factors which, Morris (2014) argued, aimed to drive schools towards 'choosing' the academy conversion route. New Labour's correlation between structures and standards is borne out by Coalition expansion of different types of provision and provider. The dangers of inconsistency and inefficiency - not simply financial but in the capacity to partner, share resources, learn from others

and so on - are a natural accompaniment to greater flexibility and independence. In education and training terms, free schools offered an opportunity to pioneer models of teaching and learning. Unfortunately they were also a political football, with their educational potential at times hidden behind their political impact.

Free schools extended the academies programme to allow the setting up of new schools in areas where there are insufficient good school places. This is arguably the most market driven school model and perhaps the most logical result of the application of neoliberal principles to the ET system, driving changes to infrastructure that not even the freedoms enjoyed by academies can achieve. Free schools are founded on three policy principles: greater flexibility and autonomy for teachers; the ability to innovate; greater responsiveness to the education market. Critics accuse them of diverting money away from established schools, removing vital funding. Concerns about the cost and efficiency of the educational experience appear to take precedence over the quality of learner outcomes. A proliferation of smaller establishments may risk limited or no employer involvement as the administration and spread of institutions becomes impractical. Some have already called for LA control to be reasserted over free schools to hold poorly performing ones to account (Davis, 2014). The 'per pupil' funding model does not allow for surplus places in the system - a necessary factor for a truly competitive and 'customer-facing' system.

In ignoring or not implementing the for-profit element of free schools, Gove missed an essential driver for the success of the model (Sahlgren, 2012) and, as with 14-19 Diplomas, political reasons rather than educational or other principles lay behind this failure: a fear of voter and Opposition reaction (Astle, 2011). Such a change to the funding model may have provided an opportunity to improve school- rather than learner-centric CEIAG, but would have been accompanied by its own

issues such as the oversubscription of desirable schools and a surplus of places in less well-performing ones.

University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools

UTCs - which enrol pupils from 14 years of age - and Studio Schools are specialist Academies providing the opportunity for some young people to access high-quality technical and professional provision - and with that opportunities for employer involvement. The ET at these specialist schools is not aimed at 'those who can't' but at those capable of achieving good grades in English and Mathematics as well as being successful in their vocational subjects. This set vocational provision under the Coalition apart from the more inclusive or 'alternative' interpretation under New Labour. UTC curriculum focus is on technical subjects and the provision of a high quality academic education within an employer resourced setting, with progression into further academic or technical ET.

UTCs and Studios schools appear to make the employer role easily identifiable but it remains problematic. Despite planned openings, young people in the South West, and the North East and East Anglia still have considerable difficulty in accessing one. UTCs tend to offer Engineering, Construction, Business and Design and Technology: they do not appear to specialise in 'Gove's trades' and further limit access to those who may not wish to pursue a locally-available specialism. Whilst provision of high quality technical education is to be welcomed, the ability to specialise in this way reinforces the differences between diverse 'vocational' subjects. Low pupil enrolment numbers have already seen the demise of a central London UTC after only two years, calling into question both the business model employed to justify its opening and the appetite for different types of provision (Hackney Citizen Online, 2014).

Studio schools emphasise employer partnership to support the successful delivery of professional and technical qualifications in addition to the academic curriculum. The school day follows a 9-5 work timetable and the curriculum and project links to employers reflect need and availability in a school's locale. Arguably they can only succeed if the parents of children who might normally be pushed down the academic route allow their children to attend such schools from the age of 14. This research revealed concerns among employers that 14 is too young for an individual to specialise in any sense in future employment skills, yet their tangible support is critical to the success of the model.

The founding of a UTC or Studio School in the vicinity of an existing school may be problematic, being likely to limit provision in existing schools and the willingness or ability of employers to contribute to other 14-19 provision. There may even be a reduction in the number of apprenticeship places available to learners in other settings. Since substantial employer investment is required to provide technical equipment, it is unlikely that UTCs will open at a convenient distance for the majority of learners as employers may provide resources for only two or three 'hubs' across a number of regions rather than spreading finite resources across the many. Young people may incur expenses and face safety issues relating to their need to travel to access these institutions, or miss out on their first choice route due to a lack of accessible places providing a high quality alternative to the academic route. These present potentially significant barriers for young people legally obliged to remain in education or training - even if combined with employment - until 18.

The OECD (2014) continues to criticise ET provision for young people in England in terms of everything from the resulting lack of employability skills to receiving consistent, joined up CEIAG and support from education and training through to employment. It reiterates that this is not a new problem. The language of the report reflects the lack of government ability to enforce co-operation:

‘the Department [for Education] should find more ways to *encourage* (my emphasis) employers, colleges and schools to work together...’ (NAO, 2014:12). There is still no obligation - and on this evidence, few incentives or drivers - to change the experience of young people and therefore improve their prospects. Local provision is often segregated, with sixth forms tending not to take less able students, often influenced by funding, meaning young people are either more likely to drop out or to attend local colleges, which are then faced with supplying opportunities for a very diverse range of needs and interests, (Fletcher and Perry, 2008; Hodgson and Spours, 2013). It is difficult not to conclude that certain stakeholders do not want a joined up approach - nor to reject the idea that ‘encouragement’ based on an assumption of interest where a limited amount has so far been shown, will improve the situation (Morris, 2014).

The 2008 financial crisis had an impact on the amount of money available to finance ET programmes. In a supply-led system any reduction may be felt more keenly, since if the funding for education or training is not linked to proven need, it is easier for those controlling the budgets to cut monies for what may be recast as non-essential training. Such cuts leave many young people without an alternative way to fund their training. Supply-led funding policies have created a dependency without obligation: employers are unwilling to pay for training that was once funded if that funding is withdrawn (LSN, 2010: 34).

The advent of the Coalition did not necessarily simplify ET systems and policy. Abolished in 2010, the LSC was replaced by a further three quangos, the Skills Funding Agency (SFA), the NAS and the Young Peoples Learning Agency - the latter subsequently replaced by the Education Funding Agency and becoming part of the DfE. Continual restructuring appears to reflect an assumption that the shape of an organisation, or its place in the governance structure, will lead to a more effective

distribution - and product use - of funding. To 'customers' such as employers it represents a confusing picture of responsibility for, and the availability of, funds.

The Liberal Democrat-promoted Youth Contract Wage Incentive scheme (DWP, 2012) intended to support young people into work by paying their wages for six months, and that employers who would not otherwise feel able to afford to offer an opportunity to a young person would take advantage of it. It was withdrawn in August 2014 and its failure has been attributed to a number of factors ranging from lack of need in the face of strong economic recovery, and high levels of bureaucracy preventing small businesses from accessing the scheme. The failure of a similar scheme under the previous, Labour, government - 'Future Jobs Fund' - calls into question why a similar scheme was set up under the Coalition, and why the Opposition has flagged a similar replacement in its policy manifesto. Policy continuity appears to be a more influential phenomenon than policy learning, but is tied to the inability of government to do more than cajole employers to play a role through the implementation of such schemes. This policy was based on a critical assumption that in their use of the funding employers would act morally (Brennan and Hamlin, 2008), rather than purely in their own self-interest. Instead, a number of employers who would otherwise have employed a young person 'pocketed' the money provided from the fund for that purpose (Pickard, 2014) resulting in deadweight - a failure to increase the number of young people in training and work despite the investment of public money (UKCES, 2011). Flawed policy combined with unexpected employer behaviours resulted in another failed, if well-meant, initiative.

Careers Advice

This research found that CEIAG had an unintended and unacknowledged impact on its users. The CBI/Pearson education and skills survey (2014) reports that 80 per cent of businesses have 'links of some type' with at least one school or college (8), the most common types of involvement being

work experience and providing CEIAG or talks. Ironically, the former is viewed by employers – and indeed more widely - to be one of the weakest links in the chain of learner progression (OECD, 2014). Barriers to greater involvement with schools are given as a lack of knowledge of how to make work experience worthwhile; a lack of interest among schools or pupils; and the difficulty of fitting support into the school timetable.

Companies providing careers information have previously been directly funded or reliant on funding from their LA, but there had still been some measure of independence in the advice provided. Some school models such as academies, free from accountability to the LA, have been able to bring CEIAG 'in-house'. A report from the Institute of Fiscal Studies identifies a significant drop in funding for sixth form colleges by 2013 (Chowdry and Sibbets, 2011), raising the question of whether learners will continue to be kept on programmes for purely financial reasons, what the corresponding impact on colleges of FE might be in terms of numbers and funding, and what the impact might be on the proposed increase in the school leaving age, issues that form part of this research.

Fears about the lack of independence and transparency leading to learners being advised on the basis of what is best for the institution appear to be well-founded. Where funding follows the learner, keeping the pupil enrolled on any course makes financial sense for the school.

Recommending that a learner would be better suited to a course run elsewhere, such as a UTC or FE College, will cost the originating school money, as would resourcing high-quality technical vocational education. Keeping the learner in school, pursuing low-quality vocational courses with little chance of progression, would generate more revenue. However, as Stanton (2006) observed, from 14, many young people see school as preventing rather than providing access to the experiences they want. There is much talk of progression into employment at level 2 but in reality, jobs at this level in England are limited to a small number of sectors and roles.

Other criticisms of CEIAG provision seem predicated on the assumption that it is possible for employers to inform schools at a local or national level about what skills are needed and what positions are available. On a practical level, it may be easier for some local employers to co-ordinate training vacancies, work experience opportunities and other employer inputs through an intermediary agency, such as a supplier of CEIAG, as these agencies may be more accessible than individual schools, or can at least inform more than one school – but only if the institutions concerned call on them for support.

The problematic role of employers in ET policy

The preceding pages have set out some of the complexities of the employer role. Table B below draws together some of the main system elements and wider factors that have resulted from these, and which the policy assumptions of successive governments have reinforced. These dimensions of employer involvement range from globalisation, as the broadest area of impact and involvement, through more localised elements, to the most individual – and frequently altered – one of qualifications. Macro level influences such as globalisation, the economy and neoliberalism, drew different policy reactions from New Labour and the Coalition. A significant increase in immigration under New Labour, to provide business with the skills needed for expansion, was coupled with a national narrative of a proposed expansion in the state – resulting in new governance models – including a proposed increase in the school-leaving age and encouragement to the majority of young people to enter Higher Education. This is in contrast with the perhaps surprising anti-immigration, anti-EU – and ultimately anti-business – narrative of the Conservative-led Coalition which, coupled with the deterrent of the introduction of high tuition fees for undergraduates, a toughening of A-Level assessments and a further reduction in the size of the state, appears to have left not only young people, but also employers, out in the cold.

Table B.: Dimensions of employer involvement under New Labour and the Coalition

| | New Labour | Coalition |
|----------------------|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> attempts to marry Thatcherite neoliberalism (including business interests) with policies of social justice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> pursuit of pure neoliberal policies – reduced state and reduced dependence on the state |
| Globalisation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> immigration provided skilled (including low-skilled) workers leading to more competition for available jobs and potentially less interest in investing in local/national training when staff could be hired elsewhere increase in businesses owned by overseas concerns | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> attempts to limit or reduce immigration but without skills criteria or similar, potentially damaging business pursuit of tax payments from international companies based outside the UK (reflecting the difficulty of applying national laws and plans – including those for ET - in a globalised marketplace) anti-European stance impacts negatively on the key partnership between state and business in terms of improving training opportunities and private investment in training |
| Economy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ‘prosperity’ driven by finance-led expansion labelling of those not in education, employment or training (NEET) expanded state and creation of ‘internal’ state markets vocational qualifications, including Modern Apprenticeships, tried to combine technical, general and ‘social’ education ‘citizens’ to access welfare through work (job-seekers allowance, tax credits, minimum wage) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> austerity high youth unemployment promotion of Apprenticeships private sector expected to provide jobs and stimulate the economy whilst being heavily criticised and challenged to change their reward and tax payment policies in the wake of the global financial crisis reduced welfare state (limits on tax credits and child benefits – impacts on working mothers) |

| Contd. | New Labour | Coalition |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| State/ Governance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> new managerialism; ‘artificial’ state markets created and managed through NPM coupled with deregulation citizen as consumer; governance through multiple agencies either of representation or inspection (regulation) e.g. Regional Development Agencies, SSCs, Regulator (QCA) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> continued deregulation; reduced ‘measures’ and auditing reduction in the number of the quangos, increase in the number of LEPs; employer position recast; |
| Localism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> appearance of much devolvement of power and responsibility to the regions through Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), LAs etc but NPM kept central control local employer partnerships (LEPs) introduced | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> educational powers removed from many LAs through new school structures closure of RDAs; Continuation of LEPs |
| Education institutions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PFI initiatives e.g. BSF move away from Comprehensive model towards Academies and Specialist Schools to promote equality of opportunity proposed increase in school learning age multiple demands on employer resources increased access to HE (grade inflation/better results) leading to credentialism and complaints from employers that graduates also lacked employability skills 14-19 regional partnerships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> cancellation of BSF; expansion of Academies’ programme to include all interested schools and some ‘forced’ schools apparently centralised administration of fragmented schools’ picture including UTCs, Studio Schools and Free Schools increased tuition fees leading to significant reduction in places and courses available; reduction in number of overseas students owing to stricter visa requirements school leaving-age increased from 16 to 18 (New Labour proposal) - though with the option to pursue training rather than remain in school post-16 employer role refocused on the provision of apprenticeship places |

| Contd. | New Labour | Coalition |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| Qualifications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowledge – and education - declared the answer to a successful economy; attempts to provide qualifications for all results in a triple-track of academic, vocational and apprenticeship routes • A-Levels reformed making them more inclusive with ‘greater breadth or cross-disciplinary content’ (DfES, 2003: 10) • employer-led development of 14-19 Diplomas creating a ‘middle track’ • key, core and personal, learning and thinking skills; citizenship; employability • Modern Apprenticeships – sometimes surprisingly limited employer role in their definition and delivery | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • young people expected to engage with education through qualifications • re-emphasis on education being for both the individual and the economy • A-Levels reformed making them more exclusive; return to linear assessment with defined knowledge separating subjects clearly • formal acknowledgement of a drop in standards of achievement under New Labour • rejection of 14-19 Diplomas; dramatic reduction of ‘vocational’ provision in the upper secondary phase; employer role generally appears reduced in policy and practice • rapid increase in Apprenticeship numbers post-election – variable quality; Masters-level Apprenticeships to be offered by large organisations; calls to use public procurement as a way to pressure employers into offering Apprenticeships |

The impact of globalisation was such that despite New Labour attempts to formalise the 'partnership' concept (HM Treasury, 2004), without regulation both local and international businesses in the UK continue to be free to ignore domestic demands and to recruit – or not – from any labour market around the globe. Yet the assumption remains that international business parties will support 'national interest' in the shape of a better performing UK ET system (Keep, 2012). The government can only request inputs - or partly steer them through policy - rather than arrange and enforce employer contributions to education and training. New Labour tried to work with businesses in ways that were unusual for the party (Falconer and McLaughlin, 2000). However, lacking as it did a comfortable or close relationship with business, Blair's government used policy to position the employer role within their aims (UKCES, undated; Tomlinson, 2004). They had no way of forcing employer co-operation with national ET policy even among UK-domiciled businesses. Positioning of employers at its heart reflected the neoliberal trend of business domination and leadership in all areas and allowed the Government to make ever-greater demands in terms of education and training inputs.

Localism, promoted by Toqueville in the 1800s, revived under New Labour and adapted by the Coalition, can be interpreted as a form of social partnership, one seen to avoid 'soft despotism' by ensuring that the power to determine individual and local needs was not centralised (Hodgson and Spours, 2012). Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), and later Education Business Partnerships (EBPs) and Local Employer Partnerships (LEPs), were used to co-ordinate and implement policy but the role of potentially key partners such as local colleges has been reactive to local economic crisis, for example, rather than key to planning local capacity, (Fletcher and Parry, 2008). The local nature of these bodies, in contrast with the national remit of many sector bodies, meant that strong local buy-in and cooperation succeeded in spite of, rather than because of, national policy. In Hull, for example, the college is instrumental to transforming skills strategy in the area, but this is the result of local determination rather than national strategy.

These bodies faced similar issues to those experienced by SSCs. Changes to their structure, purpose, constitution, funding – and, with a change of government, political purpose, resulted in curtailed projects, challenging communication and an inability to plan and implement long-term solutions to local training and employment needs, (Fletcher and Perry, 2008). Critically for this research however, the role of key individuals in businesses, Councils and Agencies was identified as being equally important to their success: strong leadership and strong local government (Quinn, 2013).

Centralisation of power has been a trend across governments in England for a couple of decades, and the revived Localism sometimes appears to be based on what powers government is willing to cede rather than on a considered strategic plan and devolution of powers. There seems to be an artificial separation between business-led regeneration of an area and the supply of education and training to support this (gov.uk, 2014), although there is some localised evidence of attempts to counter this (<http://www.hull-college.ac.uk/ssw>, 2015). Whilst a rise in the number of apprenticeships, for example, is to be welcomed, a local approach necessarily means local - rather than national – successes, and may result in an uneven, and potentially unfair, experience for young people in terms of accessing opportunities and progression.

Even where there are tangible benefits to a business engaging through a planned, local partnership, such as support with recruitment and training and the accompanying funding, some employers appear motivated by a genuine belief in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policy - desiring to support people who have been out of work or have had limited opportunities in life (Job Centre Plus, 2011). Yet despite local exceptions, LEPs overall are failing to address many of the issues faced by RDAs, particularly in an environment of swingeing cuts to Council budgets and staff, and the economic priorities of business people in challenging financial conditions.

Employer involvement in full-time 14-19 ET in an era of neoliberalism is framed by shifts in the role of market and state. Greater deregulation has enabled businesses to pursue increasingly flexible employment and training policies. Under a social partnership model relating to supply-led training, workers are afforded some protection from the impact of global and flexible markets and the accompanying 'flexible' workforce. This approach is rooted in the socialist history of Germany, similar to that of many other European countries - but not England. Here it is arguably a concept which is not discussed when it is 'alive and well', but one that policy makers and stakeholders explore when centralised processes and agencies have failed to do so (Billett and Seddon, 2006), appealing 'to its spirit once it is significantly weakened' (Unger, 2015). In the absence of 'codified practices or shared understandings' (Billett and Seddon, 2006: 56), that is, a culture suitable to the sustaining of 'socialist' shared partnerships, the 'new' type characterised by the structures and rules of RDAs or LEPs can only be partly successful, (Fletcher and Perry, 2008). In this respect, both New Labour and the Coalition pursued 'new' model social partnerships but their success was, and is, limited by other factors, not least the voluntarist freedoms available to employers, a key 'partner'.

The relationship of employers with ET is described as a 'liaison/interaction' (Keep, 2005: 357) encompassing 'rules of exchange' (Gleeson and Keep, 2004: 41). The authors are concerned both with the shift in the balance of power between employers and education and the place of education within society as a whole, rather than as an economic support. In an echo of social partnership, a move among policy-makers towards 'an inclusive and high-achieving' system (Hodgson and Spours, 2003: 49), in which 'the rights, responsibilities and duties' of all involved in the development and delivery of VET are 'more clearly articulated' (58), is considered. However, without recourse to a regulated relationship, such a system is difficult to implement. (Hodgson and Spours, 2003). RDAs, EBPs and LEPs have tried in various ways the challenge of local partnerships, the building of development networks and the identification and addressing of related training needs but again

such solutions rely heavily on the capacity, capability and willingness of individuals rather than on the execution of a regulated set of criteria.

At an organisational level, there are a number of dimensions to consider: the top down management of performance and the centralisation of the curriculum; the existence of a variety of school models; the funding of full-time 14-19 ET; and the available progression routes into employment and FE and HE from it – further curtailed under the Coalition by austerity, and increased tuition fees and the political stance that educating all to degree level was a mistake, regardless of the equally political reasons behind that New Labour policy to increase access to HE (Heath, 2013).

Qualifications and changes to the delivery infrastructure were critical to the ambitions of both New Labour and the Coalition, with the former in particular positioning education achievement as a way to personal and wider economic success, and to engaging fully with society. Reforms appear to have been based on a number of assumptions, many of which were generated by long-established features of the system, a fact that has in turn thrown up additional, often-unintended, barriers. Coalition reforms to the National Curriculum sought to ‘embody...cultural and scientific inheritance’ whilst avoiding the imposition of ‘passing political fads’ on young people (DfE, 2010: 41).

The significance of the employer role in full-time 14-19 ET

This second use of the conceptual framework diagram (Figure 4) illustrates that, just as policy has had little real effect on the nature of the employer relationship with the ET system, it remains a weak influence on the behaviour of employers. This section summarises that employer role and highlights some of the challenges faced by it arising from those weak relationships.

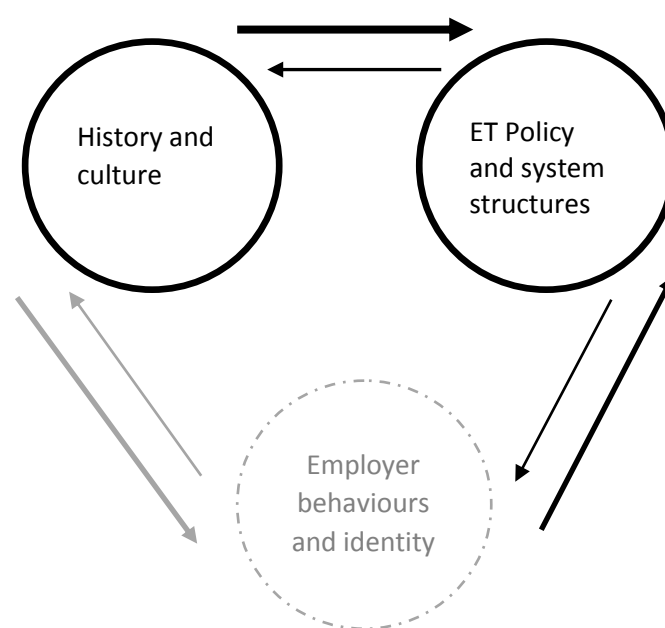


Figure 4. The weak influence of ET policy

Wolf (1998) claimed that ‘we are...so accustomed to education being discussed in terms of its economic relevance that any other reference point strikes us as curious’, also that the previous fifteen years of education policy had been driven by ‘an economic panic among politicians’ associated with ‘an unprecedented willingness to hand policy making over to the official representatives of ‘the business community’ (219). She accused this community of being the origin of the problems that caused government to ‘panic’ and attempt to improve the skills and international economic standing of the UK, observing that handing over the ‘cure’ to employers was a strange yet understandable course of action.

Competition and privatisation have produced greater educational, social, and economic inequalities (Pantazis and Gordon, 2000; Ball, 2003; Tomlinson, 2005), and the plethora of ‘vocational’ provision under the Blair and Brown governments confronted employers with a set of demands and potential roles (Huddleston *et al*, 2005; Hodgson and Spours, 2008; Huddleston and Laczik, 2012). Under the existing partly-regulated system, some employers have benefitted considerably from access to

government funding or government-trained labour resources, had access to and influence over non-education policy through their 'engagement' however informally with full-time 14-19 ET and positive publicity, for example in relation to the provision of apprenticeship places, which in a fully-regulated system would simply be expected of them.

The amount of freedom employers have to act is partly dependent on the economic situation and the political climate, which affect the extent of control they have over the planning and delivery of training and of demands made on their resources. Where employer involvement widens to encompass the plans of the state in terms of extending skills-training to the unemployed as an aspect of welfarism, or supplying LMI to aid the effective planning of future skills needs on a local and national basis, for example, which in turn has a knock-on effect on wider VET provision, then the need to explore the 'voluntary' nature of the employer role in full-time 14-19 ET becomes more acute. It could be argued that employers never really change their approach, but that periodically government policy and ideology suit their aims.

Crouch (2011) claims that both political democracy and the market are capable of harnessing the strengths of the individual for the collective good. However, he also points out that the moral perspective of the individual versus the collective may be viewed from two contrasting points of view. Under socialism or in strong religious states, for example, the collective is usually seen as the means to preventing individual selfishness from causing harm. Conversely, under the English liberal tradition the triumph of individual achievement is seen as a check against what Crouch (2011) terms 'cynical collectivity' (146). In democratic societies, the state is seen as the collective which ensures that a balance is sought between the competing demands and powers of individuals.

A similar argument may be made with regard to the levels of participation of employers in 14-19 ET: elements of the system conspire to make it difficult for employers to work with schools (less so

colleges) and less desirable for schools to make an effort to engage with employers. The one-size-fits-all nature of many solutions and policies means that engagement with the system may only be possible or attractive to an even smaller minority (Billett and Seddon, 2006; Keep, 2012). This is in part because individual 'employers' are playing multiple roles and their choices may at times be surprising. Such choices include becoming involved where there is no obligation to, or rejecting qualifications as a recruitment standard, when they have developed or endorsed them elsewhere in their role as the representative of an organisation on a project.

Gleeson and Keep (2004) raised the issue of treating employers as a heterogeneous category, showing how differences in business size, location and management style can shape inputs. Individual representatives of an organisation or sector might equally differ in their 'opinion' of what that industry, sector, occupation, business type or location requires from the ET system. Whilst '...employers may want outcomes... that potentially conflict with the interests of students, parents, teachers' (39), they may at the same time be a parent or other stakeholder who acts one way as an employer and another in this additional role, causing conflict in their choice in both. This research examines the nature and impact of identity in relation to full-time 14-19 ET.

The role granted to employers by New Labour assumed that they had an interest in curriculum and individuals in the 14-19 phase (Tomlinson, 2004; Line of Learning Statement, 2009). Also that they were better placed and able to articulate teachable, assessable learning programmes to meet future employment needs, and that they would want and value new vocational qualifications (Tomlinson, 2004) rather than seeking to reform the 'A-Level failure system' (Young and Leney, 1996: 50). Further that there was a single 'employer view' and that employers saw this phase as a priority. Their role was positioned in terms of 'employer engagement', which in perception, if not in practice, sounds far less active than the more recent term 'education-industry partnership' (Keep, 2012).

In the absence of any 'meaningful public debate about what the roles and responsibilities of employers should be' (Keep, 2005: 537), the employer role in education and training in England remains a 'work in progress', with the involvement of employers outside the apprenticeship 'heartlands' of construction, engineering, hospitality and hairdressing being 'patchy and limited' (Keep and James, 2011:58). Barriers to defining an effective role include an over-emphasis on the importance of skills to employers; the lack of a national industrial policy; a 'learned reliance' (58) on the education system to provide any training needed; public funding, plus a ready supply of skilled workers from the single, EU market, trained at limited or no cost to UK-based employers. Further, there is the continued lack of a licence to practise; the absence of employer organisation in relation to training; and a disjointed employer view of 'skills' in the UK, which differs from the broad vision of a skilled and roundly educated individual held by European apprenticeships instead often reduced to fulfilling immediate skills needs; and the push for 'flexibility' in programmes as a way to minimise what is required of the employer. In short, the employer appears to hold all the cards in the training relationship.

The impact on alternative qualification routes such as 14-19 Diplomas can be damaging. If the public – of which employers are part - are not seen as trusting a qualification which has been established for many years, there is little chance of a completely new qualification being seen to be recognisable and useful in its early stages of existence. Despite hopes of Keep (2005) and the fanfare of Leitch (2006), the ET system remains supply-led because the political will or ability to change the structures and cultures which perpetuate the situation either does not exist or is too difficult to enforce. Keep (2006) identifies the dominant trend in the English ET system since the 1980s as the increasing role of the state in the design, control and implementation of policy at every level across a wide range of topics. Keep identifies the 'central government' part of the state as the key influence here. Employers are not a single phenomenon with a single motivation so the existence of a credible 'employer voice' is questionable (Keep, 2005). Even those organisations committed to CSR must

prioritise their financial success (Wolf, 2002). Employers seem reluctant to engage where one might reasonably expect them to (Keep, 2005) and to have been privileged in policy, but to have remained powerless in practice (Hodgson and Spours (2008). Gleeson and Keep (2004) claim that 'largely unfettered de-regulation' has gifted employers a 'voice without accountability' (37), and argue for clearer rules of employer engagement.

Unexpected or unplanned consequences of a hybridised system must be of interest when governments attempt to give, or demand, a role to a specific group. Globalisation and the deregulation that has allowed overseas investment and buy out of a number of organisations may mean that some employers recruit internationally and feel little obligation towards local or national training, only towards business success. Local staff may have little power over local training, recruitment or investment in resources. Clashes in legislation have also hindered rather than helped the cause of employer involvement. Health and Safety requirements and Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks had an impact on the ability of employers to provide meaningful work experience or apprenticeships (Keep, 2005).

Under the Coalition, employers faced the contradiction between the 18-25 target age group of the NAS and the legal reality of age-discrimination and sound business planning/practice. The rapid pace of policy adaptation and change both within and between governments leaves it unclear at times which initiatives are continuing and which are being brought to an end, with the net result that employers may remain unmotivated or feel unable to become involved. The existence of a supply-led system raises a number of issues, for example, in which government attempts to predict workforce needs on the basis of incomplete or absent information (Finegold and Soskice, 1990), gathered at a remove; also the use of taxpayers' money to carry out training for the success of private businesses. Whilst businesses will argue that they are taxpayers and that the money used is partly theirs, in a true market situation, if they did not train their own staff, organisations would fail.

This must lead to the conclusion that either much of the Government skills supply is unnecessary or incorrectly focused, or that businesses already train or recruit sufficient numbers of skilled workers independently of government schemes. This latter view is borne out by a recent report showing that only 15 per cent of employers interviewed reported skills deficiencies in their staff, with over two-thirds of employers arranging and funding any necessary training (UKCES, 2013). As this chapter has discussed, however, the word 'skill' has a number of meanings among stakeholders - the two subsequent annual skills' reports from UKCES (2014, 2015) appear to show a steady decline in available skills.

Stakeholders are left with the perception that, despite being gifted a central role in the identification and training of skills for young people who will eventually form part of the future workforce, and will create economic success for businesses, employers cannot, or will not, play their part. The impression of employers is of a group of people who are uniquely privileged within the system in terms of being able to identify their needs, and have them met through the outcomes of the system, but whose behaviour seems to show them at best refusing, at worst ignoring or abusing this prerogative. This is underpinned by the state assumption that an improvement in education performance is of direct importance to employers (Keep, 2012). Primary research examines some of the personal experiences and factors which colour employer involvement, exploring what additional factors to those already identified prevent or discourage employers from taking a greater role within the ET system, whether these reasons are only partly systemic, what other factors might prevent a greater level of involvement and what individual, personal or organisational reasons may lie behind this apparent reluctance. Although there is significant evidence of the impact of historical and cultural factors on current policy and practice, this is insufficient to explain the nature of employer involvements, or the impact of the individual opinions and experiences of employers, which appear to play a significant and as yet unexplored part.

Conclusion

Through a wide-ranging discussion of the main ET policy activity of both the New Labour and Coalition governments, this chapter has attempted to illustrate the complexity of the system and the apparent lack of ability in the successive administrations to provide a coherent and effective employer role within it. It also partly fulfils the third research objective, concerned with the extent to which the historical and system tendencies can explain the relative weakness of the employer role within full-time 14-19 ET. This aim is further explored through the later analysis of the original research. Issues begin at an international level, where globalisation has affected the ability of many western governments to plan for and control skills supply and demand. In England, the supply-led nature of the ET system, compounded by the voluntarist nature of the employer role within that – preventing a transparent picture of skills needs to be built - already made such planning challenging. The nature and extent of the employer role envisaged by New Labour demonstrated some aspects of continuity with the policy of the preceding Conservative government and the subsequent Coalition administration. Differences between the vision for the employer role for the 14-19 age group are thrown into clear contrast by the differing attitudes towards vocational provision for those in full-time 14-19 ET. Blair's failure to address or review A-Level provision per se, however, might be said to have left the door open for Gove to force academic provision on many more learners who may have been better suited to something different from the 'traditional' route even if not 14-19 Diplomas.

Elsewhere, modifications to the infrastructure, a key area of influence within the ET system for both administrations, shared a need for investment from the private sector but with differing motives for this. Whilst New Labour invested in new buildings and strove to link physical change with social improvement, the Coalition appeared to view Academy status as a way to enable any school to have more freedom from Local Authority control, a policy which had mixed success in terms of accountability and learner achievement. There is a separate thesis in the problematic nature of

CEIAG, but it is a topic which provoked interest among the research interviewees and which provides a clear illustration of how policy can unintentionally drive poor behaviours – an important concept for this thesis.

Chapter 3: Beyond voluntarism: how identity and behaviour shape the employer role

Introduction

The first two chapters explored the historic and cultural roots of the ET System, and the policy of New Labour and the Coalition in relation to full-time 14-19 ET. They offer some explanation for the relative failure of policy in relation to the employer role, namely that in the context of a largely voluntarist system no employer is obliged to participate in the education and training of young people. Further, that qualifications and infrastructure policies act as proxies to strategic system reform, and that policy is often based on assumptions about how those it includes will respond to it. The most significant assumption made under New Labour, and to some extent the Coalition, was that full-time 14-19 ET was a priority for employers, yet the low number of employers involved in the area, even in the delivery of apprenticeships, belied this. This thesis therefore introduces a third set of factors to support understanding of the problematic role of employers in relation to 14-19 ET, the focus for the original research, namely the identity and behaviour of employers, and how these shape their relationship with the ET system and policy.

Figure 5 (below), the third and final use of the conceptual framework illustration, now shows the full extent of the relationship between background, policy and employer behaviours. Only when taken together do these three overarching factors provide sufficient explanation for the continued failure of policy to make more than a partial impact on defining and delivering a successful role for employers in full-time 14-19 ET.

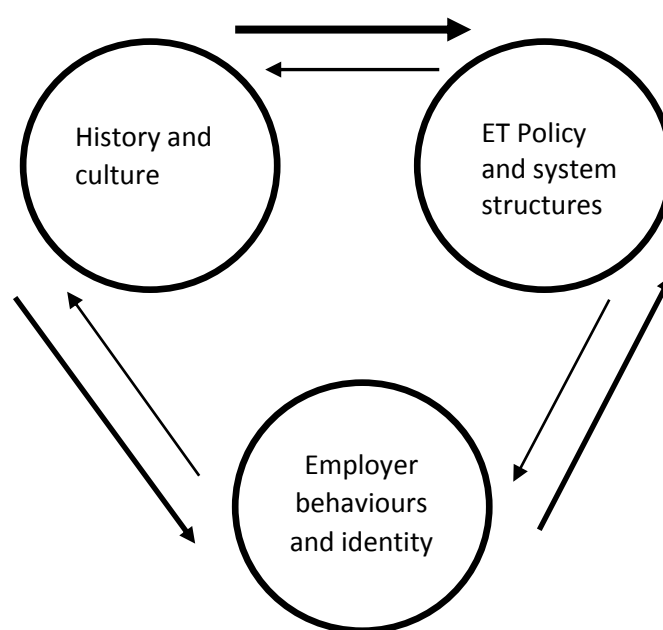


Figure 5: The conceptual framework: how history, culture, policy and employer behaviours and identities shape the ET system

This chapter summarises the policy demands made of employers. It suggests that even where an initiative successfully attracts employer involvement, this diminishes over time, affecting the medium- to long-term credibility of any employer-led initiative. It further suggests that, in the absence of a fully-regulated employer role, policy may be better targeted at those who already play a part, and to removing barriers to the participation of the willing, rather than attempting to meet the apparent needs of those who have no interest in engaging. Importantly for this thesis, it claims that the identities that make up the individual employer, for example, that of parent, member of society, ambitious employee, impact on their attitude towards ET policy, recruitment, and their contributions to policy groups. It asserts that in the absence of social partnerships, and of radical strategic reform and cultural change, the setting of superordinate goals represents a good – if imperfect - way to overcome the differing interests of stakeholders.

The conceptual framework draws on a range of theories to explain how the identities and related behaviours of employers shape the ET system alongside its history and culture, policy and the assumptions on which the latter often appears to be based. Theories of self-interest, egoism and altruism (Batson et al, 2011; Khalil, 2001; Singer, 2000; Humphrey, 1997) provide a basis for motive (Leary and Batts, 2011; Walton and Cohen, 2011), with Agency Theory (Jensen, 1994; Eisenhardt, 1989) to some extent framing how employers will act. Theories of social identity - how individuals relate to other members of a group, how they identify themselves within that group and how this affects their individual behaviour and their relationships with other groups with which they feel they share an identity - illustrates the impact of group identification on that of the individual and the concept of multi-facted identities and the tensions between them. Game Theory expands this into the realm of interaction with others and how this further modifies the behaviour of the individual (Spaniel, 2012; Binmore, 2007; Hargreaves and Varoufakis, 1995; Davis, 1973). Theories of Public Choice (Buchanan, 2003; Jensen, 1994; Schugart, undated) and collective action (Buchanan and Tullock, 1999; Schugart, undated) share parallels with gaming behaviour; and they shed light on the political and societal implications of individual motive within the apparent boundaries of public groups (Buchanan 2003), and seek to understand the impact (Buchanan, 2003; Buchanan and Tullock, 1999; Schugart, undated) and evolution of Public Choice Theory (PCT) (Brennan and Hamlin, 2008).

ET policy demands of employers

Despite exhortation, many employers do not meet the demands made of them by policy, acting in their own interests, which, if they coincide with those of the ET system, may be seen to be acting in its interests too. Even positive involvement may be narrowly targeted or short-lived and therefore of limited benefit. Probing the potential reasons behind this variation is important – can it be addressed or not – and, if not, what implications are there for future policy.

It is 'rational' to choose business profit over training in some eyes because in the short-term it is more profitable not to spend the money. It is 'rational' for some to employ Russell Group graduates if that is what they are used to - and find works - and they have no experience of alternatives, such as apprentices. What is rational for an individual does not necessarily equate to 'fair' for another, in this case a potential trainee or a policy-maker. If a dominant characteristic of an employer-group is shared parenthood and a common experience of good schools or excellent Apprenticeship delivery, this may influence both the outcomes of the group, the ET choices which affect their business and the successful creation and implementation of a policy.

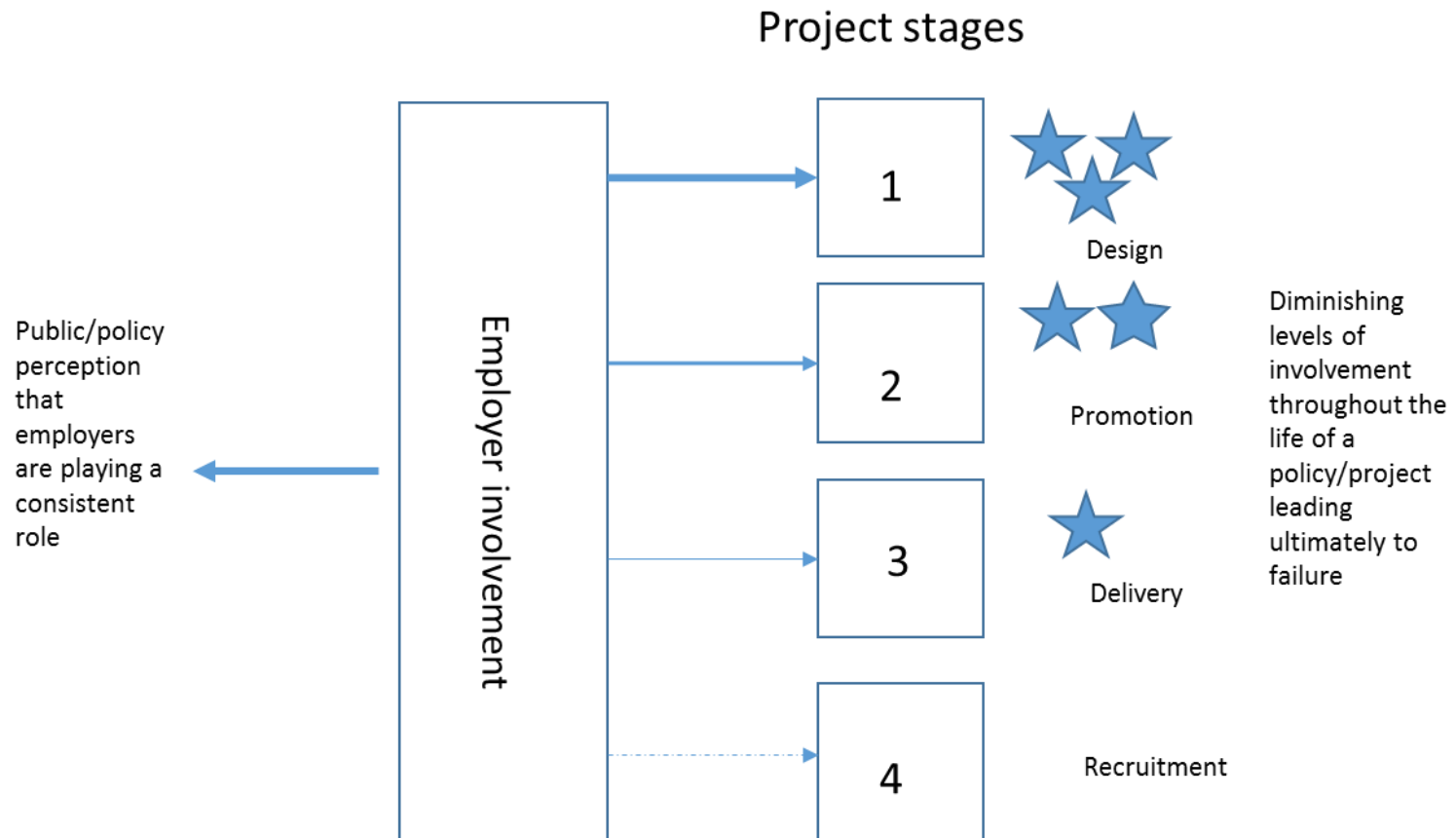
There is a necessary assumption that, if employers are exhorted by policy to participate in full-time 14-19 ET, at least some will participate in all of the proposed activities. The inputs in Table C (below) were drawn from a variety of sources within the literature review but were arranged into three groups by this author to reflect the levels of interaction of employers with policy – state, organisational and personal. The majority of employers still tend to contribute either work experience placements or provide career or industry talks (CBI Pearson, 2014), suggesting that many remain unwilling or unable to provide more. This reflects Mann and Virk's (2013) characterisation of these most common employer interventions as "'superficial": episodic, non-iterative and limited to narrow aims and purposes' (1). The most popular contributions are finite in nature, demanding no long-term commitment. Whilst it is theoretically possible for a single large organisation to be involved in all the activities at all levels this is unlikely. Instead, a limited number of organisations, or one or more representative individuals, will probably contribute to, or carry out, only some of the activities. If young people between the ages of 5-16 benefit from one or more of these activities – and some 'participate frequently' (Huddleston, 2012: 406) – this suggests a consistent input to their ET from one or more employers. It also indicates a lack of access to opportunities for others, and an uneven system overall: yet any employer activity is invariably viewed within the system as 'effective' support or input.

Table C: Policy demands on employer resources

| Level | Activity |
|-----------------------|--|
| State | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • policy development and implementation e.g. private finance/sponsorship of academies • membership and research contributions through the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Institute of Directors (IoD) and the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), for example • proxy – through agencies such as SSCs, Regional Development Agencies (RDA)s etc • definition of apprenticeship frameworks • development of new qualifications and curricula (14-19 Diploma) • training supply and demand • influence through government Departments for Business and Education |
| Organisational | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • supply of apprenticeship places • sponsorship of projects • class visits to the workplace • sponsorship/supply of resources • 14-19 local partnerships • engagement with SSCs etc • funding • work experience (WEX) • work-based learning (WBL) • Public Private Partnership, Public Finance Initiative (PPP/PFI) • Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) • internships • group visits to the workplace • resource sponsorship |
| Individual | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teacher training • sharing of knowledge (presentation, for example) • representation of organisation on agency board • input to specific projects and initiatives, e.g. qualification development individual sector/subject projects for school groups • mentoring • CEIAG • school governor |

Figure 6 was created by the author to illustrate how misleading the view of 'effective' employer support can be. To the left of the diagram is the apparent interaction of employers with policy – at a consistent level throughout a project. The stars, however, represent the diminishing number of employers involved at each stage. Early in the life of a project or initiative, employers may be present in greater numbers or contribute more resources but, over the life of the policy or project, employer support diminishes until in some cases – for example, the recruitment of young people holding a newly offered qualification – the support disappears altogether. There is an assumption – a public perception - that where an employer plays any role, whether offering CEIAG or contributing to curriculum content - they are 'supportive of' or 'involved with' 14-19 ET, yet a common model of employer involvement is one with gaps. It is necessary to recognise the impact of the perception of participation based on limited types of input as this illustrates starkly the limitations of 'employer involvement' and the veracity of claims that a project has 'employer support'.

Figure 6: Reflection on employer involvement in projects using the development of a new qualification as the project example



The impact of voluntarism on employer behaviour

The voluntary nature of employer input matters because it results in uncoordinated, uncontrolled and unpredictable employer involvement. This has led to a number of issues such as the pursuit by young people of programmes of study with limited prospects of progression; the inability to successfully predict nationally specific skills requirements to plan and budget to meet them and to confidently deliver valuable ET to young people. Also wasted resources that are spent on developing programmes of study for those in full-time 14-19 ET which are then discarded by the subsequent government for both political and pedagogical reasons. Further, when resources are wasted to attract employers to publicly funded training when this may be unnecessary, as they have no interest in it, or when those who are interested are already involved.

The picture is more complex than has been suggested so far. Whilst the voluntarist nature of the employer role has a significant impact on the ET system, this thesis argues that employer involvement is affected by subtler factors, which might also be summarised as their individual background and culture - their professional and personal experiences and identities. What makes a difference to participation - or explains a lack of it - may not be as straightforward as business' circumstances or apparent lack of interest in, or value placed on, an initiative.

The on-going influence of voluntarism in the ET system is evidenced by the haphazard nature of employer involvement in it. Despite policy aimed at clarifying what is required of employers and some recognition of their apparent needs, the employer role remains inconsistent, even in their own words. Figure 7 shows the relationship between the long-established voluntarist nature of employer involvement in full-time 14-19 ET and more recent policy attempts to regulate this. It identifies four key relationships: between employer involvement and voluntarism, employer involvement and regulation, no employer involvement and voluntarism, and no employer involvement and regulation.

The theories from the conceptual framework allow the relationships in each part of the figures to be explored more fully.

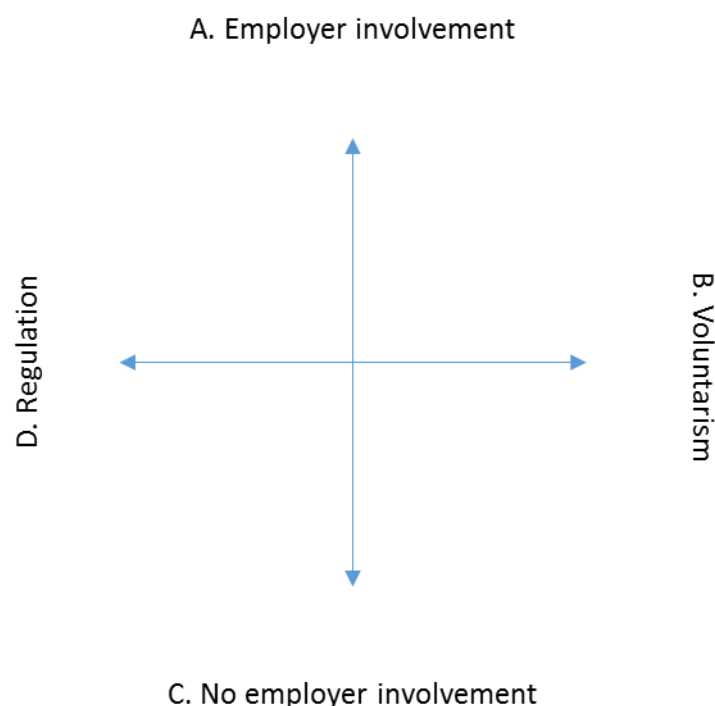


Figure 7: The 'voluntarist' axis of employer involvement in full-time 14-19 ET

Regulation in the shape of funding, company tax breaks and the licence to practice, for example, has successfully driven some employer involvement (A-D). Where there is no employer involvement (C-D) there must either have been a conscious decision on the part of employers to reject the conditions of regulation, or there are unforeseen barriers thrown up by the regulations, which revised, targeted policy might help to remove. A number of employers (A-B) play a role despite the lack of obligation on their part to involve themselves in full-time 14-19 ET, and may do so on a regular, if limited, basis. The remaining area (B-C) offers the most challenging area for policy. This is where employers neither feel motivated to offer their support nor are there obvious barriers that could be identified through an examination of policy and subsequently be removed.

A strategically co-ordinated review of ET system-wide policy seems unlikely to occur in the foreseeable future. Yet equally ineffective is the assumption that ‘borrowing’ the design of another system, however effective in its original situation, can provide the answer in England (Raffe, 2011; Coffield, 2012). Since piecemeal review of policy has failed to galvanise greater levels of employer involvement to date, this thesis argues for a concentration on the influences on the right hand side of Figure 7 - understanding why some employers volunteer and others do not, finding short- to medium-term solutions for system shortcomings in the absence of a more strategic and radical overhaul of its elements. An examination of the motives and drivers that cause employers to ‘voluntarily’ support ET, and the barriers unrelated to policy that prevent them from doing so, may allow for a richer policy framework, which positively exploits the motives and drivers and, if it cannot remove barriers, can certainly help highlight the cultural factors causing these.

A matter of self-interest?

The voluntary nature of employer involvement in full-time 14-19 ET appears to offer an obvious explanation for the absence of many employers. As they are not obliged to participate, many do not. Even where they do participate, their identity as parent, member of society or ambitious individual (Figure 9, later in the chapter) means they act in their own – often diverse and opposing - interests. This framework visualises self-interest as a spectrum (Figure 8) at either end of which sit the concepts of egoism and altruism. These may be defined respectively as ‘pure’ self-interest, with no capacity for consideration of others, and selflessness, which would suggest action in favour of others with no consideration of consequence to oneself.

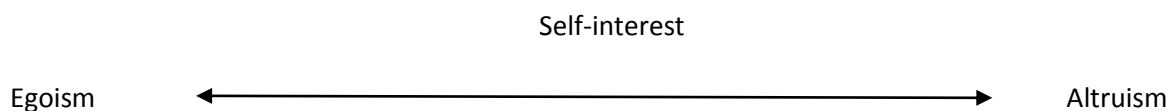


Figure 8: The spectrum of self-interest

These extremes seem rather melodramatic in relation to education and training. The reality is more complex and nuanced. Theorists argue variously that no-one ever acts purely in the interests of others, but that this is not necessarily something negative (Jensen, 1994); pure egoism is not ideal as ‘the individual pursuit of self-interest can be collectively self-defeating’ (Singer, 2000: 48); people only ever act in their own self-interest, that is, egoistically (Batson et al, 2011) and self-interested behaviour can also be altruistic (Batson et al, 2011; Khalil, 2001; Jensen, 1994). The absence of regulation and obligation in ET policy, and the existence of voluntarism invites consideration of whether those who are involved have their own interests, or those of others, at heart.

During the Industrial Revolution, David Hume and Adam Smith examined self-interested behaviour in relation to the welfare of others and the provision of public goods (Kahlil, 2001), which were traditionally provided ‘voluntarily’ in England, rather than being imposed from a central source. Smith argued that economic self-interest was the best for society as a whole, without government interference or regulation, because he believed that individual behaviour would always be regulated by altruism and a care for the less well off – that people would not intentionally cause suffering to other members of society through their profit-making.

Ozinga (1999) argues that laissez-faire was not intended to suggest that self-interest was the best thing for society as a whole but that on the spectrum of altruistic and selfish behaviour the correct balance would emerge without need for government interference. Thus the description of a social actor as a ‘rational, individual self-sufficer’ (96) is incomplete if it does not take empathy, the social actor, or the social context in which the action occurs into account. If empathy is left out of the

equation, the contract is wholly in favour of the individual. Yet Smith came to recognise that merchants would do anything to ensure that their interests took precedence even if this was to the detriment of the many: profit came first, an observation which appears to remain true to this day. The inception of the welfare state post-World War II drove greater government 'interference' but the liberal history of England means that many inputs, including to the education system, remained voluntary. Neoliberalism subordinates altruistic behaviours as less beneficial to business interests.

Employers appear to act in their own interests regardless of the policy demands made of them. Individual behaviours are modified by motivational, dispositional and expressive dimensions (Brennan and Hamlin, 2008), the latter especially relevant for this research as it suggests that privately held views may have influence in the public arena. People may express support for an initiative, something they might not do in other circumstances under which they had decisive influence. This might see employers and other stakeholders making the best of a situation: promoting the latest government-backed qualifications or using a qualification development project as an opportunity to put across their views, whilst perhaps not agreeing with the format or outcomes, or indeed using it in any way in recruitment - and rejecting it for their own children. Crucially they are still seen as offering support.

Brennan and Hamlin (2008) seek to move away from the 'relatively narrow conception of self-interest as motivating choice in the political as well as the economic domain' (77). It may be that the exercise of 'optimal abstraction' (78) has resulted in the rather simplistic views which emerge in relation to the 'self-interested' behaviours of employers. In the absence of any greater understanding of potential barriers or other plausible explanation as to why employers are absent from a particular initiative, that it is their 'choice'. Where employers do not play a part in full-time, 14-19 ET, for example, it is not sufficient to apply the 'parsimony principle' (78) and argue that this is indicative of optimally self-interested behaviour with no need for greater explanation. The simplest

explanation is not only perhaps incorrect but its acceptance prevents a more complex – and appropriate – solution from being determined. In this case, a more refined understanding of the necessarily complex set of drivers and motivation necessary, according to this thesis, to bring about genuine change to the employer-ET relationship.

The dispositional influence (Brennan and Hamlin, 2008) is that which may make certain behaviours more likely, whilst being no guarantee of them. An organisation which is frequently difficult to engage with may become more open and willing because the disposition of the individual who is asked is generally helpful and supportive. A change in personnel or a change in employment circumstances for that ‘helpful’ individual – a major project at work, for example – may result in a helpful disposition being less influential, overruled by more ‘self-interested’ considerations. The continuum between ‘egoism’ and ‘altruism’ suggested in Figure 8 above is potentially extremely nuanced. An ‘enhanced account of motivation offers considerably greater normative insight’ into behaviours (86). The ‘narrowly self-interested’ (86) account of individual behaviours is flawed in its generalisation which admits no deeper understanding of motives or drivers, excluding the possibility of modifying policy, for example, to accommodate them at least in part.

Since people broadly act rationally, in their own self-interest, it is logical that the act of volunteering in itself brings a reward - however intangible - to the individual (Dunning et al, 2011; Khalil, 2001; Jensen, 1994). Individual behaviours are motivated by a tangible incentive, often financial - an argument Jensen (1994) reported as being met with dismay by Brennan (1994) but with equanimity by the author himself, who questions what is wrong with acting in one’s own self-interest - to one’s material benefit - providing it does not harm others, and when it in fact often benefits others.

Rational and non-rational behaviours are arguably held to be so in the eye of the actor, depending on their current circumstances and the ‘self’ whose interests they are acting in at the time. An issue

with self-interested behaviour is the concept of non-rational behaviour, and that individuals do not always act as they might be predicted to in a given set of circumstances. Gaming Theories are useful in predicting optimum outcomes as a result of rational behaviour but people often behave non-rationally (Jensen, 1994). This extends to being unable to see that how they perceive the world around them may no longer be how it is in reality, so that how they genuinely believe they behave - and would behave - differs from what they actually do: the difference between their 'espoused theories' and their 'theories in use' (Argyris in Jensen, 1994). This is significant both in terms of individual employers contributing to policy but not using the outcomes for their own organisation or on personal level, for their children, and in the way they behave in a group setting, in which they may believe they are acting in the interests of the organisation they represent, but may in fact - influenced by, or leading, the behaviour or other group members - act according to personally held beliefs or experiences.

Game theories offer a method of predicting human behaviours to a reasonable degree of accuracy since individuals will take action 'to accrue the greatest rewards or advantage in any situation, and will generally make rational decisions' (Lumby and Morrison, 2006: 335). Game theories are '...able to draw parallels among seemingly dissimilar situations...to unify a wide range of life-decisions under a single, unified framework (Spaniel, 2012: Kindle Location 232). Theories of Gaming take as their starting point the interaction between two individuals: where two individuals interact they are said to be playing a game (Spaniel, 2012; Hargreaves and Varoufakis, 1995; Ordeshook, 1986). Each individual has preferences and as far as possible they will make choices within every game that will deliver those preferences: they are 'instrumentally rational' in their choices (Hargreaves and Varoufakis, 1995: 5). However, as this chapter has already discussed, it is neither possible nor preferable for an individual to maximise his or her self-interest at all times, nor in fact to define that based on their apparent identity. Behaviour may be perceived as irrational when in fact it is rational in relation to the part of the individual's identity most influencing it at the time. Not only are people

willing to compromise under some circumstances, they are willing to behave altruistically, that is, in the interests of others, even if in many circumstances both of these behaviours may still be viewed as self-interested.

All the employers and stakeholders are game players. The extent to which an individual is willing to stand their ground, or to compromise - the strategy they employ - is the essence of game theory. An individual may choose to take all the gains at the cost of any to their opponent: a zero sum game. Such an outcome may be forced upon them. Those same organisations working for 'their' sector may also compete at an organisational level. Signalling the contradictions found among employers interviewed for this research, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1995) write that 'unlike a normal game, different players are striving to achieve different ends' (199).

Acting in the interests of another – agency

Another aspect of self-interested behaviour is illustrated by the principal-agent relationship. In broad terms, agency theory examines the relationship between a 'principal' (contractor) and an 'agent' (the individual tasked with the work) and how the most efficient contracts might be agreed between two parties or a wider group, bearing in mind the impacts of self-interest on individual behaviour (Jensen, 1994; Eisenhardt, 1989). Contracts in agency theory may be either explicit or implicit. Agency theory assumes that an 'agent' will act with a degree of self-interest to the detriment of the 'principal' or group, for example, resulting in disagreement or an imbalance in the potential gains for each party. This might be the 'employer acting as ambitious individual' (Figure 9: later in this chapter) Just as it has been argued that there is no such thing as pure altruism, there is therefore no such thing as a 'perfect agent' (Jensen, 1994; 5), since all individuals will act to some extent in their own self-interest even when working with and in the interests of others.

It can be difficult to define which party – employer or government – is the principal and which the agent in terms of supplying skills. Should employers supply skilled workers to boost the economy and are they therefore the agent, with the Government exhorting cooperation as the principal? Or should the Government - fragmented through diverse agencies representing employer interest and government intention - be acting as the agent of employers through the education system, supplying employable young people at their behest? The answer is probably a balance of the two. Yet a successful relationship between principal and agent requires a number of criteria to be met. Chief among those is an outcomes-based contract to drive positive behaviours, making an agent more likely to behave in the interests of the principal: shared and agreed goals (Eisenhardt, 1989). These may still favour one party over another but, if they are agreed, both penalty and reward may be attached to them. However, under the voluntarist system, a contractual relationship of this nature between employers and the state is not possible. In addition to the issues this causes for a principal reliant on an agent without contract to fulfil a critical role, the situation has driven the state to overcompensate and overregulate in areas – and over parties or agents – that it is able to control, such as the QCA and Ofqual, Ofsted and the extensive and suffocating use of NPM measures to control – and remain informed about – their behaviours.

Whilst the Government may appear to be in a weak position within the voluntarist system, in agency terms its position is relatively risk neutral. Certainly the financial investment in the development of initiatives such as GNVQ and the 14-19 Diplomas, coupled with their subsequent lack of success, portrays the Government as a risk neutral principal ‘relatively uninfluenced by outcome uncertainty’ (Eisenhardt, 1989). The Government is neither challenged by risk - failed initiatives and changes of government being commonplace and taxpayers’ money at times apparently limitless - but nor is it able to really influence employer or awarding organisation behaviour. A lack of comprehensive LMI and consequently knowledge of skills needs, erratic funding investment, and the unwillingness of many employers to share industry requirements or to train beyond immediate needs to protect

business interests - and prevent the poaching of trained staff, for example - would see the Government as a weak principal in terms of 14-19 ET system developments.

The development of the 14-19 Diplomas relied on the voluntary input of employers and their acceptance and 'use' of the qualification at a later date. Despite the governance structures in place, the quality of input, particularly within certain sectors, appeared uncontrolled. There was no guarantee of employers making either a contribution to content or accepting the final qualifications or of subsequent governments maintaining them. In these circumstances, the employer is a powerful agent with the Government a weak principal, lacking information and the ability to enforce the contract on employers supporting the new qualifications: 'outcome uncertainty is positively related to behaviour-based contracts and negatively related to outcome-based contracts' (Eisenhardt, 1989: 61).

It is not clear who will verify or measure which employers are putting ET at the heart of their organisation, and how this will be done (The Edge Foundation, 2013). Conflicts impact on the 'equilibrium behaviour' of the organisation as a whole (Jensen, 1994: 11). Critically for the success of the ET system, that is not to say that individuals cannot represent the interests of others. In many situations, the principal and agent or the members of a group will reach a compromise: what Jensen (1994) terms the 'conservation of value principle' (13). However, in this instance the 'value' appears to be linked to 'widest use' rather than 'most appropriate to need', resulting in longer-term devaluation.

Agency theory draws attention to the problems of self-control which lead to 'non-functional' behaviour. Predicting the behaviour of individuals and what this means for future models and policies will merit, in Jensen's (1994) view, vastly increased attention. He suggests that altering 'the institutional structures, contracts and informal arrangements...to reduce conflict' (15) is a more

effective aim than trying to alter the motivation or behaviour of individuals, but these are arguably two facets of the same aim. In altering the systems and processes with which the individual engages to minimise the impact of conflict, some incentives to behave self-interestedly must be removed, and likewise some opportunities for conflict. This in turn will increase the potential benefits to all involved. More recognition of this might elicit a less self-interested approach.

The impact of identity on the employer role

The impact of the presence – and absence – of employers in ET policy-making and implementation, and the impact of business size, for example, has been discussed previously (Keep, 2005), but examinations of the employer role have tended to put aside individual behaviours in their consideration of why partnerships do not always function predictably or in the way that policy rhetoric assures us that they will (Lumby and Foskett, 2006). This thesis argues that understanding what motivates or prevents involvement from an individual perspective is central to a greater understanding of - and ability to influence - employer involvement in full-time 14-19 ET: unpacking the 'black box' (Jensen, 1994:14) of 'employers' as far as it makes sense.

There are well-documented issues faced by SMEs in terms of funding training, and covering potential absence through training, and issues faced by businesses in rural locations. Observations about the heterogeneity of 'employers' as a group and the difficulty of firstly defining 'business' and then representing its interests within the system (Gleeson, 1990; Gleeson and Keep, 2005; Keep, 2012), supported a closer examination of 'employers', which when broken down revealed a number of additional identities. ET policy appears to be based on a misleading assumption that the term 'employer' is synonymous with 'organisation'. It allows government to declare the support of a number of national or international companies, whose names may be familiar to all, but does not represent the true picture. What is seen is the organisation. What may be seen is the impact of the

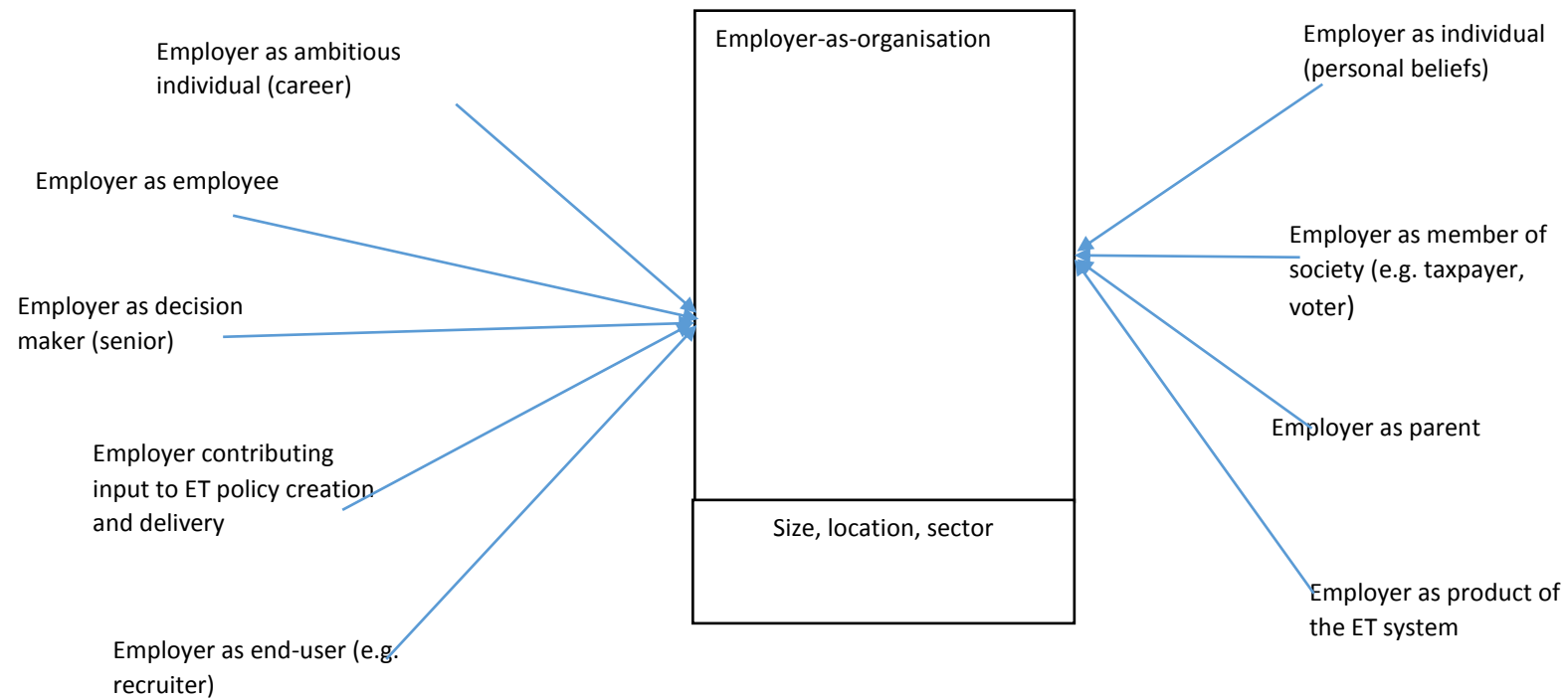
size, location or sector of the organisation. Yet what needs to be taken into account as far as practicable is the range of identities 'hidden' by the word 'employer, but which nevertheless help to shape the employer identity and therefore influence any inputs. Engeström (2001) recognised this in the 'multiple points of view, traditions and interests' (136) in an activity group, splitting further the external identity of the employee down to their position within the completion of a task and the perspective this affords them. Figure 9 (below) illustrates the most significant argument of this thesis: that the multiple identities that make up the individual employer impact on their attitude towards education and training policy, recruitment practices and contributions to policy groups.

Employers may have multiple identities such as those of parent, employee, voter and member of society, all of which influence and shape their 'employer' input. On the left of the diagram are the work-related influences: not solely the job role but the ambitions and hierarchies that impact on this. On the right of the diagram are the personal experiences and circumstances that cannot be left at the office door. It is this combination, underpinned by the more usually identified factors, such as business size and location, which make up the 'employer-as-organisation' sitting round a project table, shaping the future of young people through qualifications and other ET initiatives. Whilst the figure includes only 'individual' identities, the impact of these, that is, the impact of a group of parents or ambitious individuals when grouped, needs to be considered.

No one type of person is an employer. Employers are individuals who happen to make up a group called 'employers' because of the commonality that they employ – or work for organisations which employ - others. An 'employer' is an individual with a lifetime of experience and a set of current personal circumstances, which may be unknown or even unwelcome in the workplace but the influence of which cannot be ignored by the individual themselves, or arguably by either the stakeholders or policy-makers calling on their services.

‘Employer-as-end-user’ is an important distinction as it represents the majority of employers, that is those *not* involved in full-time 14-19 ET, and is accompanied by a policy assumption that ‘employer support’ represents many of these people. It means that the vast majority of those expected to use a new qualification as a means of sifting potential entrants to the workplace, for example, have had no influence in its creation, and little knowledge of its content or suitability as a preparation for progression. Young people, however, receive the message that a qualification is ‘endorsed by employers’ or similar. This disjoint could result in many wasted learning hours and resources, and the disillusionment of both labour market entrants and potential employers. Despite the importance of structures, institutions and processes (Lumby and Morrison, 2006; Jensen, 1994) a system which is not fully regulated must rely on individual behaviours for success. Regulation is weak because it covers only certain elements of the system - such as qualifications - and therefore lacks coherence or significance.

Figure 9. Potential personal and professional identities (illustrative)



A number of drivers may affect the employee role in full-time 14-19 ET: the seniority of the position held and the commensurate ability to make decisions in relation to the commitment of resources or the definition of ET needs within an industry; the personal ambition of the individual and their attitude towards the impact of their involvement in a given project in relation to those ambitions; the national or global profile of the organisation represented by them, and the weight of their individual opinion in relation to that; their knowledge or interest in ET; and their belief or knowledge of how that impacts on their organisation.

Beyond the identity as an employee a number of other factors may influence decisions made by an 'employer' in relation to education and training: the educational background of the individual, their personal knowledge and experience of the system, and how it has helped or hindered their ambition; their attendance at state or private school, in that the latter is unlikely to have brought much exposure to qualifications or learning routes beyond the traditionally academic; the role of parent, which may see the individual basing their choices and having their opinions formed either by their own experience or by the availability of opportunity in the area in which their family is located or by the ambitions of their offspring; finally, but not exhaustively, the employer as an individual member of society and voter may seek to influence projects in line with long-held beliefs reflecting a political or personal belief: 'an individual may define herself in terms of the organisation she works for, yet she can disagree with the prevailing values, strategy...and so on' (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). People behave unexpectedly, particularly when certain behaviours are assumed.

On a professional level, an employer is also an employee, subject to commercial strictures whatever policy demands are made of them, and may not have the freedom to act assumed by policy. Despite their greater decision-making power, even an owner-manager, particularly one with employees, may be faced with a complex set of considerations. Where that individual is a senior figure, an independent decision-maker, they may be less bound by the need to consult the wider business

before committing resources to a project, but as an employee they may be powerless to do more than represent a name by their presence. They may harbour ambitions within or outside of their company, which would be harder to fulfil if an ET project is not successful or costs their organisation more than it benefits them. On the other hand, mixing with policy makers to the highest level in support of ET policy might enable both other personal and organisational ambitions to be fulfilled through lobbying. The individual choices of employers can have as much impact on the success or failure of an initiative as the structure of the system. Policy must assume that employer involvement is motivated by business need, however long-term.

Both organisations and employers are able to act as ‘individuals’, that is, in their own self-interest or in the interests of others. Individuals act in their own interest but this fact does not exclude benefit to others from that action even if this is likely to be a secondary result of the original decision or action taken. Where individuals put the interests of others first, that is, behave altruistically, it does not mean that there is no benefit to the individual. The system throws up barriers, often unintentionally, which drive behaviours in organisations and individuals, but it is not possible for a system to be responsive to all the barriers – perceived and real – that prevent employers from playing a greater role in the system. Individuals cannot fully separate their identities when acting: an employer remains an employee and a member of society even when representing their organisation on a project or recruiting to their business, and may also be a parent or school governor and influenced by that position too.

Some organisations may be heavily involved in training but not in publicly funded training, with their contribution to skills development consequently less visible and measurable. This may lead to a perception that they are not contributing sufficiently, and to accusations of non-participation or a lack of interest in the future skills of the country. Equally, some employers may make a great show of being involved in government projects, for example supporting the development of new

vocational qualifications for delivery in schools, but may privately admit that their company would never employ an individual holding such a qualification, or that no child of theirs would be allowed to study it - an example of Hall's (2006) 'double shuffle'. The perception is of participation but the reality may be less transparent.

In addition to the physical and sectoral differences between them, the businesses supplying the 'employer voice' on government initiatives represent only a fraction of employers and the 'voice' they represent at a national level, for example, is extremely fragmented. What begins to emerge is a far richer picture, with the employer having a potentially different impact on each demand fulfilled depending on which 'role' they are playing and which facet is most influential at the time of their participation. Individual employers participating in education-related projects at any level will provide a quality of input commensurate with their own knowledge, experience, interest and the reality of the daily demands of the job they are being paid to do. The 'boss' giving time to a high-profile initiative may have a very different attitude and set of motivations to the 'mere employee' who has been gifted the project on top of an already full-time role.

A sense of social responsibility is both too specific and too broad a concept to be an effective driver of behaviour because, whilst individuals may be predisposed to help in many circumstances, drivers of the occasions on which they would be prepared to help, and the exceptions to these, may vary exponentially (Batson et al, 2011). Where, for example, six employers are invited to contribute to an initiative, three may willingly provide resources in the shape of themselves, offers of work placements, or staff training. The other three may turn down the offer for reasons as diverse as personal circumstances, personal beliefs or interests (or lack thereof), organisational demands, funding constraints, political reasons, organisational size and structure and the inability to commit the resource, location and working hours requested. It may be the case that a willing employer will find a way to overcome their particular exception(s) and fulfil the given role. All the employers in

these examples will have acted to a greater or lesser extent in their own self-interest (Jensen, 1994; Khalil, 2001); 14-19 ET policy wants employers to demonstrate social responsibility, but not all of them do, and the motivation of those who do varies. This matters as policy must appeal to such varied motives to succeed in its apparently core aim of increasing the number of employers involved.

The influence of group membership on behaviour

Whether an employer is a member of a policy group or the 'group' that represents their identity as parent or voter, this identity can influence their 'employer' input into policy. Ashforth and Mael (1989) argue that a number of factors have a bearing on social identification, including how the individuals making up a group are identified, for example, as employers or employees, or even parents (Figure 9). The 'distinctiveness and prestige' (20) of the group is a factor. A room full of individuals from 'big name' organisations may be worth attending for the professional networking opportunities it presents or the kudos that contributing to that group brings. The 'salience of the outgroups' (20), that is, the relevance of them to the individual in relation to other identities, can be influential. If, for example, an employer is asked to create a qualification that will impact on the experience and chances of their own child, they may identify with the 'parent' outgroup in a way that others may not. This in turn might influence their input.

Where employers come together in a group – take collective action - the policy assumption must be that they are motivated by organisational, sectoral or individual need. Individuals are not acting from such a degree of self-interest or altruism as for their personal choices to skew the decisions made to an untenable degree. Instead, overall they are working for a 'common' good - even if that allows them ultimately to garner individual reward. However they will have particular preferences. Political allegiances may colour their judgement (Buchanan and Tullock, 1999). In a later work

Buchanan (2003) argues that people tend not to rise above their own self-interest when making decisions about the use of public resources but instead act according to their own benefit, be that re-election or career success. The author owes this apparent 'disillusionment' to the insight into more than half a century of politics provided by Public Choice Theory, from its socialist origins through neo-liberalism and NPM to being largely market-driven in the public as well as private arena.

Schugart (undated) argues that it is not the motivation of individuals that changes in a collective choice situation but that the incentives and constraints available in either the individual or collective setting have a different influence on decisions. Privately, one may take a decision 'voluntarily' and benefit from or suffer the consequences of that decision. Within a group there are generally rules or incentives constraining the decision-making process. In a room full of diverse interests, collective rather than individual goals are the only way to achieve success. However, where that success may be linked to the image of a FTSE100 company, it may not be easy to make a rational judgement about how best to serve the interests of an anonymous 14-year-old in full-time education.

As employers engaged with a potentially politically and financially rewarding infrastructure, the behaviour of employers with an active role in the ET system may also be shaped by considerations other than ET, at both an individual and group level. Public Choice Theory (PCT) seeks to explain political behaviours through the application of economic theories and methods. The political process itself is characterised as a market since, as in any other market, people act in their own self-interest, even where they are acting as part of a group. Public servants therefore act largely in their own self-interest since decisions are made not by organisations but by individuals (Buchanan, 2003; Buchanan and Tullock, 1999). PCT rejects the idea of 'group' choices by 'society' or 'the people', with the individual being the unit of analysis. Ordeshook (1986) terms this 'methodological individualism', the idea that 'social processes and outcomes can only be understood in terms of

individual preferences and choices (1). Employers too are individuals, even though in commercial law no such unit as 'individual' is recognised: the organisation is collectively responsible for the actions of the individuals it employs (Crouch, 2011). This is a notable tension between the public and private sector and may explain some of the policy expectations centred on employers: perhaps public servants expect employers to be able to commit resources on a continuous basis with little consequence to themselves. Employees behaving this way in the private sector would be unlikely to stay in post for long.

Setting overarching goals to moderate behaviours

In the absence of social partnership, the challenge within the English ET System is to compensate not only for the interests of the individual businesses when the 'partnership' is invited - rather than enforced - and therefore to overcome the individuality of experience and opinion within the structure of the system. It is a false assumption that the rules governing groups are fixed externally before group behaviours 'begin' (Buchanan, 2003). For policy to be effective, it must create and sustain an effective set of overarching, or superordinate, goals. Since group rules of behaviour are not fixed until a group comes together, it is possible that the dominating factor of group behaviour has little to do with its externally perceived or intended constitution. In those circumstances a clear set of superordinate goals, agreed prior to the group coming together should help to 'flatten out' extreme individual or group behaviours (Billett and Seddon, 2006) through an 'enacted' social partnership (57).

Achieving employer participation is rarely as simple as asking and receiving. Whilst incentives may help, not all individuals are motivated by the same goals and policy often burdens the 'usual' solutions of qualifications and infrastructure with too many competing goals (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1995). In the absence of social partnership, and of radical system reform, effective policy

must include superordinate goals and those goals must be sustained (Lumby and Morrison, 2006). Such goals are necessary to motivate all parties concerned in the transaction and, in practical, political terms, to justify the use of public money, for example, an increase in financial incentives or greater funding from public money. NPM demands measurable outcomes such as 'x number of newly qualified apprentices' or 'x per cent increase' in the number of learners achieving a higher grade or staying on in full-time learning'. However, such crude measures may have little impact on the bottom line or social conscience of a business or individual employer - as they must if there is to be an increase in, or a more demonstrable return for, employers involved in 14-19 ET.

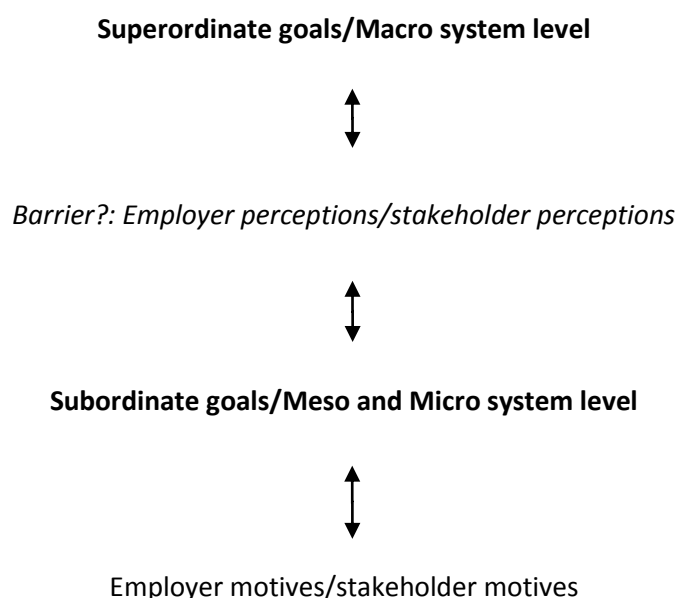


Figure 10: The relationship between goals, perceptions and motives

Figure 10 illustrates the relationship between employers, stakeholders, goals and motives. Superordinate goals must appeal to all and must sit above the perceptions, misconceptions and motives of both employers and stakeholders (including employers as end-users). Barriers may arise where one group feels more included or favoured than another by the end goal. Motives are problematic as they involve personal- and organisational-level drivers for action and behaviours, which may influence the subordinate goals, however neutral or globally-relevant they appear.

This is reflective of the split between ‘ordinary’ and ‘constitutional’ politics (Buchanan, 2003: 5), where the superordinate goals act as the constitution under the limits of which, subordinate goals may be debated, selected and discarded. This concept should prevent individual motives from becoming so varied that progress within the system becomes stagnant. It allows instead for a ‘qualified majority’ of motives and goals to be agreed whilst allowing for a good degree of personalisation and the meeting of sector needs. Yet even this may mean that the needs of 49 per cent of those contributing could be put aside in favour of the majority. This would result in a lot of businesses with their needs not met but initiatives in which they are asked to participate and, in the case of qualifications, on the basis of which they are asked to recruit. Such insights might inform qualification design, thus preventing the selection of a single, ‘best-fit’ approach, which originally only meets the needs of a section of the proposed end-users and which will perhaps be further modified to reflect the opinions of the various aspects of ‘employers’ as defined above. If these employers represent only a small minority, outcomes they define risk becoming increasingly irrelevant.

Conclusions

The framework of theories in this chapter supports the argument that individual identity has the potential to influence at both at an individual and a group level. In addition to historic and cultural factors, and state policy, individual and group employer behaviours shape the inputs to, and outputs from, the ET system. Inputs are affected not only by the size, location and interests of the sector or organisation – factors which policy does try to take into account – but by the experience and interests of the individual ‘employer’, which may be far-removed from the output they are asked to shape or implement. Such ‘self-interested’ behaviour may be exacerbated or exaggerated in a group situation, contributing to a mismatch between policy intention and implementation. It also raised challenges for the research process itself, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

Specifically, the research method would need to enable an in-depth insight into the experience, practice and views of individual employers and other interested stakeholders, draw out aspects of employer identities, and allow the emergence of the complexity of identities and interests making up the 'view' of an employer. At a macro-level, this would reinforce the consequences of the ongoing policy error of referring to 'employers' as a homogenous group, rather than acknowledging and attempting to address the diversity of needs. At a micro-level it would reveal the impact of a single employer view on the creation and implementation of policy.

Chapter 4: The research methodology

Introduction

This chapter provides an explanation of the research methodology. It reiterates the aims and objectives of the thesis, and of the original research, and describes how and why the latter took the shape it did. Following a brief consideration of potential alternative methods, the choice of research method is confirmed and justified in relation to the overall research objectives. An explanation is then given of how the interview schedules (Appendices A and B) were created and interviewees selected. The identification of themes and the coherent ordering of them was significantly more challenging than the selection of methods, options for the latter being limited by the personal nature of the information to be collected – a one-to-one method was required. In terms of themes, however, the nature of the method meant that the data was both rich and varied in nature and it took several attempts to code, analyse and set out the ‘story’ of the responses.

Aims and objectives of the thesis

There are two main elements to this research. A literature review established the historical context the extent of existing research in the area, and provided an up-to-date picture of the New Labour and Coalition education and training policy in relation to full-time 14-19 ET, and how this has shaped assumptions and perceptions in relation to employer behaviours. Primary research then investigated the perceived and actual role of employers from their own perspective by collecting views from a range of individuals and organisations, all of which to some extent represent ‘the employer voice’. From this point onwards, the latter will be referred to as stakeholders to distinguish them from representatives of large commercial organisations.

The initial chapters showed that the employer role in full-time 14-19 ET is affected by the history and culture of England and the ET policy created by successive governments. The findings resulted in the overall research objectives (Table D, below), leading to first-hand knowledge about the opinions of the topic from employers and stakeholders through analysis of the resulting data (Denzin, 1988 in Robson, 2007). The overarching aim of the research is to demonstrate that the relative failure of policy in relation to the employer role in 14-19 ET cannot be fully explained by the historic and cultural roots of the system and the policy of successive governments. Table D reiterates the five objectives identified to support the fulfillment of this aim. Objectives three and four in particular are explored by the original research: individual employer behaviours influence the historic and more recent assumptions on which ET policy appears to be based; how these behaviours are informed by the personal and professional characteristics of the employer that no policy can entirely account for; and the impact of these behaviours on policy implementation, with a view to mitigating the negative effects and challenging the assumptions which otherwise serve to reinforce and influence employer behaviours in their turn.

Table D: Research objectives

| Research objectives: to explore | Chapter |
|---|--|
| How the contextual history of employers informs current relationships with the state and education | Literature Review - Chapters 1 and 2 |
| What the different dimensions of the employer role in New Labour and Coalition policy in a partly voluntarist system were, and the assumptions on which they were based | Literature review – Chapter 2 |
| The extent to which the historical and system tendencies explain the relative weakness of the employer role within full-time 14-19 education and training | Literature review - Chapter 2 Thematic analysis of primary research – Chapter 5 |
| The behaviours which characterise employer involvement in full-time 14-19 education and training, and the drivers behind them | Thematic and Conceptual analysis of primary research - Chapters 5 |
| The changes needed to improve the relationship of employers with full-time 14-19 education and training | Conclusions and recommendations - Chapter 6 |

Overall research approach

Although some quantitative inputs may be gleaned from secondary sources, the overall approach is qualitative. Themes and patterns arising from the primary evidence will be grouped in support of, in addition to, or in potential contradiction of those emerging from the literature. The research is exploratory, explanatory (Oppenheim, 1992; Robson, 2007), and interpretive, seeking to empathise with the motives, actions and behaviours of employers through an understanding of why and how they are involved – or have avoided involvement – in full-time 14-19 ET (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Morrison, 1998). The research starts with a broad base, narrowing to provide an illustration of the findings. Figure 11 illustrates the overall approach to the research, with a background and contextual element supported by original research and finally outcomes based on the analysis of that.

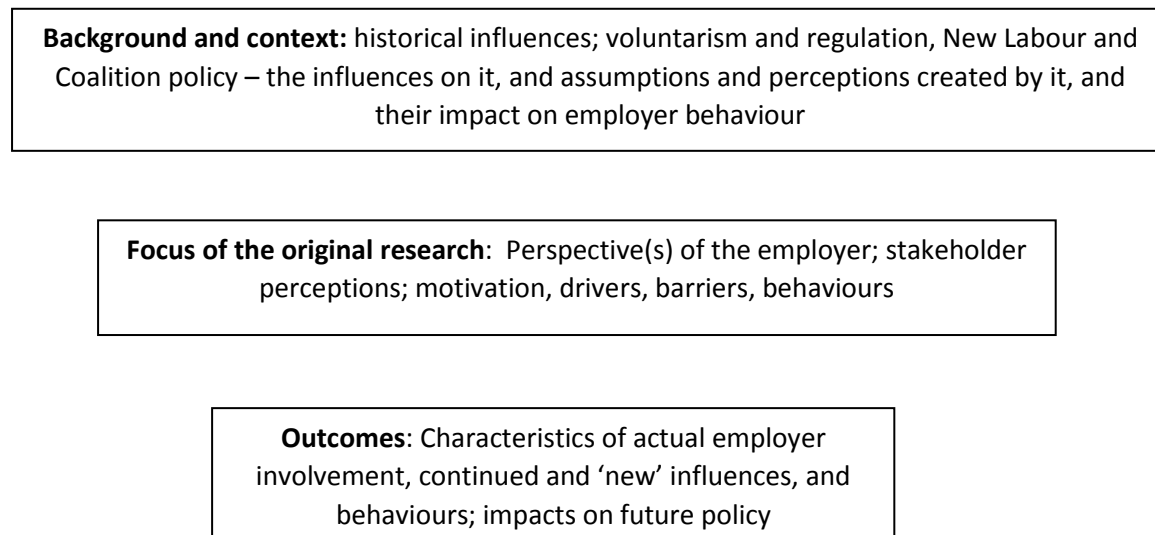


Figure 11: The overall approach to research

Data collection methods

The research is not intended to be statistically valid in terms of the number of individuals interviewed or their grouping, but to elicit illustrative views and experiences directly from individuals about a role which is much represented in literature and policy at organisational level. The research is therefore qualitative with potential methods considered - the focus group, questionnaire or interview.

Focus groups are practical in terms of costs and limiting the number of sessions required to generate sufficient data. They offer an opportunity for free discussion, generating inputs from participants that may not emerge from the one-to-one arrangement of the interview, and revealing categories and links not previously considered by the researcher (Macnaghten and Myers, 2007). The credibility of the research rested partly on the seniority of the chosen interviewees and their ability to give an industry and commercial account of their role within 14-19 ET. The intention was to interview senior representatives in depth rather than larger numbers of industry employees more superficially. In combination, the resulting interviewees represent senior and influential individuals in their respective industries. Issues of confidentiality and practicality therefore posed drawbacks in relation to the focus group method. Participants may have been less honest or more reticent with opinions (Kitzinger and Farquhar, 1999), and it is unlikely that senior figures would have given the time to participate. Further, in terms of location - most individuals agreeing to an interview have an office or meeting space at no additional cost or disruption to the remainder of their working day - so focus groups proved an impractical option.

Questionnaires can have a limited rate of return (Cohen et al, 2007), in this case potentially compounded by the desire to access senior representatives from an organisation for interview, a smaller pool that would be less likely to take - or have - the time to complete a written survey.

Arranging a meeting with an individual, either directly or through a third party introduction, has ensured that priority has been given to the request. It is doubtful that a questionnaire would produce similar results. In terms of responses, questionnaires do not offer an opportunity for discussion or clarification and 'sensitive' data may be under-reported (Sudman and Bradburn, 1982; Cooper and Schindler, 2001). This may add to consistency and validity in some respects but also limits the ability to explore new knowledge over the research period (Bailey, 1994).

Selected method

Semi-structured (Robson, 1993) or 'standardized open-ended' interviews (Cohen et al, 2007) of thirty to forty minutes in length were used to gather data to inform the research objectives (Cannell and Kahn, 1968; Tuckman, 1972 in Cohen et al, 2007), the selected method mitigating a number of the concerns raised above whilst generating some of its own. There appears to be some disparity between the definitions and extent of the term 'structured interviews'. Different experiences, and in the case of stakeholders different roles and literal perspectives, will produce a variety of responses.

Consistency of question ordering, interview length and to some extent location, enables methods to be replicated but the nature of interviews means that some variability is inevitable, for example in terms of interviewee reaction (Oppenheim, 1992), background, knowledge of the topics explored and enthusiasm (Kitwood, 1977). Question sequencing, finite in a questionnaire, may alter to account for these. Neither location nor length can be guaranteed as arrangements change, focus and knowledge vary and flexibility is required to ensure the interviewee feels able to express themselves. Seidman (2013) argues that the best way to understand 'social abstractions', in this case assumptions and perceptions around the role and involvement of employers in the full-time 14-19 education and training system, is 'through the experiences of the individuals whose work and lives are the stuff upon which the abstractions are built' (Ferraroti, 1981 in Seidman, 2013 : 9). Interviews

are the best way to gain a 'subjective understanding' (10) of that experience. Interviewing is 'deeply satisfying' (13), and a 'powerful way to gain insight' which 'affirms the importance of the individual without denigrating the possibility of community and collaboration' (13) allowing a deep insight into the research subject (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), which in this case involves investigating personal and professional experience and opinions.

Only one interviewee, a stakeholder (STK7), was unable to give at least half an hour owing to a subsequent appointment: as CEO his diary took precedence but he followed up one or two points for clarity via e-mail. STK11 was the only one who would not allow the conversation to be digitally recorded and was visibly nervous about expressing an opinion. Since the interviewee was also fairly new to the role and lacking seniority, this provided an effective illustration of the difference between someone who is used to confidently expressing both personal and organisational opinions and one who is not. The transcript for this interviewee is far shorter than the rest as it was possible only to record the key points – necessarily selected at the time of interview – rather than everything that was said. This may have resulted in some point or nuance being missed at the time of analysis but there are sufficient other interviews to counter any problems arising from this. As a result there are no direct quotations from this individual in the analysis.

All 'employers' (EMP1-8) were at the most senior level within their organisation, and both willing and open with their personal and professional opinions. Their seniority occasionally made it difficult to limit the length of the interviews, partly because they felt that they must ensure that certain things were recorded and understood but, in two cases, where considerable travel was required to conduct the interview, good manners clearly made it the case that the interviewees wanted to ensure 'value' for the journey undertaken. One interview contained two interviewees, a fact not disclosed until arrival, at which point it felt awkward to ask one of them to leave. However, they simply took turns to answer the questions rather than both trying to answer all, and provided very

different perspectives on the same sector as one had been an officer in the Forces and one had a background as an FE lecturer. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews provided original insight into the existence of the influence of personal and professional opinions of and behaviours towards 'employer'-based ET policies (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

Interview schedules and questions

Two versions of the interview schedule were produced: one for employers and one for stakeholders. These appear in Appendices A and B. For employers four main sections cover: personal background; organisational structure and culture; individual and organisational activities undertaken in relation to the employer role in 14-19 education and training and reflection on the role of employers in 14-19 education and training. The stakeholder schedule differs slightly. Although the four sections are similarly titled, in the third section, stakeholders are asked to reflect on the activities employers are asked to undertake in this area, stakeholder opinions of and attitudes towards these, and how they might be shaped differently to maximise benefit to all concerned. Although difficult to completely avoid mentioning personal experiences or opinions when one is engaged in a conversation, leading questions must be avoided (Morrison (1993) – as to use them would distort the interviewing process. Consequently, each section includes a number of potential topic areas as prompts, and interviewees have talked about those most relevant to them, plus an opportunity for them to offer any additional information of their own choosing. The purpose of the questions was to elicit information about the personal motives and policy drivers and barriers to employer involvement in full-time 14-19 ET in the eyes of the interviewees, and to understand how these are perceived by stakeholders – some of whom see themselves as both third party stakeholder and as representatives of the employer voice.

In addition to probing the more obvious aspects of employer involvement in full-time 14-19 ET, and to some extent confirming some of the assumptions, drivers and barriers revealed in the early chapters, the objectives sought to reveal the very personal nature of certain employer responses. Questions about employers' own backgrounds in terms of qualifications held and schools attended could extend into revealing positions on the relative merits of said certificates and establishments. Confirmation of the fulfillment of some of the demands listed in Table C. Chapter 3 could lead into the identification of barriers and drivers for and against particular choices made.

Interviewees

The sectors from which interviewees were drawn were those involved in the development of the first tranche of the 14-19 Diplomas and therefore have had some experience of full-time 14-19 ET and knowledge of the wider issues and aims of the thesis. The interview pool was partly planned and partly arose from interviewee availability and the need to represent a rounded view of the issues raised. Many of the employers are drawn from the Construction sector, which has an established tradition of provision in full-time, compulsory and workplace ET.

It is important to acknowledge that the Construction industry has a number of peculiarities which might have risked skewing the research outcomes. The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) has survived, and adapted to, many of the incarnations of the intermediary bodies representing employers such as National Training Organisations and Sector Skills Councils. Unlike the majority of sectors, Construction employers are subject to a training levy making their role in training more regulated than in most other sectors. The split between skilled manual trades and professional roles within the sector has meant that the sector suffers a reputation for being for those less able to pursue other careers – at least in the context of what is offered in schools, which has largely been those manual skills. The target audience for schools-based vocational qualifications in the industry has also largely been boys. This has had the effect of excluding girls, and more generally students of

higher ability, from an industry rich with opportunity at many levels, including professional roles such as surveying and all manner of engineering. For those employed at the level of manual labourer, the sector has suffered from a reputation for poor training and a lack of long-term employment opportunities owing to the short-term contracting of workers. It is one of the only sectors to enable the recording of experience and qualifications on a credit card-sized proof of achievement, the content of which can be accessed easily through central records by any prospective employer, mitigating some of the negative impacts of short-term contracts for workers, granting them ease of transferability between employers. A licence to practice in addition to a levy. The sector has worked hard to rid itself of its negative image. It is then, a sector which appears to be an exception in terms of representing the employer voice.

The initial intention was to interview a small number of employers from this sector and to contrast their views with those in other sectors. However, owing to the willingness of those invited to participate - not one person asked turned down the request to be interviewed - the number of those interviewed from the sector doubled. Whilst there were early concerns about the impact of the unique characteristics of the industry on elements of the employer responses, it quickly became clear that the number of opinions and experiences within this industry – one with established traditions of providing vocational ET and participating in government ET initiatives - was almost as varied as the number of interviewees, reducing potential concerns of narrowness of view and helping to support the intended research outcome. In fact it served to illustrate just how the underlying issue of identity affected even those who appeared to share similar contexts. This was confirmed through comparison with employers and employer-representative bodies from other sectors.

It would be challenging for an individual researcher to carry out interviews of this nature with a representative sample across a number of sectors without far greater resources. The intention of

this work is to illustrate and illuminate the multivariate opinions and experiences of employers and employer-representatives who are – or who the system would like to be – involved in full-time 14-19 education and training, and to gauge the complexity of the drivers, motives, barriers and behaviours within this. The desired attributes of the interview pool are at such a high level as to mitigate any concerns about bias in their selection (Lansing, 1961). The initial research interviews revealed a rich picture of ‘personal’ responses to questions originally intended to elicit organisational-level views, many of which were made unconsciously. The challenge for the remaining interviews was to balance this personal dimension so as not to be too intrusive, when the individual was ostensibly and organisational representative, and equally not to draw too many definitive conclusions from a small pool of interviewees about some quite emotive and intangible impacts on the ET system.

It is not possible to put more detail into Table E (below) for reasons of identification and confidentiality. The associations and councils represent aspects of the Engineering and Construction sectors – some representatives of which view themselves as falsely separated industries since the former supply much of the workforce for the latter in certain disciplines; Manufacturing, which offered a critical insight into small businesses, in an industry with established VET provision, and representatives of small businesses, specialist trades and sectors as a whole. Many of the stakeholders are employer-membership organisations and consider themselves representative of the employer voice, which in practice means the voice of the small employer against that of the large, contracting organisation, which tends to represent itself even whilst participating in industry groups. The difficulty of obtaining interviews directly with SMEs means that the research has had to rely on the input of such organisations to represent the voice of the small- and medium-sized employer. However, this reflects the reality of ET projects, which are grateful to have input from one or two voices from small businesses but more often ‘make do’ with the views of representative organisations.

Table E: List of interviewees (EMP = employers, STK = stakeholders)

| Interviewee | Type of organisation | Brief description of organisation |
|---|-----------------------|--|
| Business organisations | | |
| EMP1 | Telecomms | large organisation |
| EMP2 | Construction | large organisation |
| EMP3 | Construction | large organisation |
| EMP4 | Telecomms | large organisation |
| EMP5 | Construction | large organisation |
| EMP 6 | Construction | large organisation |
| EMP7 | Construction | large organisation |
| EMP8 | Construction | large organisation |
| Organisations whose role is to represent the employer voice or perspective or to provide a link between the employer and an element of the ET system | | |
| STK1 | Sector Skills Council | tasked with representing the employer voice in ET programmes |
| STK2 | Sector Skills Council | tasked with representing the employer voice in ET programmes |
| STK3 | Training Provider | working in detail with a number of large organisations to understand and deliver tailored ET needs resulting in nationally recognised certificates |
| STK4 | Trade Association | funded by and representing the voice of its employer membership – mainly small businesses |
| STK5 | Trade Union | an umbrella organisation working with businesses of all sizes and many industries nationwide to further the interests of union members |
| STK6 | National Academy | professional body ensuring technical standards at all levels of education and training for the industry |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| List of interviewees contd. | | |
| Organisations whose role is to represent the employer voice or perspective or to provide a link between the employer and an element of the ET system (contd). | | |
| STK7 | Awarding organisation | provider of vocational certification requiring employer input and endorsement of its qualifications |
| STK8 | Trade Association | funded by and representing the voice of its employer membership – mainly small businesses |
| STK9 | Trade Association | funded by and representing the voice of its employer membership – mainly small businesses |
| STK10 | Careers Adviser | informing young people of the progression routes open to them and the skills and qualifications required by future employers |
| STK11 | National Council for Trade Associations | bridging organisation bringing together the views of its members – and therefore those members of the represented Associations – at Industry, Council and Government level |
| STK12 | Education Business Partnership | working with businesses to provide work experience and work-based learning opportunities for primary and secondary school age children |
| STK13 | Awarding organisation | provider of vocational certification requiring employer input and endorsement of its qualifications |

The stakeholder pool

Stakeholders are drawn from a variety of former and existing quangos, governmental organisations, and membership and representative bodies. They represent perspectives where the external supposition might be that the employer voice is fully-embedded, for example, in CEIAG, the Employer Business Partnership and the Sector Skills Council. Some were put forward by employers as adding an essential element to the research. Others were professional contacts whose impact on or place in the 14-19 Diploma project was not always what had been expected and merited further exploration.

The employer pool

All employers from the Construction industry were introduced by a member of the industry council. It was made very clear by both sides that opinions given belonged to the individual parties and that the introduction was made as a favour by a professional contact. All individuals approached in this way agreed to be interviewed. Whilst there was risk that these individuals could have followed a similar line, thereby having a negative impact on the diversity of opinion in the employer group, it became clear very quickly that their opinions and experiences differed substantially and that they were willing to speak very openly on the subjects discussed. In fact, this 'consistency' of background helped to confirm early on in the thesis that apparently similar backgrounds, company sizes and aims – and even a common introduction – appeared to have little bearing on the individual input of those interviewed, further supporting the theoretical basis.

Other employers and stakeholders were drawn from the Engineering and IT and Telecommunications sectors. Some were existing professional contacts approached directly, others were introduced by an existing professional contact. The Construction sector has an established history of successful vocational education. Information Technology is a relatively new sector with

popular and respected professional certification, occasionally linked to national provision for funding purposes.

The interview process

An initial schedule of questions was produced. Four respondents were chosen to provide feedback on these. They were well-known to the interviewee professionally and therefore accessible, approachable and likely to take the time to give feedback. All interviewees were supplied with the schedule prior to the meeting. Supervisor and respondent feedback was incorporated resulting in the refining of the broad research categories, a different grouping of the questions and a reduction in the level of detail on the version of the questions to be used with the initial interviewees.

Feedback showed: a need to be more specific when categorising those being interviewed, as many stakeholders could also be classified as employer-representatives or employers; also the necessity of clearly defining questions as interviewees seem to differ in their responses according to their position, role and perceived power. Two versions of the interview schedule (Appendices A and B) were then produced, differing in the third section according to whether the interviewee was an employer or a stakeholder.

In total, four employers and five stakeholders were interviewed in autumn 2010 with a further four employers and one stakeholder in winter 2012 - a mix of professional contacts and third party introductions. The latter provided further support for the research topic and helped to confirm the shape and emphasis of the early chapters. The remainder of the interviews took place between autumn 2013 and early 2014.

Interviewees were given a guide time of 30-45 minutes maximum for the interview. The majority of interviews were completed within 40 minutes leading to between 9 and 20 pages of transcribed text. One or two interviews lasted up to an hour resulting in more than twenty pages of transcribed text. Only one interviewee declined to have the interview recorded. This means that there are no quotations available from the individual and the interview resulted in fewer than five transcribed pages. The majority of interviews took place in a similar setting: an office-based meeting room at the workplace of the interviewee. Two interviews took place in public spaces – a building atrium and a cafe – with the only adverse effect being that the data was more challenging to hear against the background noise during transcription. This at least served to mitigate concerns about confidentiality as the conversation could not easily be overheard.

Availability of interviewees

The shaping of this research has encountered a number of challenges. The original inspiration for the research, the employer role in the 14-19 Diplomas, had to be broadened following the change of government in 2010 and the effective rejection of the qualifications by the in-coming government. The apparent displacement of employers from – and the promotion of higher education to – a role in 14-19 education under the Coalition government gave rise to the potential lack of relevance of the research and concerns that a solution to the issue had already been found. These concerns have since been dispelled by the initial interview sample and daily media reports. However, as an active area of policy, there is the possibility of other findings and solutions being proposed during the course of this research. These will be acknowledged and incorporated as appropriate.

Accessing employers on a one-to-one basis might have proved a stumbling block for this piece of research, but face-to-face time with employers was the only way for the results and recommendations to achieve credibility. In setting up interviews, priority was given to identifying

potential employer-interviewees and ways of accessing them through existing personal professional networks and membership networks such as the IoD and the CBI. However, a preponderance of employers with a membership of one or other of these organisations may provide its own source of bias and this may require an additional question in the personal information section to establish membership or affiliation. On a personal and professional level for the author, the distance now existing between the professional involvement in the development of policy and qualifications for 14-19 year olds that inspired the research has allowed the identity of 'researcher' rather than 'critical participant' to come to the fore, to the benefit of the quality the research undertaken and the analysis of the data, mitigating early concerns about interviewer bias (Cohen et al, 2007).

Ethical considerations

There are a number of ethical considerations to take into account when interviewing employers (Seidman, 2013). Data security in relation to recordings and transcripts is a general given, but in this instance it is necessary to ensure that personal opinions are not attributed to a company and that company plans or experiences are not inadvertently revealed in conversation to subsequent interviewees – the latter particularly important when some of the interviewees know each other and are aware they are both being interviewed, or when more than one person from the same company – perhaps a subordinate – is being interviewed. Some third-party agencies rely on government funding or favour to carry out their role and must therefore ensure that themes and issues arising should remain non-attributable to avoid detrimental impacts from participation in the research. The research was conducted within the BERA (2011) guidelines. Participants were invited to be interviewed on the basis of informed consent. For all interviews this took the shape of an e-mail inviting participation with an explanation of the research aims and a request to allow the interview to be digitally recorded.

Recording and transcription of the interviews

All interviews were digitally recorded with a high quality recorder, adjustable to take account of acoustics and possible background noise. The recorder was for the personal use of the researcher only and therefore not accessible or usable by others in a way which might impact confidentiality. With full consideration given to the latter, using support outside of academia and the professional area concerned, original transcription and its verification were split between the researcher and one other party to ensure quality and accuracy (Seale, 1999). Concerns about the punctuation of transcripts, for example - and the possibility of changed meaning or emphasis resulting from this in the selection of the initial findings - are tempered by the fact that an interview, especially one which hopes to probe the personal motivations and opinions of individuals, is a conversation, and these, particularly in multiples, are not linear in nature.

Following transcription, the initial interviews were analysed in detail by reading through several times and coding phrases and passages, resulting in more than twenty-five categories, many of those divided into sub-categories. Early analysis tended towards the use of template analysis as this produced what appeared to be the most informative level of detail, requiring reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to identify and code categories and themes (King and Horrocks, 2010). However, this produced an unwieldy level of detail and an unhelpful – to this researcher – atomisation of themes. Many of the apparently separate categories were so closely related that there was a risk of an unnecessary complexity to the final analysis, and of coding the ‘mentioning’ of a topic rather than the more considered analysis of a theme through a wider understanding of context (Hammersley, 1992; Seale, 2004). Analysis therefore does not concern itself with the language used by interviewees but with their explanations and descriptions (Geertz, 1973) interpreted alongside relevant policy and practice to identify commonalities and discrepancies.

Data storage

Assurances were given regarding the short and long-term storage of the recording. Digital files are stored using an identification code, recorded separately and known only to the researcher to minimise the chance of access to – and therefore identification from – content. Transcripts omit any reference to individual names or organisation. Files are stored on a personal computer, which is not networked to any other and is used solely by the researcher. They are backed up to a separate hard drive, stored securely and separately from the computer.

Every effort has been made to acknowledge – and, where appropriate, reference – source materials and inputs. Any omissions or errors are unintentional and will be amended on request.

Approach to analysis of findings

In terms of data analysis, the intention was always to allow the opinions and experiences of the employers and stakeholders to emerge from the data as truthfully as possible. The very nature of face-to-face interviewing, particularly over an extended period of time, means that it is not possible – nor desirable – to behave as though the interviews are taking place in a time and policy vacuum. Discovering what has changed – or remained similar – over the research period is part of the research rather than pretending that previous interviews have not taken place or to feigning ignorance of, or ignoring the impact, of policy changes during the period. It was not possible for the interviewer to ignore questions from the interviewee about their own background or interest in the subject: such an approach would damage the relationship between the two parties. Interviewing over an extended period of time allowed for the development of views about and reaction to policy and on a research level helped to avoid the risk of interviewer fatigue (Cohen et al, 2007), with each one able to be a fresh conversation on the topic, although shaped by the same questionnaire.

Thematic analysis of the data

The questionnaires covered four potential areas of analysis as illustrated in Table F (below). Since one intention of the thesis was to explore and illustrate the impact of employer behaviours, and the motives, drivers and barriers relating to them, these categories provided one potential set of themes around which to carry out the analysis. An additional consideration was the impact of the personal and professional behaviour of the employer: when a decision is made or an action taken whether it driven by the employer-as-organisational representative or the employer-as-individual. Finally, consideration of employer behaviours through the lens of behavioural theories such as those of self-interest, egoism, altruism, PCT and Game Theory provide an insight. The potential units of analysis could be unwieldy and overly complex.

Table F: Four broad areas of the questionnaire:

| Employer background | Influences | Activities undertaken | Policy consistency and change |
|---|--|---|---|
| Examples of involvement in 14-19 ET; Policy under New Labour and the Coalition and its impact | Personal (employer-as-individual) and professional (employer-as-organisational representative) | Behaviours, motives, drivers, barriers, perceptions | Changes to policy and practice under New Labour and the Coalition |

Challenges to the thematic analysis approach include: not being able to use all the data even if it is all interesting – or just because it is interesting: it must be relevant to the research topic; presenting a balance of views even where there is no intention to claim statistical validity, for example, not quoting from one individual at length simply because their input was, in the eyes of the researcher, more interesting or better expressed than that of another interviewee; creating a coherent analysis of the data rather than presenting a random set of opinions and thoughts.

In addition to deciding which themes to use there was the question of whether to illustrate themes by employer or stakeholder or whether to make the theme the central matter and describe how it impacts on each of the groups. The former would arguably give the employer view centre stage, which might be considered critical to a credible outcome in terms of recommendations, whereas the latter would reduce repetition and allow for a truly thematic analysis of the data. Thematic analysis also acknowledges that whatever difficulties employers have had engaging with 14-19 education and training, if and when they do they are doing so as part of a bigger system, and that any measure that helps them to have a greater involvement must not in turn throw up a barrier in other parts of the system. In the absence of formal social partnership in England, it is critical that all users of the system are accommodated fairly. This may not be the same as 'equally'.

Motives, drivers and barriers

Before any examination of the data, the macro-themes of motives, drivers and barriers were identified as one potential filter, being common to all the interviewees. However, an initial examination of the data revealed a number of challenges in relation to these themes: such a high number of points could be designated motive, driver or barrier that organising them into any kind of coherent story or argument was not possible.

Distinguishing between motive and driver without repeating a point or creating an artificial distinction between individual and organisational behaviour was challenging. A rough definition is that motives are 'personal' to the individual or specific to the organisation: drivers tend to be external factors that demand a particular action, ranging from a boss's request to an individual to take part in an activity to a policy change. A similar issue arose in relation to attempts to arrange the data to illustrate types of behaviour. Since some theories themselves argue that all behaviour is self-interested (Jenson, 1994; Khalil, 2001), arranging data on a theoretical basis would have risked a

very repetitive set of findings. Many elements of the data may be understood to be both a driver and a barrier, again creating artificial distinctions between the macro-themes, with a risk of repetition under these. The apparent number of barriers risked creating an overwhelmingly negative picture in a stand-alone section, whereas in context the true extent of their impact could be seen differently. Finally, many barriers are created by individual perception rather than being the direct result of legislation or practice and it would therefore be challenging to remove them in a practical sense: their 'removal' requires a shift in understanding or behaviour.

Inductive analysis and themes

The data was therefore subject to inductive analysis, which after numerous readings allowed the words of the employers to tell their story and for aspects of their identities and current behaviours and concerns to emerge. Inductive analysis can be problematic as it is possible to use only a fraction of the available data. However, grouping the data thematically around headings based on the research and interview questions allowed the selection of data to be reached both 'organically' yet in answer to those. All themes include barriers, drivers or motives, providing a basis for theoretical analysis and the discussion of a key theory, without excluding others if needed. It would not be accurate to describe the stories as 'case studies' since they draw on a wide variety of data and interviewees.

This approach allowed the best use of the data in relation to the thesis, meaning that the words of the interviewees would be examined on the basis of the topics, issues and experiences described to identify recurring themes alongside less common issues. This allowed the research to illustrate in even a small way the day to day experiences and opinions of those involved - or struggling with or avoiding involvement - with the system. There is no claim to a representative sample of employers or stakeholders. Instead the intention is to give a rounded picture of the day-to-day experiences of

individuals in their own words and to use this to highlight strengths and weakness of policy and practice within the system, and finally to make recommendations in relation to these. Inductive analysis requires careful selection and use of the data as it is possible to use only a fraction of the data generated by in-depth interview.

Conducting the interviews over an extended period of time allowed themes to emerge from the data, for example, the dichotomy of personal and professional influences and the actions resulting from them. The challenge for the researcher is to be as honest as possible about the findings whilst acknowledging that information external to any given interview must have an influence if the analysis of the data is to be meaningful in any way. The following quotation from an employer may be interpreted in a number of ways:

'I think there's still a bit of a stigma around Apprentices, and I think a lot of schools still try to put their pupils down for GCSE's, A-Levels, Uni – it's just not something they think very highly of' (EMP1: 7).

The perception of this employer is that schools do not favour Apprenticeships as they are not as highly valued as more traditional, academic qualifications - despite media reports that claim they are becoming more attractive to the Middle Classes (Paton, 2014). This was certainly the case at the employer's own school where GNVQs were 'for the low achievers' (EMP1: 2). However, schools are steering their pupils towards academic qualifications in order to keep them within that institution, since they would otherwise lose the funding that accompanies that individual. This position is supported by data from other interviews, notably a careers adviser who claims to have been obliged to ask students to hide information given to them about alternative courses outside their current institution and that it is '*all about bums on seats*' (STK11: 6).

It is not possible to say definitively on the basis of the data gathered that the background of an individual influences their attitude towards vocational education. In this case EMP1 enthusiastically heads up a full programme of vocational training for the company and observes that it is the attitude of schools themselves which puts up a barrier towards a greater presence for their business in education institutions. Yet a closer look at the interviewee attitudes towards VET in Chapter 5 shows how some attitudes appear to be ingrained at school and carry over to their roles as employers, parents and citizens. This research cannot give a definitive explanation of employer behaviours in relation to full-time 14-19 ET but can offer a new way of looking at them, a 'recontextualisation...new ways of connecting existing facts' (Dey, 2007: 91). Table F (below) provides an illustrative coding method, showing how repeated examination of the data reveals the key elements.

Table F : The coding process in inductive analysis

| | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|---|--|--|--|
| Process | initial read through text data | identify specific segments of information | label the segments of information to create categories | reduce overlap and redundancy among the categories | create a model incorporating most important categories |
| Organisation of data | many pages of text | many segments of text | 30-40 categories | 15-20 categories | 3-8 categories |

Note: Adapted from Creswell, 2002, Figure 9.4, p. 266 (Thomas, 2003)

Variables

Three broad groups of factors influence the extent, nature and impact of employer involvement in full-time 14-19 ET: the particular variant of 'voluntarism' at a given time and the accompanying political and economic situation, including the impact of the numerous filters – governance, structures and agencies - through which employer input is gathered; plus the consequent relative strength or weakness of that input in relation to those filters: finally, the nature of the 'employer' themselves: their sector and the organisational and individual constraints and motivations that encourage or prevent effective engagement.

Variables may include: the most recent experience of the interviewee in relation to the question asked, for example, a positive or negative personal involvement with full-time 14-19 ET; a company restructuring; or the education route followed by that individual and their experience of the acceptance of any certifications obtained. The analysis must then seek to demonstrate which variables are dependent or independent. Personal motivation, for example, is a key topic for this research yet, by its very nature, it is unlikely to be replicated across the interviewees. What it might reveal, however, is potential (perceived) barriers or indeed routes or experiences which might be recognised by others, allowing them to access the proposed framework in a way with which they can both identify and see the extent of the benefits to their organisation or sector.

Interviewees can influence an outcome simply through their choice of setting, a way to take control of the interview (Cohen et al, 2007). One of the initial interviewees chose the Institute of Directors as the location – the dining room - and read the questions off the sheet before explaining what was meant by them and then launching into the answer, reducing the interviewer to 'audience'. Other interviews have involved greater input from the interviewer and yet others have followed strictly the interviewee/interviewer pattern. One interview had to take place in a busy cafe after other

arrangements failed. As far as possible, arrangements were kept similar for all interviewees and the format of the actual interview remains the same whilst the surrounding may vary in formality.

Presentation of the data

The research did not require interviewees to specify individual policies that had influenced their behaviour so, whilst it is easy to identify a broad initiative such as the 14-19 Diploma, to know that this was a programme created by New Labour and how the role of employers was defined within it, it is not possible to identify specific policies that motivated or prevented employer involvement within each area of the system around which data are grouped. What is possible is to examine patterns of behaviour and to try to identify their related drivers, and some of the on-going issues encountered, based on the very open nature of many of the responses, and to draw attention to how embedded individual attitudes may be in the face of any policy aims.

Interview data is grouped by theme to illustrate patterns of behaviour in relation to different elements of the system (Table G below). The data serves to illustrate motives and behaviours and what drives these, and how perceptions of them might enable a better understanding of their impact, value and ability to extend the employer role in both policy and practice in full-time education and training.

Apprenticeships are not part of full-time 14-19 ET provision but they are discussed by the majority of interviewees, partly because this is what some employers seem to think of automatically as provision for young people when questioned and, in later interviews, due to the importance placed on increasing the number of apprentices. Where there are issues in the delivery of apprenticeships for young people aged 16-19 in terms of legal or health and safety requirements, for example, these also have an obvious application to those of this age in other ET settings.

Whilst this research makes no claim to be statistically valid in its findings, it does illustrate the complexity of the employer role in full-time 14-19 ET by focusing multiple voices on this specific area. Even those drawn from a similar industry represent a diversity of opinion. Not every voice is represented in each section. Instead, the sections are intended to allow the voices of employers and their stakeholder-representatives to build-up a picture of the nature of the employer role in full-time 14-19 ET through a number of themes arising from the research data.

Table G. Main topic headings

| Main headings | Sub-headings/topics |
|---|--|
| A question of age | |
| The problematic definition of 'vocational' | |
| Attitudes towards vocational provision | How attitudes can shape decisions |
| Examples of employer involvement | |
| Qualifications | Qualification development 14-19 Diplomas Apprenticeships |
| Infrastructure | |
| Work experience | |
| Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance | |

The headings in Table G reflect the order of the following chapter, which provides a thematic analysis of the data, allowing the words of the interviewees to demonstrate the added complexity of individual responses to the elements of a fragmented system.

Chapter 5: The nature of employer behaviours and how these shape their role in 14-19 ET

Introduction

The previous chapters sought to establish the main factors behind the apparent failure of ET policy to create and sustain an effective role for employers in 14-19 education and training. Having established the on-going impact of the historical and cultural roots of the issue in Chapter 1, a clear link emerged between a system, which allows employers to choose the level and depth of their engagement, and weak ET policy. Having established, however, that the combined effects of these factors were insufficient to explain the relative failure of policy in this area, the original research sought to demonstrate that employer behaviours, exacerbated and influenced by the multiple identities they share, as parents, ambitious individuals and members of society, for example, combine with the other factors to cause policy failure. Face-to-face interviews were carried out to gauge the extent of this theory, and chapter five sets out the interviewee responses in justification of this argument. Both this chapter and the conceptual analysis in chapter six provide evidence in support of the fourth research objective, concerned with the behaviours which characterise employer involvement in full-time 14-19 education and training, and the drivers behind them.

ET policy is arguably only partly based on the perceived needs of learners, the economy, sectors, industries or organisations: it is also based on the individual preferences, prejudices and unforeseen actions of individual employers and stakeholders 'representing' those interests. The descriptive analysis of the original research examines potential motives and drivers behind employer behaviours and attitudes in relation to elements of the system, strongly supporting the argument that employers do not act solely as representatives of their organisation or sector and that it is this fundamental misunderstanding of the employer role which has resulted in many of the

presuppositions that continue to shape both ET policy and employer behaviour in relation to it. It also reveals responses of such complexity, sometimes within the same answer, that the fragmented nature of the system and the difficulties caused by this may be better understood. It is not possible for employers to respond coherently in the face of a lack of coherence in the system.

To the extent that not all employers had a particular interest in 14-19 ET and that many wanted to speak about other priorities or share views about other aspects of the system more generally, the interviews fulfilled the expectation that employer and government interests sometimes coincide and at other times are quite diverse. There was enthusiasm for 14-19 and examples of varied activity among employers in relation to ET for this age group but there were also employers from whom 14-19 is not a priority, reflecting the overall situation of presence and absence among those who might be expected to play a role.

Allowing the data to tell its own story felt an appropriate way to enable individual voices to reveal their sometimes multiple identities. The research data was very rich and it required several attempts at coding and analysis before arriving at the one that seemed to allow the data to speak for itself whilst illustrating identified phenomena and revealing any additional ones. As the interviews took place over an extended period of time the coding was done manually, which allowed an in-depth knowledge of the data to emerge. The type of attribution tagging and search facility offered by NVivo or similar software did not feel appropriate in this instance, as apparently related comments often required detailed analysis followed by a considered decision as to which theme they best illustrated, reflecting the personal nature of the theoretical framework.

Themes partly reflect those arising from the literature review and partly grew organically from the coding and analysis. The ordering of the themes attempts to illustrate system-wide or underpinning issues, such as age-related problems and attitudes towards VET in general, before reflecting on

specific elements of the system, most obviously qualifications and infrastructure, two of the main tools used by the administrations in Chapter 2 to drive change.

Food for thought

A key policy assumption is that stakeholders recognise and are familiar with a coherent ET System.

EMP8: 'you asked some questions on the ET System?'

Interviewer: 'oh yes, that's just the Education and Training System'

EMP8: 'Never heard of it, never heard of it! I'm pretty close to all these things – it's completely passed me by and if it's completely passed me by it's probably passed by everybody in this organisation' (18).

Perhaps the Skills Commission report (2013) which called for the recognition of 'a 14-19 system' cannot come soon enough (9). Policy which assumes the existence of a single system and an individual's awareness of their place within that, how it might serve them or how they might contribute, is likely to fail when a large organisation in the Construction industry appeared unaware of its existence.

A question of age

The research focused on policy relating to the 14-19 age group under both New Labour and the Coalition, specifically in relation to qualifications and infrastructure. Interview responses, however, raised a number of more directly age-related issues, not always confined to this group. Age in the ET system was often linked to capability, sometimes assumed, in relation to legal barriers. Young people were viewed both as a liability and as a potential source of cheap labour, a situation EMP2 found '*fundamentally wrong*' (13). Conversely, they were also seen as a critical source of future talent.

One Trade Association representing around 2,000 small businesses was very clear about its lack of involvement in full-time 14-19 ET.

'We don't get involved...I don't know whether any of our members would want any more involvement with that age group [14-19] or not... 'If [the organization] were tempted [to have a greater involvement 14-19], some of them might think 'What's in it for me?'— not a very altruistic Industry!' (STK4: 6).

EMP8 was honest about the usual recruitment pool for their company

'...in terms of recruitment from schools, it's...there's a gap there, because we tend to recruit from University' (EMP8: 4).

EMP1 was frank about what motivated others to take a role

'...with 14-19, with skills in particular it tends to be the larger contractors get more involved...they run school programmes with all sorts of initiatives, and they're doing it because obviously, it helps raise their profile, and it helps them to win contracts because they're seen to be supporting...' (4)

STK4 promised on the day of the interview to look for any documentation relating to young learners held by the TA but was unable to find anything at all on the subject. There was recognition that this age group could provide future skills for a workforce that shrank during the recession (EMP5) and in some technical roles also has an ageing industry profile (EMP2). Signs of recovery in the economy later in the research project prompted one interviewee to declare

'...there isn't the capacity to do the work that needs to be done with the contracts out there...which is why, all of a sudden, we think it's more prominent – this 14-19 - with industry playing an integral role in that' (EMP5: 3, speaking in February 2014).

At the time of the initial interviews in 2010, the statutory school leaving age in England was sixteen years old, but it had risen to eighteen by the end of the project. EMP8 argued that the relevant age was 19-24 or 25-31 - but not 14-19 as age restrictions cause frustration among employers who believe they should be left to target funding at the most appropriate candidates, whatever their age.

'...you get people who want to re-train, they've been a motor mechanic...or they've been something else, and they want to change... [One man] he was 42 and wanted to become a Plant mechanic. How did he do it? He ended up having to pay for his own National Qualifications to get a job. That's not what we're about, we should be able to support him in some way (STK8: 14).

Government loans are available for those over the age of twenty-four but these appear to be for college-based courses and training, giving level 3 or level 4 courses as their target and A-Levels as the example qualification, so not helpful to the mechanic.

EMP1 did not allow the issue of funding to get in the way of training the right people.

'...some of them [apprentices] are older than what they should be [to allow funding to be drawn down]' (1) we could never use the term 14-19...even for apprenticeships – we throw it out for anyone to apply, and with anyone, so that's a redundant term for us (9).

This caused issues for the organisation in terms of claiming funding and clashes with employment law:

'[NAS] said 'what you need to do is develop a 14-19 prudence strategy', in other words you need to recruit at that age group...we can't do that. It's illegal!' (EMP1: 1).

Some employers gave both legal and business reasons why it is difficult for employers to be involved with young people outside of full-time ET, *'insurance and all that'* (EMP4: 23) but as with many potential barriers, it does seem to be a matter of opinion.

'You only need to have one 14-year-old on a building site fall off a ladder and kill themselves to have huge repercussions for the individual firm and for the industry as a whole' (STK4: 5).

'We haven't recruited at school level because insurances, Health and Safety...we veer away from putting anyone under 18 on site – not mature enough for a complex building site' (EMP8: 9).

'...people will tell you that you can't have...16-year-olds on site, well you can, if you supervise them properly. So we do that' (EMP3: 11).

Extrapolating careers' advice from such views would be challenging for a young person. Opinions of work experience or apprenticeship for this age group ranged from the rather mercenary to the more philanthropic.

'...so you get 14 year olds getting out one day a week; to the Firm it's almost like 'try before you buy' (STK6: 10).

'No, I don't think it's possible [to deliver education and training for 14-19 year olds] in any part of our sector... I don't believe that any kid 13 years of age know whether he wants to be a brick-layer or a Quantity Surveyor or whatever' (EMP2: 10).

Occasionally a national law unrelated to full-time education was a barrier – in this case the need to have a driving license – which prevents practical experience. This was frustrating for the young

people concerned since in their eyes it put a 'fun' element of the learning experience – perhaps that which attracted them to the course - beyond their grasp.

'Are we going to do some plant training? [asks a 16-year-old trainee] Do you have to be a certain age?' 'Yes, you have to be 17-18' 'So I won't be able to do it?' 'No.' 'So what are you going to do with a 14 year old?' (EMP2: 10).

'Even to get a 17 year old Plant operator is, even now, very difficult so we do have that horrible gap of 14-19. If you start them at 17, and have 17-24, that would be great' (STK8: 4).

STK10 suggests that NVQs and similar qualifications would benefit from differentiating between what was expected at 14 and what was expected post-19 dependent on background and experience to mitigate the impacts of false expectations. Some young people found a way around this, learning informally from others who already had the skills, even if the experience was ultimately off-putting.

'...guy dug a hole, filled it in, moved the Plant [vehicle] around. He said to him, 'How old are you son?' Guy said, 'Sixteen.' 'Do you want a job?' He said' No.' MD said, 'Why not?' He said, 'My grandfather did it, my Dad did it...I don't want to be out in all weathers, in the cold, in the wet - I'm not doing it' (STK8: 15).

It is a matter of opinion whether the above young person reflected the first or second comment below:

'...kids are very lazy' (STK11:12).

'[young learners] have a very clear, accurate and appropriate sense of what they want to do' (STK6: 15).

There were mixed opinions as to whether it is even in the interests of a business to raise awareness of its activities among young people and the potential for employment within it. Employers within the same industry – in this case Construction argued on the one hand that *'fundamentally it's in our interest to get people interested'* (EMP3: 10) and others quite the opposite:

'...how important is it for us as a business, to interest 14 year olds in engagin with us and wanting to work with us at 16? Quite frankly, it isn't!' (EMP2: 11)

The picture remained very confused. The message appeared to be that some 16-year-olds could do an apprenticeship, *depending* on the organisation concerned – hardly a basis for national policy. Some interviewees considered 18 not mature enough, others acknowledged the non-educational barriers that stood in their way. If this is the picture for apprentices, there is little hope for consistent advice for those in full-time education wishing to explore potential progression routes.

The problematic definition of vocational

Interviewees were asked to for their understanding of the meaning of 'vocational'. Their responses indicate that providing 'a' definition remains problematic, and perhaps undesirable, as it appears to mean different things to different people at various stages of the ET experience, an reinforced earlier findings that attitudes to VET in England remain mixed and often negative. Vocational was

'...learning for work rather than learning in a sort of academic way.., it is important for the employer to be involved and to say what kind of skills requirements are coming up' (EMP1: 12).

'...work-related rather than purely academic study' (EMP2: 9).

'...that which leads to a job function as opposed to an academic qualification' (EMP 5: 12).

'...a trowel in the hand or it's a hammer or a chisel, or it's an apprentice' (STK1).

'...students being embedded in the Organisation that they are working in...very much in the Sector they are working in... that work-placed learning element of it - and that can be from Business volunteers coming in or students going out into the workplaces to learn about work related studies or activities...students being really part of that, and learning through experience' (STK12: 15).

'... teaching the basics in the context of a sector...' (STK2: 8)

There was shared views of vocational as work-focused among some, but the last interviewee quoted above indicated a view that sectors provided a context for learning more generally - a key factor for full-time 14-19 ET policy - as well as a specific body of technical skills and knowledge.

STK6 offered a different and positive response:

'...if the question's VET then deep employer engagement is part of the process...a school that aims to offer excellent VET advances its students' (6).

STK2 claimed that more recently

'...no-one will listen to [the idea that skills and knowledge in school can be taught in the context of a sector] because Wolf has decided it's fluffy' (STK2: 8).

and EMP6 acknowledged that, for many, vocational education was for

'those who can't do anything' (22).

Others showed surprise and even wariness at the question. This may have been because of the spectrum of meanings of vocational in modern ET, a desire to offer the 'correct' answer, or because personal and organisational beliefs did not tally.

'That's very interesting, isn't it? It's [vocational] one of those words that everybody bandies about. You know what it means, but when you're actually asked – like sustainability....well, kind of non-academic, I guess, the kind of training that sets you up to do...that prepares you for work where there's a practical element to it, I guess' (STK4:4).

'I don't know if I want to answer that - it's a difficult question, isn't it?' I mean, vocational? Without thinking? I'm thinking now! I think the development of skills...I've suddenly realised I'm speaking on behalf of [the organisation], so maybe...' (STK5:11).

In the absence of the 'trowel in the hand', attempts to offer 'vocational' qualifications in full-time education caused confusion.

'... the Diploma, they [employers] struggled with that because they had a view that it was vocational...but of course it wasn't...I don't think...the BTEC...seems very practical...some employers struggle to see that as vocational, they see it more academic than vocational...' (STK1:7).

Apprenticeships have probably the highest public profile in terms of public understanding of vocational provision. EMP1, from a Telecommunications company of over 30,000, was in charge of their rolling out the apprenticeship programme. At the secondary school attended by the interviewee, GNVQ was an option *'if you didn't get great GCSE results'* being as it was for the *'low-achievers'* (2). In their experience, there was still a *'bit of a stigma'* (6) around apprenticeships, with schools preferring the academic route, and vocational *'just not something they think very highly of'* (7). EMP1 went on to praise the quality of their organisation's technical provision and the progression routes it provided but at the same time actively limited the scope of its apprenticeship programme as

'...there's some Directorates like HR or Finance where they need more academic kinds of qualifications, so probably less appropriate, but within Operations, we do have a history of apprentices there...' (EMP1: 4).

Apprenticeships exist in financial disciplines and the Chartered Institute for Professional Development is a long-established provider of a highly respected route for the development of Human Relations professionals.

This view was not confined to one sector. Apprenticeships were '*psychologically*' (EMP8: 10) for on-site trainees and not for office-based disciplines, as this deterred applicants whose views of apprenticeships were not favourable. This particular interviewee stated a preference for an Oxbridge graduate as their Personal Assistant having told the Recruitment Consultant that they wanted '*a really top-notch graduate*' (EMP8: 20), and claimed that

'It's wrong to call aspiring Managers, or people who want to come into the professional side of the industry apprentices, because it's not the image they've got of what they are doing' (EMP8: 10).

Yet the same individual was told by a school in which they wanted to promote apprenticeships:

'My girls don't go into Construction!' (EMP8: 12)

And with no discernable sense of irony continued

'...liaison between schools and businesses...it's not happening but I don't know why' (EMP8: 11)*...it's not all schools, it's not all industries: there is a huge culture gap...' (12).*

Such conflicted views are indicative of prevailing attitudes towards VET, though EMP1 also found that the main barrier was the headteacher

'...if the headteacher doesn't want me in there – then I don't get in' (8).

A campaign in London has seen young people pursue apprenticeships with Goldman Sachs, the Royal Bank of Scotland and PriceWaterhouseCoopers (Cohen, 2013), companies to which 'my girls' would surely aspire. Whilst industries or companies that are relatively new to apprenticeships may be able

to start with a positive attitude towards 'learning on the job' for administrative and professional roles, sectors with an established history of VET, in this case Construction, may harbour well-established attitudes towards certain types of ET and those for whom it is suitable. There is an element of protecting one's own achievements and the image one has of those.

However good government or other initiatives are, it is sometimes unexpected stimulus that makes the difference. EMP8 reported a conversation with a senior policewoman who stated that the screening of 'The Bill', a long-running drama series on English television about a police force, drove up the numbers of female recruits exponentially. It portrayed female officers at all levels of seniority, and young women recognised a potential career option. The same employer admits that Bob the Builder and Cowboy Builders – one an animated children's character and one a programme about the dangers of employing unqualified, unregistered builders - hardly had the same impact on the Construction industry,

'...people don't want to be associated with a negative image' (EMP8: 17).

Attitudes towards vocational and academic pathways

The research took a fresh look at the origins of interviewee attitudes towards options for 14-19 year olds, inspired by the desire of New Labour to give vocational provision equal status alongside academic subjects, and equally strong moves under the Coalition to refocus on academic achievement.

EMP3 attended a meeting with government on the morning of our interview to discuss the future of the 14-19 Diploma in Construction and quoted another attendee, a College Principal, - *'...he was really cynical, which was good'* (13) - whose opinion apparently summarised the issue for the majority that day. The Principal stated that the issues with vocational education stemmed from people using the term to define levels rather than subjects, that is, who it is for rather than what people can learn from it. When people say academic they tend to mean a higher level of learning and qualifications - *'that's a really unhealthy thing in this country'* (13). Classification to a granular level remains very important within the English system, as demonstrated by the tortuous grading structures in place, whether A*-G or 1-8. This is not a new phenomenon:

'...classes from one right down to eight, where you were relegated to feed the chickens etc when other people did Maths! I wasn't one of the daft ones and went into class one' (EMP2:2).

EMP6 studied O-levels - *'took ten, and they were proper ones'* (3) - and believed that not everybody wants to pursue fully academic pathways preferring instead to do something more *'hands on and more closely related to a trade...or business area they might want to go into'* (3). They described the view of vocational studies as being for young people who are not quite bright enough as *'entirely wrong'* (4). Yet here a positive message about the purpose of vocational education is accompanied

by a message that some academic subjects are more challenging or worthwhile, that is, 'proper' than others: it is not only vocational education that has its 'levels'. Even degree results are not immune to comment:

'...the number of people who come out with 10 A but come out with a 2.2 or a 3rd degree indicated that either they aren't quite as sharp as they thought when they were measured at school, they haven't put the time and effort in maybe...' (EMP2: 3).*

Issues raised here include that different values are placed on different types or levels of qualification, and on different subjects within the same qualifications. This is not confined to academic subjects or to sceptical evaluations of vocationally-related qualifications delivered in schools, but applies equally to apprenticeships even within a sector. Here, both employers and the schools in which they try to promote apprenticeships put up barriers in the form of assumptions and prejudices about the suitability of the route for particular cohorts.

'If we're going to solve this [skills] shortage we're going to have to attract a more diverse group of youngsters coming into the Industry, and therefore our image could do to be changing a bit to reflect that...it annoys me!' (STK4: 6)

'...a lot of schools won't let Construction in – certainly won't let [us] in...they don't think it's appropriate' (STK9:5).

Yet (STK10) referred to project management and awareness of environmental impact as 'rubbish' suggesting that there is still an element of maintaining the status quo in terms of positioning their sector for a new audience.

This complex situation may be summarised as follows: employers promote some apprenticeships, and are prejudiced against other apprenticeships; schools may promote some apprenticeships, or reject all apprenticeships on the basis of prejudices held about their suitability for their pupils; some 'big name' organisations may promote apprenticeships at all levels, whilst some established providers of apprenticeships accept and promote them only for selected roles. In the light of this picture it could be argued that employers do not support apprenticeships – or do so only in selected circumstances – and that poor quality CEIAG is only partly to blame for the ignorance among young people of some of the progression routes open to them. Apprenticeships were valued by EMP1 and EMP8 in one area of their industry but not in others.

Even those offering apprenticeships were not immune to 'positive' 'discrimination' against those who pursued an academic route. The experience of young people who may be better suited to an apprenticeship, but feel social or grade-related pressure to continue on the academic route, reinforces the attitude that those on the academic route are there by preference - a point disproved by what is revealed about CEIAG - and that they already have a career advantage. For an Advanced Apprenticeship

'...we don't want people who've got an academic background, we want people who have done a two year apprenticeship on site – we're trying to convert them into supervisors and managers' (EMP3:5).

'Airbus...really only want top A-Level students with Maths and Physics...' (STK6: 21).

In these circumstances, calls for *'a different attitude from policy-makers and other stakeholders'* (STK2: 8) seem difficult to achieve, though some were keen to try.

'...I just joined the governing body of a school...they've introduced vocational education there and I said "please tell me that this is being promoted to all?" and I got "well...er...yes it is but the parents of the bright ones want them to do GCSEs"...actually, if I see a CV coming across my desk that's got a BTEC in it, I think that's interesting, because I've seen 55 that have got GCSEs...' (EMP4:16).

'I'd like to see a more positive emphasis on vocational training – we keep being told it's going to happen but it doesn't – it always seems to keep getting diluted or...just put down or debased in some way...which I don't think is particularly good' (EMP6: 4).

'...one of the curious features of 14-19 VET... to prepare students to compete in a labour market that doesn't actually value the qualification' (STK6: 8).

The complexity of the reasons behind this 'dilution' and 'debasement' are extremely complex: historic, personal, and cultural – and not to be resolved simply by further revisions to the content or shape of a qualification or learning program, the solution put forward again recently by the Chief Executive of City and Guilds (TES, 2014). His argument for programmes that are valued was of course valid but the system must support these from inception to employment, which means other barriers must also be identified and removed. Whilst no-one would argue that learning programmes should not be engaging and should enable progression, this still represents the level of debate.

The frustration of wider stakeholders with the impact of this reliance on qualifications - many of which do not appear to be valued - to answer any problem, was palpable here.

'I learned how to fly a Tornado in six months straight! Dropping bombs and ordinance IN JUST SIX MONTHS! I have no qualification after my name to show I am capable of doing that, but there was a system in place to ensure that I did, and I think we'll start there – I was able to prove that I was competent. It takes eighteen months to get back where we started – laying bitumen!' (STK9: 29).

Qualifications seem to have become the end in themselves, often not fit-for-purpose, and whilst young people may be on paper increasingly 'qualified', employers complained of an on-going skills shortage.

'...until last year, there was no NVQ in Rain Screen...so in theory there was nobody in the UK who was capable of doing this...despite the fact that it's on every building in London...so people are obviously doing training, because if you've got a contract you're not going to let some guy hang this stuff without...' (STK9:26).

Money invested into qualifications which do not have the support of the 'employer-as-recruiter' is wasted because holding qualifications is not an end in itself, despite much ET policy being predicated on the value of certification.

'...there are now, in Construction, 90,000 full-time students, and that's not with a major company, not in full-time jobs. They're going to come out with a piece of paper that isn't relevant!' (EMP7:5).

Qualifications must allow young people to progress

'...we've also got people who've come into us, probably post A-Level, didn't want to carry on, didn't want to go to Uni, and broken their Mothers' hearts, thrown it all in, come into construction, you know, hope you get a proper job – it'll do 'til something else turns up; by the time they've got to 25 or 26 they've usually matriculated and got a degree, but they've got no student loan, they've earned while they were learning, they've usually got places of their own...' (EMP6:7).

How attitudes shape decisions

The previous section revealed frustrations among interviewees about many aspects of the system, and revealed sometimes surprising attitudes towards both academic and vocational provision, which often did not reflect their personal experience of education and training. This research tried to understand both the origin of some of these attitudes, and then how the latter go on to shape decisions among those involved in creating or implementing policy.

Interviewees were asked about their own educational background in terms of the type of school attended and the highest level of qualifications held, for example, to give some indication of whether their own experiences could be seen to influence their attitudes towards education and training. Of the twenty-one interviewees, nine did not specify the type of school they attended, three said that they had attended a Comprehensive, two Grammar Schools, two 6th Form Colleges and three simply offered 'State' school. Only one described their school as being a '*very traditional independent school*' (EMP4: 1).

'...so it was basically A-Levels, or, well you're not really good enough. I think I became aware even then of the issues that young people who didn't really fit into a school's agenda...' (STK5: 2).

Several employers acknowledged that opportunities for young people today differed from their personal experience when starting out in industry. In their view, today's job market was more limited, reducing not only the chance of finding a permanent job, but also opportunities to try an industry and to progress within it, based on enthusiasm and aptitude rather than the now all-pervasive qualifications.

'I didn't get any really meaningful educational qualifications and when I left school...you could go into a...different job Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday...it was totally different, and times have changed (EMP7:1)...at present, the Funding Manager, Painting Manager, Labour Manager, Head of the Bonus and Chief Quantity Surveyor all started at 16 or 18' (8).

One employer related a seemingly common experience to be had at careers' fairs, of parents who tarnish the image of apprenticeships and the vocational route just as surely as those who would not consider it for their children.

'I get so fed up of careers' fairs ... Mum will come over, "My son wants to be an apprentice." Son standing there, and you think, "Can you speak?" And it's just clear that he's been dragged around - and it usually is a he - that's another thing. I mean you've got to try to work on with the School. Mum and Dad are dragging him around – "he wants to be an apprentice, doesn't he?" So you know that he can't do anything else, because he's not got his qualifications, because he couldn't be bothered at school, "so let's get him an apprenticeship, get him out of the house for x hours a week!" ' (EMP5: 21).

When it came to employers' own children they appeared both to perpetuate stereotypes and to find excuses for not changing their approach, whilst discussing the alternatives for 'other people's children' (Wolf, 2002: 56)

'He's a bit lazy, typical boy... He's middle-of-the-road, academically - he's not a genius, but he's not a klutz either (3) - he does barely what he has to do. If he can get away with doing the bare minimum, he'll do the minimum. It's just the way it is!' (EMP5: 4)

His son's school was described as being '*just a traditional school*' (4) with not much vocational choice – it is in fact an Academy - but he would be '*happy*' (4) to let his son attend a University Technical College. This route may indeed have suited his son better or perhaps his son would have been 'lazy'

whatever his options. The employer commented on the distance his son would have to travel to attend the nearest UTC – despite living in the catchment area for it and his father being a governor. Yet one of the selling points of a proposed location for the UTC is its proximity to a train station:

*‘...kids can come in from...wherever. If anyone can get to [major rail hub] then get to [town]...you’ve got the whole conurbation covered by public transport and walking’
(EMP5: 6).*

It is worth reflecting on the kind of barriers ‘concerned’ parents raised even whilst making positive noises in favour of the ‘alternative’. The employer was concerned that comments about distance were not relevant to the research but in fact they spoke to the perceived or exaggerated barriers that allow people to keep their children in a ‘traditional’ setting whilst working as a governor for the alternative school – in which capacity distance was not an object – and promoting this approach to other parents. He appeared to be supportive of vocational education whilst ensuring that his son remained on the ‘traditional’ route. Here, traditional may be read as ‘best’, ‘known’ or ‘established’. It is natural for a parent to act in the interest of their child, but the altruism of ‘employer-as-parent’, which sees them design and promote qualifications that they would not allow their own child to study, is potentially damaging to a far wider audience, unless, as suspected, such prejudices are rooted in society and culture not organisations.

STK3 demonstrated the conflict that exists where parents want the ‘best’ for their children but this does not necessarily mean the most appropriate qualifications or most suitable learning experience – it can just mean the best local school. English parents – many of whom are employers – are very conflicted. The following interviewee trained as an apprentice before going on to run in-house corporate apprenticeship programmes, and finally setting up his own training practice advising large organisations.

'...[my children] are at a School where you can't actually progress into 6th Form unless you get at least B Grades in your GCSEs - every subject! ...they are not being elitist or selective, they say, actually, our experience tells us that we are not giving the students a fair chance at an A-level qualification if you don't get at least a B Grade... our experience tells us that you will absolutely struggle. And I guess that now, I would wholeheartedly agree with that, because now.....my son did his GCSEs there and did well, you know, got a bunch of As, Bs and Cs ... got an 'A' in Maths GCSE - so he was clearly not thick - and Maths was one of his four A-Levels that he chose, and his AS Level, he got a U! So it just - it's such a step from GCSEs to A-Levels!...there was a lot of talk about the International Bacc, at one point, but they don't....and they've got a couple of BTEC modules, but I guess they're running parallel for things...they're not like a school that's got...I mean, we've got some local schools that we've [the Training Provider Business] done some work with and they've got a whole bunch of BTEC vocational qualifications that have been aimed at less academic pupils, or where people have wanted to do both, so they've run them parallel. So we've had guys that we know - some recruited from local schools - who've done an A-level and maybe a BTEC National, or something, at the same time, and just found by the very nature and structure of a BTEC National, it suited their learning style, and that it was better for them. But unfortunately, my own [sic] school hasn't allowed that option, so [my daughter], much to my disappointment, is stuck with her A-levels!' (STK3: 4-5).

This is a very lengthy quotation but its inclusion is justified as it serves to illustrate the conflicting cultural and identity issues that drive ET policy. STK3 came through the apprenticeship route himself. His children were not best served by the qualifications offered by the school attended. He has professional experience of other local schools offering qualifications he believed better suited the needs of both his children. Their own school was clearly very academic in its focus, even to appraising the International Baccalaureate (IB) qualification as an alternative to A-Levels and considered by some to be more challenging in its breadth and assessment than the latter. Moving his children to a school that might better serve their learning needs did not seem to be an option. There may have been other familial or practical reasons for this – a reason can always be found. Professionally, he supported the 'alternative': privately, he did not appear willing to act on this even

with his own background and professional knowledge. He communicated the idea that his daughter's circumstances were out of his control – she is 'stuck'. He was very aware of the issues and the alternatives, yet appeared to leave her to her fate despite the difficulties faced by her older brother. The impression was given that poor academic achievement somehow remains more valuable than an equivalent vocational success.

Others were loud and proud about the different routes taken by their children. This learner, who followed a vocational route, was described as being 'ferociously bright' - which she may be - or it may have been necessary for her father, a very influential stakeholder from an awarding organisation, to point this out to ensure that nobody considers the vocational route she chose to be second class. His knowledge and experience may have also helped him to cut through existing prejudices to support his daughter's choices. Certainly he also confirmed that his organisation offers apprenticeships in 'virtually every function' although interestingly he admits that they struggled to 'place them all into full time positions' (2).

'My daughter is just about to finish her first degree - my daughter is probably quite interesting - 12 GCSEs, 8A, ferociously bright. The school were [sic] desperate for her to do her A-levels, but she actually chose not to go into 6th Form. She did a BTEC ... at ... College, and from that route went on to study Veterinary Science. So I actually have very much the view that you shouldn't be defined by GCSE/A-level/Degree, you should be defined by what is of interest to you. It is, if you like, a classic example of someone who understood what they wanted to do and how they wanted to learn, rather than feeling compelled to learn in a different way, and how the system, actually, was forcing them to work in a certain way to get to University. She's been very lucky and fortunate, but I think it's interesting that she chose to buck the system, and I'm very pleased' (STK7: 2).*

An illustration of the barriers facing those who wish to bring equality to the academic and vocational routes was made by the following illuminating example:

'...my Boss...he became director of a company when he was 22...and yes, he went to grammar school...but it doesn't mean to say he's any better than I am, because I didn't go to grammar school, - I went to state school [sic] but I still got where I wanted to be...he'll throw things down my throat...he thinks that because he went to Grammar school he's better than I am, but actually, if I gave him a screwdriver, he wouldn't know what to do with it. He'll know what to do with a piece of paper – a letter – great...If I write a report, he'll put a comma in, a full-stop, where I've probably missed it, whatever, ...Does that make me a worse person than him, because I can't write two sentences, and I only write it as one? Does that made me any worse? I don't think so' (STK8: 18, 19).

The two men in question were in charge of training policy for 1500 members of a Trade Association and their employees and managed to encapsulate a common level of debate in English education and training to depressingly succinct effect. Both were working in the same organisation to the same ends and both were focused largely on the provision of vocational and practical training. Yet after more than 30 years professional experience each, their educational background and potential skill set remained a matter for competition. They were both competent in their fields but it was still a subject of debate - and to them, importance - which one was better. That the interviewee felt it necessary to point out that the other man *'...thinks...he's better than me'* revealed a sneaking suspicion that he was on some level right. He tried to avoid this conclusion by talking up his practical skills in comparison with the paucity of *'knowing what to do with a piece of paper'* and succeeded in capturing the cultural issues that continue to beset English educational policy.

The same interviewee provided an illustration of how the language used in this debate remains unhelpful. This is not a criticism of the views of this individual but an observation about the use of words and phrases such as 'stupid' and 'not-so-clever' even from individuals supportive of VET. The

interviews included a comfortable use of colloquial terms but those terms in themselves indicated ingrained opinions of VET.

'... you've got to give...a bit of a choice, to say...or there's this, if you like, for the not-so-clever....but I've got dexterity in my hands, I'm not stupid...can fix that piece of machinery, but I don't need to have 1,300 A levels or O levels to do that ...I've got the ability to do it, so let me have a chance to do something I want to do, and I'm good at...I think we miss that point...and I think the teachers miss it and I think that as parents possibly miss it at times...and that's just a personal thought of how we....we just channel people the wrong way in jobs and then they go wrong...' (STK8: 18).

This quotation also provided an insight – though greatly exaggerated - into the perception of which qualifications young people felt they need to have regardless of whether they enabled them to progress along their desired route. STK8 also identified a number of stakeholders – employers, teachers and parents – who fail to listen to, or to offer advice outside, the 'normal', 'traditional' routes.

Conflict and tensions seemed to characterise the nature of interactions between parents, children and institutions, in this case between the interviewee and her parents and then the interviewee and her daughter.

'Part of me thinks I should have forced [my daughter] down the academic route, because she pretended she was dumb so she could go to College at 16, and I wanted her to do...I didn't really, because I would never push her I mean my parents are both teachers, and I think that's one of the reasons why I was very...my Dad was very old fashioned, you know, 'I strongly advise you...you WILL do...' He was very academic. And knowing that she's got something about her – intelligence – and I'm not going – I couldn't do that to [her]' (STK11: 14).

One remarkable thing about this extract was that the speaker is a Careers Adviser. Elsewhere she expressed the opinion that parents believed the academic route to be the best – as she appeared to herself. Further, that ‘...those who can’t’ (EMP6: 22) - should be offered the chance to pursue an apprenticeship, at the same time expressing frustration with the poverty of CEIAG in schools, which means young people were not helped to choose what was right for them.

‘...they could go into the world of work at 16 and the parents don’t want them to. They don’t think it’s good enough, they don’t think it’s secure enough. They think that Higher Education and A-Levels and keeping them in the 6th Form is the best way’ (STK11: 16).

As another interviewee states it baldly

‘...some people are pushed down the academic route because of peer pressure from parents and school’ (STK8: 17).

Just as STK8 used the term ‘stupid’ and STK3 ‘thick’, STK11 found it acceptable to refer to those who choose College as ‘dumb’. She herself was qualified to post-graduate level and did most of her training and qualifications whilst she worked, not completing her A-Levels. On the one hand she wished she had forced her daughter to stay on, on the other

‘[my daughter] is much more of a practical person, and if there were suitable apprenticeships that would do for [her] because she’s very mature, and she is work-ready, and I would say that is the big problem at 16, we molly coddle...because schools don’t prepare them and as parents we don’t prepare them...’ (STK11:16).

This interviewee grappled with the tensions in the English system which tend to favour academic study and achievement above alternatives, something driven by cultural legacy as well as by policy.

'You get some Businesses, don't you , that ignore the State Schools, and they go off 40 miles away to the Grammar School, because they know that's what they want, don't they? It's not wrong – they value what's productive for them' (STK6: 10).

This differed from the opinion held by STK11, who described businesses recruiting in schools as 'really discriminatory' (8), which begs the questions of whether recruitment is about what is good for the success of the business – something which might inform the education being received – or whether it is about an exercise in fairness for all learners who pass through the system. Such 'discriminatory' behaviour represents a combination of self-interest and altruism. It could be argued that, without a successful core business, there would be no opportunities for the less fortunately placed, but really it reflects a more pervasive bias towards what people believe is the best - and if they can afford or access the best they will do so.

EMP8, who left school without many qualifications, and achieved professional status working seven years on day-release, recruited their Project Manager through the Oxbridge graduate website, to manage a notably contrasting project recruiting young people from backgrounds of gang culture into employment elsewhere in the company, admitting

'We tend to go with the same people all the time. If they produce the goods, why make it more difficult? We do have fairly narrow avenues from where we recruit' (EMP8: 21).

It is questionable what motivated the apparent move towards a different employee base: a sincere and long-term change strategy or a short-term CSR project to fulfil a contractual commitment?

At the other end of the scale EMP8 found that

'We do get a bit of a turn around when you do take the top cream. They're obviously inspirational, and they get a fabulous grounding and if you've worked for [this organisation] you get a job anywhere' (EMP8: 21).

'...the notion of a community of practise around teaching and learning, where teachers and practitioners are somehow peers and equals, doesn't seem to be the current reality in 14-19 education' (STK6:4).

'...where it becomes problematic very quickly is over the issue of mastery' (STK6: 9).

Finally, even learners are not immune to misconceptions about the world of work:

'What students think a job's going to be about...and the reality of what the job is about are two different things!' (STK12: 15)

Examples of employer involvement

Employer involvement in 14-19 ET was through a number of routes, for example, initiatives such as the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme where the employer builds the new premises and contributes directly to the education and training of young people, initially at least as part of its contractual obligations. Differentiation was made between 'qualification-related engagement' (EMP3: 10) and a more general involvement meeting both industry and broader-educational needs. This included providing work experience and site visits or more creative inputs into the curriculum.

'...we assisted with a big Maths Learning Day...in Y9. We sent some of our Graduates in and they're doing, 'Well, this is Maths in Construction', so we set it out and we'll do some area calculations, whatever it might be' (EMP3: 12).

'Learning and Development, until about a year ago, was principally aimed at [our] people, but now they're slowly starting to work with the supply chain, and they're also putting together packages roughly aimed at what I would class as work-related learning' (EMP6: 5).

Some employers had productive partnerships with Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), resulting in a more hands-off set of inputs, produced with – but deliverable without – business organisations. In the case of STK2, these included schools programmes for around 25,000 young people each year, with materials provided and mapped to national qualifications such as GCSEs and A-Levels. The SSC where they worked acted as an intermediary, 'twinning' schools with organisations enabling them to visit each other. Such partnerships

'create a buzz around the company...crews love it – it makes them feel important' (9).

In this particular sector, STK2 said the SSC acknowledged that, whilst around 25 per cent of sector organisations was active in this area,

'...they understand skills and investment in people, and the supply chain of people through and that sort of stuff... and another tranche can be persuaded to play some kind of role, the final 20 per cent of companies have no interest in being involved and it is therefore a waste of resource to try to work with them - they're run by Finance Managers – they wouldn't know a strategic investment if it hit them on the head' (9).

Whilst this stakeholder considered such involvement to be a 'strategic investment' in the future skills of the workforce, he also considered it a 'waste of resource' to try to work that latter group. Policy might do better to acknowledge this and to focus on pushing against doors which if not already open are at least unlocked, the key being to appeal to business or personal benefit.

Motives stem from economic and political circumstances or from a desire to ensure that someone else takes the initiative, and funds what is needed so that a business or institution benefits with the minimum outlay of resources. One-size-fits-all policy must assume that apprenticeships – or anything else - will be promoted equally across subjects and by all those tasked with doing so. Apprenticeships are the vocational qualification with arguably the highest level of employer involvement and awareness. All interviewees mentioned them in some capacity.

'...and what might be needed otherwise, I mean, the Government's got to know from somewhere how to write the framework, and how to and what to include in the framework – I can't see how else it would be steered!' (EMP1:12).

It is unlikely that government policy around the promotion of apprenticeships, or requests to increase their number, was based on an assumption that either employers or schools would act in an actively prejudicial way. If employers felt unable – or unwilling – to promote apprenticeships in their sector, they probably felt even less inclined to endorse vocationally related subjects in full-time education.

Because, ultimately, it's to our benefit, isn't it? If we don't go into Schools and say, "yeah, you may think it's about bricklaying, but actually, it's about Project Management and Surveying, and high level qualifications"... How are we going to ever get anyone to join the Industry? So, there's a clear... long-term recruitment issue there. And equally, too, if we can contribute to... curricula, and people come out of school better educated, and with better results, then they're going to be better employees. Ultimately, it's entirely selfish, isn't it?' (EMP3: 15)

‘we’ve got to get more people into the industry and get a better qualified industry, because a lot of the current CEOs, and the current site managers – people who are running the business, came up through the trades – the next generation probably won’t do that’ (EMP8: 23).

The latter point is worth dwelling on for a moment in terms of what has changed so dramatically that those in the trades will no longer feel – or be deemed capable – of progressing through the company.

Employers therefore, even within similar industries or size of organisation, had extremely mixed views about the value and abilities of young people in their sector. One describes the organisation’s involvement as ‘selfish’, whilst not offering support might be considered ‘selfish’ elsewhere.

Qualifications

Qualification development

In England, qualifications have been used to drive a variety of changes to the ET system, and many appear to have become an end in themselves, as partly illustrated by the preceding sections. A new government invariably means at least some new ET policy and projects. Different configurations of sector bodies, awarding organisations (AOs), employers and other stakeholders are involved to various extents in creating and implementing the new vision. Little account appears to be taken if employers no longer support a previous initiative, or the impact of such politically-driven changes.

'...we appointed Curriculum Centres...children could win medals...it was fantastic, and we can prove that it was successful in terms of recruitment, particularly the retention...then, of course, along came the Diplomas, so the GCSE was stood down, and we had the Young Apprentices Programme running as well...and now all this happened [new government and lack of support for existing programmes]...so now we're inventing the curriculum to do recruitment again...' (STK1: 6).

Qualifications are used not only to demonstrate knowledge of a subject but to shape and differentiate between individuals both socially and for purposes of employment; and to measure the achievement of schools as well as learners. They are used to alter – and at times reinforce – perceptions of an industry or subject and as such as a marketing tool. Such diverse goals and outcomes attached to what is often a single model of delivery across subjects or sectors is problematic, and lead to ambitious aims. The language of Leitch (2006) was still to be found. This AO aspired to

'...really world-class qualifications that are all-demanding, vigorous, empowering and inclusive...' (STK13: 5).

Whilst one-size-fits-all solutions such as the 14-19 Diploma may not meet the needs of all sectors, providing different types of qualifications for some sectors may perpetuate the view that some qualifications are 'better' than others: in England, 'better' has acquired a social, rather than educational or progression-related meaning.

The state expected programmes created at a national level, such as the 14-19 Diplomas, to be a success across diverse industries and regions, despite the variety of needs they must meet. Qualifications set up to make similar demands in terms of assessment approaches, for example, were comparable across subjects but entirely unsuited to the context and purpose of the programme being delivered. This caused employers to disengage or to pursue their own industry solution.

'...we didn't like the diverse nature of all the various programmes out there, so we built one just for us' (EMP2: 6).

'All the extended frameworks, and projects, and all the other gunk that was hung on [the 14-19 Diplomas] I'd have swept away...' (EMP5: 15).

Employers were 'becoming wise' (STK13: 11) to the opportunity being offered to them by the Government and saw 'an opportunity to inform...what those qualifications look like' (11). Where employers played a role, STK6 believed that they

'...are interested in the structure of a qualification...its level in educational terms, its duration, in time terms and the types of activities that young people...get involved in... Their interest...in the content is superficial' (2).

Adding that

'...Employers have been brilliant and generous in their engagement with us in re-defining the Diploma...being mostly interested in the size, level, structure. When it comes down to debating, 'Should we have this in it? There hasn't been deep engagement' (STK6).

STK6 referred to 'us', meaning that despite the critical importance of employers to the success of his organisation, a National Academy, that brings together the best in the industry under its Fellowship to promote the interests of the discipline and the businesses it serves – 'employers' were still seen as somehow separate. He did not refer to 'our fellows' or practitioners.

More than 150 institutions are able to award qualifications in the UK. Many of these are small in size and are driven less by the needs of the industry and learners than by the necessity of balancing the business budget, operating as they are in the valuable market of publicly funded certification. Larger AOs were able to develop some qualifications at a loss, compensated for by other more commercial products. Smaller organisations were commercially bound to reject requests for qualification development that made little profit, to accusations of ignorance and a lack of responsiveness in relation to industry. This situation was exacerbated by the loss of core funding from the SSCs, for example, but the impact on skills remained the same in some eyes: market forces, not skills needs, drove provision.

'...the awarding organisation side [of the SSC]...they just do not understand simple requirements of what industry wants! So, unless they can see the potential of earning lots of money they won't develop the qualifications that meet the industry's needs... every qualification has got to make them some form of surplus, and that to me, is the wrong way to look at qualifications...' (STK8: 20).

'...we're all saying the same thing but nobody actually pulls it all together and you may as well discard this lot's [SSC] job!' (EMP2: 13).

Employer involvement with AOs occurred through a number of routes: large organisations, professional bodies and Trade Associations - such as that of STK8 above - *'which have a real interest in qualifications'* (STK13: 7). STK7, also from an AO, confirmed that

'...in the last two years we've been more explicit in creating a Business Unit that fundamentally only serves employers, and works for the employer directly' (3).

'...large employers are, on the whole, more easy [sic] to have a conversation with, will engage into a process... would be more likely to send someone to a half day meeting...' (STK13: 10).

Under the Coalition, SSC support was no longer recognised as employer support

'[Ofqual] don't recognise SSCs lateral support for a BTEC National, or a Level 3 qualification, so you have to go direct to an employer' (STK13: 6)

EMP3 seemed in agreement with this development, commenting that SSCs

'...are rather dismissive of awarding organisations – who actually do a very good job...[I'm] disappointed by the intermediaries' (EMP4:13).

In a system landscape where ET partnerships established under New Labour were breaking up, and the role of the more recently established Local Employer Partnerships (LEPs) remained largely weak, becoming involved in the system as an employer appeared to have become more difficult. Whilst the multiple agencies under New Labour, such as the SSCs and Regional Development Agencies, were imperfect, a few were effective in encouraging and coordinating inputs.

Following a hiatus caused by the lack of labour market information coming from previously effective SSCs in some sectors, one stakeholder placed faith in these LEPs, which now offered ‘deep-dyed’ intelligence’ (STK13:18) to inform the development of qualifications. Issues here included the previously uneven nature of LMI, which moved from being inconsistent by sector to inconsistent by region, depending on the effectiveness of the respective SSC or LEP. There was little consistency across the national picture of need and where there was, it required a great deal of pulling together - there are over 30 LEPs - to understand that picture. There was also the familiar tension between the unresponsiveness of ‘one-size-fits-all’ in terms of some qualifications across sectors and the equally challenging tailoring emerging from such detailed local knowledge. There was a need to balance the economic advantage gained by providing the local economy with exact responses in the shape of qualifications and training with the needs of young people who wished – or were forced – to move away from that area through a combination of transferability of skills and knowledge and a recognition of the quality or purpose of the qualifications held.

‘...a lot of those local partnerships that are part of the LEPs were there when the 14-19 Diplomas were in place’ (STK13: 18)... some LEPs are thinking “actually, we are going to crack on and deal with those Agencies, create our structure to support our local employers – especially our small local employers,” in a way that really hadn’t been done before’ (19).

The Technical Baccalaureate, an employer-supported award for those in full-time 14-19 ET, was developed ‘*very specifically in conjunction with employers...working very closely...across a range of different areas*’ (STK7: 4). The extent of employer involvement – at the time of the interview limited to the Construction, Engineering and Health and Social Care sectors - meant they ‘trusted’ the qualifications to deliver

'...both the learning that is required – Maths, English, IT, Literacy etc – but also loads of employability skill that they often say are lacking' (4).

Securing the meaningful involvement of small and medium businesses (SMEs) remains a challenge and therefore looking at where these *'already come together naturally'* (7) through the Federation of Small Businesses and the British Chambers of Commerce was one way to do this. The performance of sector-based intermediaries was found wanting

'Some of the SSCs were brilliant, some weren't any good, and some really struggled to engage with their employers – especially those liaising with mainly small employers' (STK13: 20).

The assumption that small businesses are more difficult to engage with or were less eager to do so was challenged

'...as a large employer engaged in the educational system, it's phenomenally difficult. If I ran a 25 person SME it would be really easy. I'd go find my local school and be all over that school or two schools. Here, how do you do that?' (EMP4:8)

SMEs were able to offer fewer apprenticeship places on a regular basis, but securing these was sometimes a less bureaucratic process than in larger organisations.

'...[an SME] who's incredibly passionate about learning and development, and will give time to comment and engage, more so sometimes than the larger employers – so it's really a mix-up out there' (STK13: 11).

There were also sectoral differences, with Engineering and Construction relatively easy to reach through their prominent professional bodies. Engagement with Art and Design, Creative Media and Production, Hospitality and Sport, however, was fragmented and difficult, and raised multiple questions for those developing qualifications, such as

'Who are the employers? Who are we working with? How can we work with them? Where are the gaps and how do we supplement those gaps? And that's different for each sector...' (STK13: 8).

'...the technical guidance the Department of Education produced is very much...you know, 'a' set of guidance...of characteristic requirements around recognition, which is universal and that doesn't really acknowledge the variation in sectors!' (STK13: 8)

While large organisations had the capacity to be supportive, finding the right input was a bigger challenge. Contact relating to skills needs was often made with Human Resources (HR), but these individuals were less likely to know what skills are required in a given role – that required the 'local' knowledge of someone in the relevant department, but they were more difficult to gain access to,

'...even within [a] company, it's often down to individuals' (EMP6: 23).

Closer input from employers is welcomed however:

'...the continued desire of subsequent governments to engage employers, and for employers to take leadership in that design of educational skills, I think that's a good one' (STK13: 13).

Yet this '*voluntarist*' approach to getting input required many resources. Involving more employers required '*quite a big communication exercise*' (STK13: 9) to explain to them why government is asking for their support and why it has put them '*in such a prominent position*' (9).

Here was a policy, with employers at its heart, devised by a government that must assume it will work, yet it required a third party, also a business, to explain it to employers and hope that they would give it their support. This 'marketing' of a policy to a supposedly key proponent of it included

communicating the benefit to employers of working with the stakeholder to implement the policy, messaging around a talent pipe-line, and ensuring that recruits have the right qualifications so that the employer does not have to re-train.

'...professional bodies that are designing professional standards, particularly in English, in Computing and Construction...we work quite closely with those to make our qualifications match their standards' (STK13: 4)... we have to devise our approach according to what a Sector, or in some cases an individual employer – how they might approach and work with us (11).

This approach is analogous to making school attendance voluntary for learners and tasking teachers with the role of persuading them that coming to school and being taught by them would be a good idea. It is policy based on an presumption that if employers are asked, or placed at the heart of written policy, often enough, the system will transform at least in part to a demand-, rather than supply-led one. Something needs to effect this change to counter the impact of *'good liberal traditions'* (STK2: 10), which continue to over-supply the system with unneeded skills, but here the prevailing culture provided a barrier:

'...there's more people doing photography courses in the UK than there are working in the photographic industry in the whole of Europe...whether that's constraining people or if that means you can't access hairdressing in Yorkshire, and your dreams of being the next Vidal Sassoon, you're stopped from being that...it's odd, isn't it, we're not used to [any kind of meaningful constraint as a result of planning]' (STK2: 10).

Efforts may anyway be wasted

'[Employers] are looking to education to provide the basics, the fundamentals, which can be up to 16 – reading and writing...Employers are interviewing for behaviours and the mannerisms and the attitudes...' (STK6: 28).

Government has continued to push the employer centre stage, giving them the lead on qualifications. A requirement exists for a small number of employers to sign-off qualifications developed by awarding organisations (DfE, 2014) to demonstrate that there is both demand for them and that they are sector relevant. One interviewee from an AO sold this requirement as two-fold: an internal desire by the company to produce high quality qualifications with demonstrable input from employers, and separately, to meet the demands of employers. The positive spin on the stringent requirements is noteworthy as AOs have suffered criticism in the past about the value of the qualifications they offer.

However, whilst some employers were willing to write a letter for use as part of the regulatory process, the request to demonstrate publicly their support by publishing a copy of the letter on their web-site, for example, *'scares off some of those employers'* (STK13: 9). The policy is flawed, based as it is on an assumption that employers will publicly endorse untested qualifications, but STK9 explained that, in his experience of NVQ, it takes roughly 15 years for new qualifications to be truly accepted throughout the system. It sounds reasonable to have employer endorse qualifications that will provide skills for their sector but, with extensive lead times between the creation of a new qualification and delivery time to the first cohorts, its eventual acceptance is by no means guaranteed. It may be altered or removed by a subsequent government or simply fail to find favour in terms of its assessment and outcomes. Few employers would publicly endorse a product that had little guarantee of success – they would at least wait for it to prove its value and might even then only take it in combination with other, more familiar, proof of ability.

Yet the alternative remains equally frustrating and there is a notable contrast between the impression given by employer-centric policy - that employers had a key involvement in the development of qualifications - whilst the employers professed to being concerned that such things are developed for them, in their absence, and then foisted upon them.

‘... we’ve done this in a darkened room, does anyone disagree?’ (EMP4: 13).

14-19 Diplomas

Many of the interviewees were originally invited to take part in the research as they, or the sector in which they are based or represented, had some supportive involvement with the development and delivery of the 14-19 Diploma qualifications. The research period coincided with that in which these qualifications were being implemented, and in which the change of government had an impact. This provided a rich set of data which illustrated many of the issues faced by all manner of stakeholders in a system, in which there appears to be little regard for vocational routes, whatever policy role the Government decides is appropriate – and tries to implement - for stakeholders.

Some sectors witnessed considerable input from employers whilst others experienced very little.

‘My instinct for [the Employer voice] not being very strong is that it wasn’t likely to be directly linked to productivity in the workplace’ (STK6: 10).

‘...some sectors completely embraced it...[employers] saw it as a real opportunity to completely change what that learner looked like when they’d finished their formal education’ (STK13: 13).

There were both positive and critical reactions to the 14-19 Diplomas among people who had contributed to developments. Employers were ‘entirely positive’ (EMP3: 8), ‘heavily engaged’ (8), and ‘big supporters’ (EMP5: 15) both at a national policy strategy level and locally with schools. There was a perceived ‘advantage’ among employers to being able to engage with the design of the content and as an ‘academically rigorous qualification’ it appealed to ‘brighter kids’ (EMP5: 15). It provided an opportunity to alter perceptions of an industry for the better.

'...we were very supportive...because the issue we've always got ... is we want people to join the technical and managerial side, and everyone in school, from the teachers down, thinks it's in trades, so the Diploma, we saw, as a great way of improving people's awareness of Technical, Supervisory and Managementcareer pathways' (EMP3: 8).

'...the thing about the Diploma was -- it wasn't a BTEC - I mean schools have done BTEC with their students for a very long time with their failing kids, basically, so if you're no good, if you're really disruptive in your History and Geography, then we'll send you to do a BTEC! I might be grossly unfair - it's slightly unfair, but not grossly unfair!' (EMP5: 15)

EMP5 illustrated the confusion around the nature of the 14-19 Diplomas, viewed by many as an alternative 'vocational' route to traditional academic qualifications, a description rejected during the project via Line of Learning Statements, for example, which do not refer to the content as vocational in any sector context. Here, an industry with a long history of vocational qualifications both within and beyond compulsory education, referred to the Diplomas as 'academic'. Perhaps a wider definition of the method of learning – largely in school or college rather than on site – was intended:

'The advantage of the Diploma was that the actual core Principal Learning was developed extensively by the industries – so employers wrote it, basically, with educationalists, for sure – but we wrote it so it broadly covers a good overview – an academic overview – of the Construction Industry' (EMP5:16).

Others welcomed attempts to create provision which introduced their sector to learners of all abilities and in doing so provided a more inclusive educational experience for all.

'I think Nuffield 14-19 Review...and the Diplomas had a big vision - what was interesting about these two is that they created outcomes that deliberately attempted to span...lower level VET- type outcomes and differentiated outcomes related to Higher Education in the same qualification! And I think that's really interesting, and I would say that it is more socially just than choosing to cleave the two' (STK6: 9).

Although the need to confirm its rigour remained

'...if you haven't got Maths you'll really struggle...it's hard, it's a hard qualification, and this idea that it's for the less bright is preposterous' (EMP4: 7).

STK6 had a positive view of the willingness and ability of employers to support qualifications. In the Engineering sector, employers continued to fight for the survival of the content and aims of the Diploma in some format even after the change of government. The problematic issue of a lack of shared outcomes was also highlighted.

'Employers know what they want – this is their money you know – their cost. They're investing in a very purposeful way. These purposes are different from Employer to Employer...' (STK6: 27).

'In the original Diploma, there were some real punch-ups...there was a land grab issue - it was set in a sectorial way...I think it was just the way the debate was framed' (STK6: 2).

Reflecting findings from earlier chapters that employers do not value qualifications per se as highly as the policy emphasis given to them suggests, a training provider whose clients include Lever, Ericson, Cable & Wireless, Virgin Media, Vodaphone, O2, Telephonica, Visa Europe and Lloyds Banking Group, claimed that it was not the resulting qualification or training certificate but the skills outcomes - which may or may not be based on a specific syllabus - that were valued by its clients. The training offered often results in a recognised qualification being awarded but this was not the driver behind the tailored programmes on offer.

'What do you want these people to look like at the end of this Development Programme? Whether it's a year, or two, or three or four years, that's our starting point with the Employers. We never even talk to them about the ICT Diploma' (STK3: 9).

During the research period, EMP3 was fighting to save the Diploma within the Construction sector, providing an insight into the aspirations for - and flaws of - the qualification. In his view, the Diploma was '*fundamentally flawed*' (15) in terms of logistics and organisation. He was pleased at the ability of the Diploma to raise the profile of roles such as Project Managers and Quantity Surveyors, for example, but found school recruitment policies onto the qualification 'depressing' (13) as they 'undermined' (9) opportunities to alter the profile of learners in the first couple of years. Learners put on the course were often '*naughty white boys*' (9), most of whom were unable to achieve the academic standards demanded by Diploma. STK4 added to the picture of the typical industry profile

'...[our professional body has] photographs in the hallway of all the great and good men...the organisation has an image of being an Old Boy's Club – the decision making Committees are dominated by men of a certain age...' (STK4: 6)

In contrast, many of the roles that enable the industry to run smoothly were filled by women:

'...We've got a lot of women working among our Member Firms...without which the show wouldn't be on the road...the building doesn't [just] take the guys on site, it takes a lot of back-up and support from people ordering the goods, and talking to the clients, and co-ordinating things...' (STK4: 6).

EMP3 touched on a common theme among all the Construction employers interviewed - the split that exists between trades and professional roles and the ability of any one learning route to serve both requirements.

'...there were two different programmes [14-19 Diplomas and Young Apprenticeships] both of value... worth supporting... in slightly different ways for slightly different reasons, but

because they were 'vocational' - and that's a dirty word - then they could be mixed up, and be the same, can't they?' (EMP3: 12)

Hiring trades people to teach reinforced this issue even though they were able to teach technical skills. Schools seemed to view the Diploma as just another trades-skills qualification, whereas this employer saw the value in drawing the attention of those learners to what it could be for professional pathways in different areas of the industry. His comments too summarised many of the challenges faced by new qualifications and the institutions teaching them: a lack of understanding of who different qualifications serve, and a probable doubling-up of teachers across the Construction Diploma and the Young Apprenticeship to save costs, with the adverse effect of maintaining the status quo in Construction provision to this age group.

'...some Schools and Colleges seemed to muddy the waters between the Young Apprenticeships and the Diploma, which I thought was a bit unhealthy, personally, but they're both worthy of support. And that is now sort of disappearing as the funding benefit to it has gone' (EMP3: 10).

A successful working relationship between an institution and an employer depends on the individuals involved. Despite offers to play a role, it was obviously possible to deliver the Diploma without employer involvement.

' "Well, we can give you some site visits some work experience, and we'll come in and help you with lessons, and we'll interview some of your pupils for opportunities, later." Oh, Brilliant! Fantastic! Then you hear nothing else. Then we'd knock on the door again, "We're still here, we thought you wanted Employer involvement?"' (EMP3: 8).

Other schools had success with the Diplomas because they just *'had that mind-set'* (EMP: 9).

Individualist as this was, it was not possible to predict on the basis of whether the school had good links with its local College.

There was recognition that the vision for the Diploma and the reality of resources on the ground often created unforeseen barriers to delivery.

'I don't think... that school can cater for, you know, Engineering - it can't - I mean this is why the Diploma failed, as much as anything else...' (STK6: 10).

'The problem is - and I'm sure it is for teachers - is change, constant change for the sake of it!' (EMP 3: 14).

'...it doesn't actually suit being scaled up to 150-300 kids - funnily enough, the Diploma only works in small groups - you can't do it, you just can't deliver, you can't have all these projects - 150 kids doing the Diploma... you just can't deliver!' (EMP5: 17)

EMP5 also observed that the sheer size of the qualification – three GCSEs worth – excluded other subjects, making it an unlikely choice of study for anyone wishing to keep their options open.

Some schools and individuals were able to overcome delivery challenges and employers responded positively to this.

'...school teachers stick to Maths and English, and we'll get someone in from the FE College for the Construction or Engineering, or whatever, Catering, or whatever it is for the day, and then you'll go back to do Maths and English, tomorrow in School. I think that's a good practical response to it' (STK6:10)

STK13 described the positive impact the 14-19 Diploma had in his sector and on the system in the regions. A historic lack of collaboration among employers and Colleges became an opportunity for employers to work with Colleges to shape the young people who would become their future workforce, so that they would be *'employable at the point of completing their Diploma'* (16). It involved communicating with schools and Colleges, with the LA, the DfE and the SSC, for example. On the downside, the complex nature of the system with its multiple contracts meant that in some counties

'you might have four or five Colleges involved in...delivery, but with different elements, so you ended up with Learners having to travel X miles...that was becoming ridiculous' (17).

Whilst the 'actual concept' (EMP5: 15) of the Diplomas was positively received it was difficult for some employers to grasp this, even when the outcomes – in some subjects at least - were perceived as being what was required.

'Employers probably didn't fully understand it, but [it] still continues to survive, because I think people still recognise that actually it was delivering something that Employers saw value in' (STK6: 7).

Whilst it may be factually accurate that the Coalition did not scrap the 14-19 Diplomas - simply removed the status of national entitlement - the message received by many interviewees was that the qualifications had been rejected by the new government. So too were their efforts to date. This resulted in disappointment among those who had invested resources, particularly since the rejection seemed to be driven by other factors than the quality or purpose of the qualifications:

'...the Opposition had a different agenda...and I think buried it because it wasn't their idea, not because it was a bad idea' (EMP3: 9).

*'The 14-19 Diploma 'started to build a bit of headway and then it got scrapped!'
(EMP5:15).*

*'Michael Gove came into power and said, 'Ditch ALL the Diplomas, ditch ALL of them!
...Now I'm not saying the Diplomas were the 'be all and end all', what I'm saying - have a
discussion before the Diplomas have gone - all four Parties...so that disappoints me as
well' (EMP8: 4).*

*'I think this is the biggest challenge we're going to face - Education not being a political
football, and everyone thinking they can do something bigger, better or more
different...and I think that's why Diplomas...going back to the Tomlinson Review,
probably everyone said that's the right thing to do, it then became a politically driven
animal, and it therefore failed' (STK6: 7).*

Their cynicism of the cyclical nature of education developments was clear – as was employer frustration with those who believed employers will keep investing their time on similar initiatives championed by a different administration. On attending a committee attempting to save the Construction Diploma, EMP7 observed:

*'I could have sent my notes and a picture of myself, and stayed at home in Manchester -
because I remember vividly saying, at the launch of the Diplomas, "Employers will really
embrace these - it was from Newcastle to Plymouth - they'd really embrace them. But
they will not take kindly to this...if this gets thrown out!" Don't come back knocking on
the door of Employers, 'cos we've already done it - been there, done that! And been
there and done that before with other things besides!' (11).*

The end of the cycle reflected a determination for some to make the best of the current situation. Whilst the Coalition placed emphasis on apprenticeships as the solution to vocational education and skills, many employers and schools were dealing with the reality of needing high-quality, engaging

provision with a useful vocational aspect in schools and they were determined to support it by contributing to UTCs and encouraging others to do the same.

'...let's just hope that it's got some sustainability, because the Diploma lasted only 2 or 3 years - if UTCs are going to work, they've got to last 10, 15, 20, or at least for the entire period of someone's school education, you know, so there's at least a chance of some of them going through a system!' (EMP3:14).

'...the problem is that it doesn't exist as a qualification anymore, so it's a different qualification with the same concept that we're going to be teaching! (EMP5: 15)...we need to find a new name for it but that - the thing itself - will continue and be the flagship product for 14-19' (17).

'...what makes the real difference is the application of Employers who are totally engaged and we've started to see some of that flowering with the 14-19 Diplomas' (STK6:13).

For others, there was only disappointment at yet another failed initiative.

'We're always involved in the Diploma and very supportive, going around presentation Groups, to try to enthuse Buyers, but the Buyers were never there – that was quite clear' (EMP2:8).

'...the Diploma doesn't exist anymore...whoever's on it now just seems to be seeing it out and it will just fade away' (EMP3: 18)

'We were disappointed at how quickly the Diploma disappeared. I'm surprised how quiet the SSC] have been about it – I would have expected more but obviously not' (EMP4: 5).

'We've lost an opportunity to get vocational training into Secondary schools' (EMP5: 15).

'...now the Diplomas aren't being promoted – I mean, it breaks my heart, because I worked long and hard on [them]... and we were getting a lot of employer involvement' (EMP6: 10)... the Diploma is all but defunct' (11).

Others had no involvement at all with development or delivery. There was an issue of communication within the system when initiatives such as the 14-19 Diploma were launched. The designation 'national entitlement', which the 14-19 Diplomas were granted, meant that a qualification must be available at least within the region of a child wanting to study it. It was not physically possible for a school or College or even a partnership of a number of education institutions to offer training in knowledge of every aspect of a given sector. However, a typical reaction to this was to reject the whole scheme.

'I remember going to the seminars [on the 14-19 Diplomas] and there's nothing about [the sector] in there, so it was a non-starter for us... some of the colleges do [relevant] courses, also do 14-19 things, and some of the children will get involved with that', (STK9: 6).

The blame for this lay partly with government, for setting expectations such that sectors really believed that a largely school-based qualification can encompass aspects – or the full needs – of every potential industry. It also lay with regulation, the narrow interpretation of 'standard', which meant that the opportunity to vary assessment and meet local need was constrained by the 'need' to be seen to treat every learner the same - thereby unwittingly discriminating against many whose needs were not met. Finally the sectors themselves were responsible for the inflexibility in their belief that a schools-based, sector-representative qualification fully met employer needs – and refusing to engage when it did not - rather than taking the opportunity to push through an open door into schools and raise awareness of their industry through project work and other channels.

Whilst the state made political and ideologically driven changes to the ET offer, employers continued along a parallel track, for example investing resource in maintaining elements of the 14-19 Diploma that worked for them. Such offers cannot be made to learners independently of the regulator as schools rely on pupil-linked funding, which in turn relies on approved qualifications, to pay for their existence. It raised the question of why the state and employers appear to have to work separately towards common ends for apparently ideological reasons rather than for the benefit of learners and their future employers – and ultimately the national economy.

Some employers took their experiences forward in support of the next initiative,

‘...even without the Diploma, there’s still lots you can do’ (EMP3: 9)...there’s still plenty of schools out there on their own or in partnership with FE Colleges, delivering Construction qualifications, often BTEC level 1, 2, 3, Diplomas, and so they’ll often ask us for input, you know, just a site visit can be an immense benefit to that sort of programme - just bringing ten kids out of the classroom, and round a live construction site...’ (10).

‘We were big supporters of the Diploma. The Construction environment as a place of learning, around the Diploma, which I still am ... in terms of the content, and we’re going to be teaching it at the [local] University Technical College...’ (EMP5: 15).

STK6 remained realistic about the extent of involvement from those employers who play an active role:

‘...my experience with the Diplomas, and what’s happened since, is that [employers] welcome new ideas in Education...[and] are selectively engaged in the components that are directly linked to productivity’ (12).

The 14-19 Diplomas provided a useful summary of the trajectory of ET initiatives within the current system: the initial enthusiasm and investment of resource; the combination of industrial and social need; the institutional stumbling blocks, solutions and examples of success; the political change in direction and the fizzling out of multiple efforts. These were accompanied by both mild and forceful instances of 'blame', disengagement, or, for some, determination to make the best of a popular initiative.

Apprenticeships

Although apprenticeships are not offered in full-time 14-19 ET, they merited inclusion as a theme for a number of reasons: they were frequently mentioned by interviewees as the training for young people with which most of them have some involvement; as the most technical and employer-led example of a qualification, they provided an example of what employers wanted from training and how they could best support it. Also, to progress from full-time education into apprenticeships, young people needed to understand what to study in school and what opportunities are available to meet their interests, rather than what served those of their current institution. They were also the flagship 'replacement' of other vocational provision in terms of their rapid expansion in number following the election of the Coalition, and, since the raising of the school leaving age to 18, have formed one of the education and training choices young people have at 16, *if* one is available.

In early interviews there were many positive comments about the Coalition government and vocational education. To be more specific, there was a very positive view of John Hayes (STK2, STK4) the first Coalition Minister of Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, in terms of his ability to provide a counter-balance to what some saw as radical changes to schools policy.

Historically, apprenticeships have enjoyed a positive reputation:

'...senior people came through with apprenticeships, so there's a culture and a history within the Directorate' (EMP1: 5).

'...some of our apprentices have gone on to become senior leaders within the business' (EMP4:4).

'[the Coalition] government is much more supportive of vocational education. Now that's a funny thing to say because the Secretary of State for Education [Gove] isn't supportive of vocational education but the Minister of Skills and the Department of Business Development and Skills see the benefit of it and keep the Secretary of State for Education in check...whereas the Labour government were like "Oh yeah, we think Apprenticeships are a good thing. We don't know why they're a good thing, but they are a good thing", [the Coalition] is like "Apprenticeships are a really good thing, and I'm telling you why they are a really good thing!" (EMP4: 14).

STK4's rather optimistic view was brought to an end by the swift removal of Hayes from post and the clear focus of Gove on academic provision. Views among employers were consistently less than complimentary in relation to each party:

*'...look at the headlines...360,000 Apprentices... it's just bullsh*t. And it doesn't matter which party is in power, they'd have said the same' (EMP2: 11).*

Many problems with the perception and adoption of vocational ET appeared to be cultural and to have originated in school. Earlier data showed that the backgrounds of those responsible for the positive promotion of apprenticeships affected their ability to do so, and that schools themselves demonstrated prejudice towards sectors and their suitability for learners.

'...although they're saying they're promoting Apprenticeships...in the school I work in – 6th Forms are the devil, the devil in disguise! They're smiling assassins and we are pretending to promote, and ticking the boxes, but underneath, there's a hidden agenda' (STK11: 16).

EMP3 wanted schools to

'...[get] rid of this (I'm going to rant, now!) this...obsession that Construction is for people who can't get a proper job! They'll go into Construction! Well, we want them to choose! (16).

Yet the sector itself had devised an 'abysmal test' (STK9:4) used across a number of industries to push people down specific routes:

'We've complained to the SSC but they don't see anything wrong in that... if you're clever, you can be an electrician, and if you're not so clever, you can be a wall/floor tiler, a plasterer, or a roofer, but it's the same test...it's not like "What are your skills here, how do we match them?" It's "You haven't scored well on this, therefore you must be one of them!" ' (STK9: 4-5).

There seemed to be a perfect storm of employer prejudice at promotional, school and CEIAG level, and if that had not put enough people off, the sector itself found a crude way to pigeonhole potential employees. One suggested solution sounded obvious

'I don't think schools have enough information about Apprenticeships (STK11: 7)...if we are promoting [Apprenticeships] as much as the academic route...then it needs to be promoted alongside, from the moment that they come in, and these links with the employer need to be organised links' (13).

Even those charged with promoting them struggled to offer apprenticeships among their own staff:

'...you could count on one hand...we're the progressive [Agency]...we're awful when it comes to that - apprentices being taken on...we haven't for the last ten years...we haven't got that culture...we tend to take on graduates...' (STK1: 8).

'We've been through the complexities of taking on an apprentice...there were some quite difficult things about her orientation in the workplace, but also about us being ready for her as well', (STK5: 4).

Although at least one demonstrated support through action as well as words:

'...we have developed the programme fairly robustly over the last 12-18 months...we have apprentices in virtually every function of the organisation...in Sales, in Products, in Finance, Facilities and Marketing' (STK7: 2).

EMP2 expressed the many-layered considerations made by employers when recruiting. They were prepared to offer an apprenticeship

'When they come to us at 16 and say I want to be an apprentice, fine if they've done something about it...' (11).

Yet greater value is placed on experience

'...would I rather have a 20 year old labourer who's been around on sites, and has experience, understanding, humour and drive – course I would! ...if somebody had vocational training in cleaning, and somebody else at school just learned about cleaning...so when they came to me at 16 looking for a position, would I want the one doing it or the one just reading about it? I'd rather the one who did it!' (EMP2: 11-12).

'...the motivation of parents sending young children, [aged] 14-plus, to UTC... for parents who are, rightly, concerned about the jobs destinations for their kids...a clear escalator to work' (STK6: 16).

Agencies set up apparently to support employers may often be a hindrance. The National Apprenticeship Service, for example, was intended to enable better co-ordination of supply and demand and the channelling of funding for apprenticeships. However, any part of the modern governance structure was reliant on and accountable to the state, being both funded by and responsible for, public money and this causes tensions and inertia.

'They had me jumping through loads of hoops...you resent it because we've been running – it is a successful programme – it's small but...we run it because it meets our business need...we don't want to be pushed like that for something we've been doing for a long time and doing well' (EMP1: 1).

This same, Spanish-owned company, with a requirement for language training for its employees, was large enough to fund this training requirement for itself as it could not be awarded as part of the funded framework (EMP1). This may not be the case in other businesses. Policy must balance the 'local' needs of employers with a comparable, national standard for purposes of transfer and progression and of ensuring frameworks can accommodate local need without losing transferability.

The business aims of the agency and those of the target organisation may clash. Policy often translates badly when implemented in the very organisations the agency is apparently intended to support.

'...the deal with the Skills Funding Agency is, they will only fund that, and the deal with the awarding organisation is that you will certificate, under this programme, those things! And the deal with [the SSC] is that under this programme you will only deliver a framework of these units!' (EMP4:9).

A mandate to drive up Apprenticeship numbers may clash with existing, successful programmes of delivery. In this case, implementation was incompatible with existing employment law but this was only discovered after months of work.

'...it's not in touch with reality...it's again how their policies can translate what it means for us' (EMP1:2).

Even when an employer chose to engage with publicly funded training they sometimes needed to show levels of perseverance and to commit resources which must be impossible for a small business.

'I was working with them for over a year, giving them all the information they wanted...and it came to nothing'... [so] we get our partner's partner to draw down funding, take a load off the top and give us the rest, just because we haven't got our own contract' (EMP1: 1).

'...when I look at all the extra stuff we do...and how much above and beyond the core framework we do, how much we invest in them, it seems really unfair' (EMP1:1).

'We will advertise our vacancies with the NAS, although we don't advertise all of them. Interestingly, a lot of our apprenticeships, for obviously in low Community Local Housing Association, or with a Client partner who will want us to advertise, you know, directly, locally, so the NAS doesn't really help with that. So, in fact, often our Clients will say we only want candidates from our Borough, whatever, they might as well get the benefit. So, it doesn't actually help much to advertise with the NAS, so occasionally we do, but more often we don't!' (EMP5: 14)

'We're frustrated, you know, people like NAS and Sector Skills Councils are saying, "Oh, Higher Apprenticeships, all shiny new!" Well actually, we've been delivering them since 2007, and we won a National Training Award in 2009, so we've got 3 or 4 years real experience of working with Employers and delivering, now!' (STK: 3 16).

The application of market forces to ET provision drove easy headlines in terms of increased numbers of learners, but its impact was similarly negative whether it was on the niche apprenticeship markets – as described below – or the inability of minor AOs to truly meet sector requirements in the absence of profit (STK8: 18).

'...as long as the wonderful NAS is only calling on the low-hanging fruit Engineering and Administration, and all the easy high-volume...the smaller volume ones aren't any use to them' (STK2: 3).

The gap between expectation and reality became a barrier. Policy expectations sought to drive up numbers of Apprenticeships but the capacity of employers to service those numbers with any degree of quality or progression – or relate them to need within the industry - led to what appears to be stagnation or even a refusal on their part to co-operate with the latest vision.

'...we would estimate there's about three thousand or so apprentices out there training within our member firms...that figure hasn't changed over the last ten years or so (STK4:1) ...there's been a lot of talk about increasing the numbers of apprentices etc, but this doesn't translate through to anything happening on the ground' (4).

Apprenticeships policy elsewhere was latched on to, to create at least an appearance of need and therefore growth in numbers, when the reality was quite different. This generated headlines but also false expectations

'...so it's like you need to have a whole new set of people called 'Green deal' apprentices – it's the existing apprentices, or new ones coming through with a bit of additional knowledge built in to what they know' (STK4: 4).

The reality of firms planning their own expansion and the training programmes that go with that was unsuited to a government drive for numbers and clashed with established – and successful – training policies.

'12 vacancies – 500 applicants!' (EMP1: 8).

The early push under the Coalition for rapidly increasing numbers of Apprentices resulted in well-publicised issues around quality and progression; as the Trade Union stakeholder said:

'...part-time things, which are predominantly – actually targeted at 16-18 year olds offering them an Apprenticeship...part time, six months, surprise, surprise - major retailers, comes Christmas, no job, no chance of a job afterwards and no real Level 1 or Level 2 in some kind of Retail' (STK5: 8).

It is difficult for small businesses to engage on an individual basis with major consultations and therefore Trade Associations sought to represent their interests. Since the majority of businesses in England are small, the small business voice is often filtered through an intermediary. Larger firms have the capacity to be heard directly.

'...our members wouldn't have a hope of responding individually' (STK4:1).

Whilst it is not possible from this research to determine the extent of the advantage of the influence of larger firms on policy, it stands to reason that a large brand name with the capacity to field one or

more individuals to lobby for their interests with government has a more direct influence than a small business, represented at one remove – and alongside hundreds of others - by an intermediary. There is no reason to think that small business' needs are any less diverse – nor that they are any more willing to share trade secrets or train individuals who may leave, than larger business.

One interviewee revealed the complexity of the situation in a single reply:

'I think the National Apprenticeship Service should be the organisation that should be looking at selling to Companies, and should be the point through which interested applicants come. I mean they've got the matching service. Now, to be fair we ask everybody to come to [large company website area]...which is our own portal, so I think that should be there, but the pooriness of the Sector Skills Council and the Apprenticeship Bodies is very poor [sic]. They seem to have no control over the awarding organisations, they seem to move at a glacial pace to get anything changed or done' (EMP4: 13).

There are a number of layers to this comment. Firstly, before being employed by this organisation, the interviewee worked for a SSC, meaning he might therefore be viewed as giving a 'truthful' insight into the strengths and weaknesses of both sides. However, the remark about 'control' revealed a potential motive. A lot of money is available to AOs to allow the development and promotion of apprenticeships and other qualifications. Any other organisation would be happy to be put in control of those sums and show frustration or envy when they are not. Managing the tensions between major partners such as the examinations regulator, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the SSCs, AOs and the Department responsible for education was a key issue during the development of the 14-19 Diplomas.

It was judged acceptable for a large employer to have its own portal – and presumably terms and conditions for the recruitment of apprentices – but not other employers. This may have limited

careers options for those without immediate access to or knowledge of that large organisation. Not all large organisations have a national presence. Yet for those with a reputation established beyond the boundaries of nationally funded provision, and whose brand is a household name, state policy has a limited impact:

'...we can call anything we want a [company name] apprenticeship, and people still come and do it, and the funding is minimal...it's not that important to us' (EMP4:12).

Infrastructure

As described in Chapter 2, both New Labour and the Coalition created a wealth of policy in relation to schools' infrastructure, such as encouraging the investment of private funds creating a variety of new institutions, and establishing market forces as a key component of the ET system landscape. Whether through PPI under New Labour or as sponsors of UTCs under the Coalition, for example, the changing infrastructure landscape provided employers with new ways to get involved with 14-19 ET, each with its own challenges.

'...the system of the last 20-30 years has lost it...[it] has got to be re-designed to allow for more fundamental work-related technical education, that is, you know, academically stretching...but equally not just simply academic in its approach' (STK7:6).

'...all of them say it starts at school...industry and politicians are saying we need to do more with the schools' (EMP8: 11).

Interviewees saw room both for confusion and opportunity in relation to the diversification of school models.

'...whether it's an Academy or a Free School, or a Studio School - and what a mad idea they are - UTC bog-standard Comprehensive, normal Grammar School as opposed to an Independent Grammar School, or whatever...' (EMP3:14).

'I think government, you know, both the current incumbent [the Coalition] and arguably, the future government – and we assume it will be some sort of a Labour government – I think they both recognise that there is a desperate need to address the shortcomings of the system in terms of technical education...UTCs are beginning to present themselves as being potentially a really credible option...for 14-18' (5).

EMP3 described the diversity of models as 'unhealthy' as it made employer involvement 'quite difficult' (14). Employers were left unsure of what to offer to which type of school, leaving them understandably sceptical. The Studio School - the very one that was supposed to prepare learners for the working day through its timetable as well as its curriculum - was dismissed as a 'mad idea' by this representative of a 40, 000 strong workforce operating in around half of the countries in the world.

'And the Government's supporting these UTCs, and other experiments, so there's space in the educational landscape now, to experiment and play, which is good! There's not a mono-culture - there will be mistakes along the way, and some of them...not every school is going to succeed, but we have the opportunity to build a school that will succeed, and be really influenced by the industry and the Government has created a space for that, so I'm quite pleased with that opportunity' (EMP5: 16).

But flexibility and marketization generate other issues:

'We've now got a more commoditised, more competitive environment, where quality is not necessarily seen as being the same by everyone, and where competitive forces, I think, are pushing some of the barriers around quickly, and that is a cause for concern' (STK6: 12).

There were concerns about the longevity of UTCs as yet another new initiative

'The UTCs have come along now, Studio Schools, Free Schools, all these issues, and you could say the Diplomas weren't going to work, so why are these going to work? Again I do have a worry, I mean, incredibly, at least the Diploma, virtually every town from Newcastle to Plymouth... only six UTCs are run for profit... so I then say to myself, "Well, now, how can only six make a real impact?"' (EMP7: 4).

In at least one case, the impact was already being felt. On giving a prize at the JCB Academy, one stakeholder observed:

'...the palpable relief on [parents'] faces when they watched their kids who'd just been successful with good qualifications, and they had a clear sense of what their destination was – and it was frequently apprenticeships and/or University. The parents were...pleased to see their daughter working towards something that, I suppose, reflected the values they held. It was about work ...[the parents] were clearly able to re-enforce, positively, the choice that their daughter had made, and she was quite pleased to be making a choice that was being re-enforced by her parents' (STK6: 16-17).

Concerns were expressed that the scarcity of UTCs on a national level would make them difficult to access

'...people will only travel so far....you've got all those great swathes of the Country and town and cities which haven't got a College' (STK9: 5).

Others were yet to be evangelised

Interviewer: '...the UTCs, are they anything for you?'

STK8 'What are they?'

Interviewer: 'University Technical Colleges – they're new-ish'

STK8: No, we have no dealings with them' (16).

Another feared that an existing element of the system would be forgotten:

'...if you go post-16... FE Colleges actually educate - I think I'm right in saying - the majority of 16-19 year olds...and yet they are not very good at employer engagement...we'll go to Schools and we'll deal with 6th forms, and so on, and we'll forget there's hundreds of thousands of good quality potential recruits sitting in an FE College!' (EMP3:16).

This concern was shared by EMP8, who reported that one of the country's best Construction Colleges in the north of England had expressed their concerns about how out-of-date their resources were in comparison with the technology and building methods currently used:

'...what we are teaching in our college and looking at what's going on there, and there's no relationship between the two!' (14).

EMP5, the governor of a UTC, reflected the newness of the initiative both in his enthusiasm and in his contradictory description of the aims and target audience for the institution. He was keen to establish its quality credentials:

'The UTC will be the first secondary school properly focused on construction and professions, more of a 'Construction Specialist Academy'... there are schools in the UK offering construction as a split specialism with other things like Engineering, but the

Construction bit is the traditional BTEC bit, so it's just for kids who aren't doing academically well...that's not my idea of success' (EMP5: 18-19).

Its purpose was not solely to educate young people. There was a belief that UTCs would

'...change...society in the UKs views of Construction, to the extent that it can be changed' (EMP5:19).

Demonstrating how far there is to go in terms of rehabilitating vocational education even in a sector with a long and successful history of it, EMP5 asked and answered his own question:

'Why are parents interested in academic? Because it ensures...success in life! If we can demonstrate that attending [the new] school, and then going on to University or whatever, leads to those successful outcomes – as we will – then that nut will be cracked easily. Because it's going to have high academic standards...it's not like we're just the sink school with construction failures...' (19).

There was no separation of young people who are skilled with their hands and choose the 'biblical trades' as a career – they were all, if unintentionally, encompassed by the term 'construction failures'. The intention was to offer the progression found in academic schools, raising the question of how provision in this particular UTC would be different. The aim appeared to be to offer work readiness skills alongside academic achievement but that seemed a large investment of money and emphasis on sector sponsorship and involvement for 'soft' rather than technical skills. EMP5 imagines the scenario of a young person saying:

' "I've been in the school but I don't want to do construction, so I'm going to University to study history, but I'm much more employable because I understand industry, I understand employers – what they need – I've got those softer skills in communication

and confidence''... that's the vision – high academic standards, vocational experience, and employability. It all comes down to employability – having these kids snapped up for sponsorship, or for jobs, because they are... so much better than the other kids who turn up for interview...' (EMP5: 20-21).

The following paragraphs seemed unrealistic both from the requirement for all 150 entrants to the yearly intake to be able to study Mathematics, and the idea that learners will respond positively to being threatened with the loss of University sponsorship. Obviously this was a very conversational view of the picture but it was to be hoped that learners would be supported to achieve their grades and sponsorship rather than – or at least as well as - having failure held over them. It was also, however, a very 'employer' approach: after all if one does not perform in the workplace it is possible to lose one's job and therefore salary.

'...we'll be demonstrating the value of vocational, but a bit of a combination, because it's not just vocational. High academic standards are a very important part of it...half the school is a 6th form...that's essential really to demonstrate that part of it, otherwise it would just be kids doing their re-takes of their GCSEs you know. To get into 6th form you've got to be capable of doing A-Level Maths, otherwise we're not interested, you know...the great thing is, we'll be telling the kids this in schools...We'll sponsor you at University, but you've got to get an A or a B. We'll walk away from you – there's plenty of other kids...the employer involvement will help drive academic standards...' (EMP5:20).

However it reflected the expectations placed on graduates elsewhere. EMP2 secured three quarters of the graduate pool intake from sponsored undergraduates who were expected to perform both academically and on site. In a similar way to the fulfilment of apprenticeship places,

'...if we don't need any more than 35, we won't take any more' (EMP2:5.)

Since undergraduates became responsible for their own University fees, competition is fierce: on the other hand

'Oxford Brookes is talking about cutting back the kids Construction Management Course because of the lack of demand... at the new Greenwich UTC it's oversubscribed, so there is still interest if you can reach the right groups' (EMP8: 13).

The problem did not always lie with the modernity of the resources, but the cost of them, and the space and learner capacity they enabled, seemingly unrelated to LMI:

'...if you put desks in here and did Computer Studies, you'd probably get ten people in here, whereas you'd only get one rig, and only one or two people could work on it' (STK9: 6).

The issue came back to employers and their habit of saying

'...you go off to learn and come back to me as a finished tradesman' (STK9:9).

but fault equally lay with a system which has a different purpose from that needed by employers

'...most roofers lay three or four products – in theory [each roofer] should have an NVQ for each of the those, each one lasting a year and a half...they can spend half their life getting this qualification, whereas the guy wants him to lay [the roof] tomorrow!' (STK9:9).

So here is an industry that the system lets down from the start. The common method of recruitment into the trade was as old as apprenticeship itself

'...most will go to someone they know, or parents they know, or have a lad that can get up at 6 o'clock in the morning and do the job...why would I employ a school-leaver who I might spend all my time doing Maths and English with?...If I wanted to be a teacher, I'd be a teacher! I don't need that! I need someone who comes to me that can learn the Trade. I don't want to be a sort of nanny' (STK9: 4,7).

This stakeholder, whose trade is essential to all the homes in England, admitted to having nothing to do with 14-19 Diplomas and claimed that FE Colleges are unable to serve the trade owing to issues with resources. He stated he had never heard of UTCs, and that employers in their trade had their own way of dealing with their needs more or less outside of the system. They criticised the length of time it takes to be recognised as 'competent' – a concern shared by STK8, who declared it impossible to have a qualification developed in under eighteen months, whatever the business case, owing to regulatory requirements – and clearly operated successfully as a trade and profession outside all of these matters. They represented around 1200 contractors and suppliers – 70 per cent of their industry by value - and were not alone in their concerns. These were relevant to 14-19 full-time ET because their views represented a set of 'real' employment opportunities and needs, which had little hope of being fulfilled by the national system of schooling and CEIAG.

Understanding was shown for the need UTCs are trying to fulfil:

'Do your GCSEs and if you pass some technical, vocational qualifications, you could follow that up by an Apprenticeship – and you've got to compete well for it because the school is well-known for producing fellows like you. Or you can use 'Route 1 [A-Levels] but you'll have built these real and tangible connections with a whole range of employers in the field that you want' (STK 6: 16)... UTCs have a benefit...of creating such a strong community' (18).

'...with these 14-19 year olds - if we get these University Technical Colleges ...but you've got a normal school curriculum, and then you've got all these diverse things regarding

Buildings and Plant and Construction as a whole. You would then pick up these 14-year-olds and then you would start seeing their abilities, because we know at 14 whether you've got a brain or not, and whether you're going to be an academic or not, and then you can say, "Well, actually, you don't have to be a dead-end brickie, or a dead-end Plant driver, you can do this. You can enhance those skills, and that knowledge he's got, and that interest within the UTC"... there's another path here and you can earn lots of very good money on it' (STK8: 16-18).

Although some interviewees seemed knowledgeable and supportive of UTCs they were also aware that the colleges are dependent for their success on employers playing a significant role. Employer involvement with a UTC comes with stringent criteria: the business needs a school skills strategy, a Community Liaison Manager and a long-term order book to guarantee the viability of the business before they are able to work with a UTC, something which even for large businesses may prove a challenge in straitened economic times.

Both stakeholders and employers were aware of the issues within the system, and potential solutions, yet EMP8 still had some way go to understand the potential of the employer role intended by ET Policy:

'...we haven't liaised with schools, we've given school talks – partly for site safety, you know. Part of our planning obligation is, you know, to go and relate to the schools...'
(EMP8: 8).

In other words, as part of creating new building sites, employers were obliged to inform young people about the safety implications of playing on them, and this represented the extent of 'engagement' with schools. EMP3 was clear that the new schools

'...won't work unless Employers are engaged with them - so Employers are almost duty - bound to get engaged and to make them work' (14).

'...[it will be] challenging to find employers in sufficient quantities to engage with Studio Schools rather than UTCs because the former model is predominantly employers providing work placements for learners whereas the latter model is mainly employers going in to the school' (STK6: 19).

This latter point picked up on one of the two most common forms of employer involvement – the provision of work experience – which despite its status as one of the most successful forms of employer involvement was still difficult to fulfil on a national basis in the eyes of employers themselves. STK11, a careers adviser based in the north of England, felt that employers in her region had little capacity for such things.

Even where employers are willing to contribute there are challenges in terms of business size and access to the right people. Whilst a large business may be able to field many volunteers or offer multiple work placements, it is more likely to be hampered by process and administration, requiring sign-off from a senior figure. In contrast, in a small business there is more likelihood that contact will be made with a decision-maker.

Work experience

There were fears around the time the Wolf report (2010) was published that the requirement for work experience for young people might disappear altogether. Indeed many schools and colleges pulled provision in-house, but an EBP representative gave a positive and healthy picture of employer involvement in her London borough,

'...[some employers] just want to volunteer again and again, or they might be volunteers from a specific Business that partners with the school' (STK12: 6).

This EBP placed 4,000 students each year: some generic, general work experience, some tailored for older students in Nurseries, Schools, Health and Social Care, Sports organisations, IT, Hair and Beauty and Art and Design businesses. Science placements and IT support were regarded as difficult as such businesses tended to be placed outside London. Engaging with Science and Pharmaceuticals was also regarded as a challenge as these industries preferred to protect professional knowledge. The EBP also organised '*curriculum enrichment days*' (5) to prepare students for work experience – CV writing, for example – all of which were also delivered by business people.

'...work experience... might be for students that are studying A-Levels even, that might wish to go out on work experience as well, or as a result of vocational qualifications...also in terms of working with students who that are not in work, education or training' (STK12: 11).

The EBP worked with 3,000 employers over the course of the year and some of these were one-off events, one instance of work experience, whilst others – notably nurseries and the National Health Service, for example, admitted young people throughout the year. Those who were unable to take on work experience students were able to volunteer to attend a careers' day at which they tell students about the work they do. Others provided one-off visits during which students learn about

business merchandising. Where a work placement was a requirement for successful completion of a course, colleges found it expedient to hand over the sourcing and management of work placements to EBPs.

'...we provide [a local] College with 514 Health and Social Care placements' (STK12: 10).

When it came to persuading employers to offer work placements and other support to young learners, interviewees acknowledged the ongoing voluntarist nature of the employer role and the attitudes that shape it

'I think some people have varying ideas about the young generally, and those...even after an explanation can still be quite negative, and that's their decision...their choice' (STK12:12).

Yet elsewhere STK8 observed

'...employers do like working with schools though' (8).

'...someone as a leading organisation, is quite open to working with young people, getting young people engaged in their Business, that's extremely helpful, and does, kind of drive the organisation. Frustratingly...you can have a really great person in post, and then they leave, and you can see that it was only that individual who was driving that forward' (STK12: 13).

'...people who, perhaps, are aware of how they gained their qualifications – in terms of Nursery Nurses etc – are quite open to hosting students' (STK12: 13).

In contrast, professions such as Architecture or Creative industries were found to be 'quite negative' (STK12: 13) about having school students for work experience as they felt the business did not benefit and therefore preferred to take an older student.

The 2011 riots in London had a perhaps surprising effect on employer participation. Based in the Borough of Hackney, in which many businesses had been '*obviously attacked*' (STK12: 14), the EBP was concerned that this might have had a negative effect on attempts to place young people. On the contrary

'...unusually, I had a few e-mails from business volunteers and businesses on the back of the riots, about getting involved after that...there were several opportunities through that that meant people were a little bit like "What can we do to help? How can we be involved?" That's the really positive thing' (STK12: 14).

Having a sufficient supply of places was an issue – not every employer can offer placements or support - yet the requirement for employer input for the 16-19 age group was predicted to grow (STK12). Work placements often faced logistical problems such as having nowhere for the learner to sit within a business. STK12 speculated about funding to resolve this but was equally sceptical of the type of employer who would require payment to give a learner an insight into their business.

There was evidence of competition for a finite number of placements and volunteers among learners and EBPs, schools, Colleges and other organisations, a situation replicated across England.

Success is

'...a matter of developing those relationships, or getting in there before the other schools get in there' (STK12: 21).

The stiff competition faced by a London-based EBP for placements raised questions about the availability of opportunity for young people outside urban areas to acquire any kind of meaningful insight into the majority of potential careers.

'...depending where you are working, the Stakeholders, the landscape, can be completely different. You can't go to Lincoln, and suddenly assume that the EPB is good there...when you go to somewhere else where it's not so good, you're not going to get the same engagement. So, it's quite a varied thing and you almost have to re-invent the wheel for each area you go to, which is interesting!' (EMP3:11).

There were a number of arguments to the effect that a properly functioning partnership system between employer and stakeholder organisations would ensure that funding was used to meet the requirements of industry, regardless of the numbers involved, and that a less competitive market would ensure that quality and need came before profit. This is not the world, however, in which the system operates at present. In some respects, market forces continue to dominate. The use of vocational education as a 'social' tool arguably made a profit for awarding organisations and colleges but in many cases had little to do with industry need.

Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance

Although wider aspects of the system infrastructure were not originally a focus for the research, initial interviews showed them as being of significance to many of the stakeholders, and of providing an insight into aspects of the employer role which it would have been remiss to omit. CEIAG is one example of this.

The interview with STK11 reinforced many perceptions – and indeed media reporting - about the state of CEIAG, the issues around which seem to have changed little since the advent of Connexions at the beginning of the Millennium. Fourteen years later, poor quality CEIAG remained a concern (CBI, 2013). Funding changes meant that advisory agencies had to contract with schools directly. Some schools opted out of using external agencies and appointed advisers in-school. Some did not even do this, relying on teachers and personal tutors to deliver advice to cut costs but also to ensure that the interests of the institution were considered alongside those of the learner. Not only did teachers have *‘enough on their plate’* (STK11: 14), but some young people objected to their teachers directing their future.

‘I don’t think you or I would be capable of knowing the ins and outs of the Financial Services of the construction industry or IT, and yet teachers are asked to do it...’
(EMP7:6).

‘...[schools] haven’t got the resources and they haven’t got the expertise’ (STK11: 9).

The danger of unqualified CEIAG can be that it switches off the very audience for whom it could offer a real alternative. The interviewee had heard teachers telling pupils that CEIAG was a *‘waste of time’* (STK11:15), and another simply lectured her class about apprenticeships and then complained about the lack of impact of the schools’ *‘advice’*

‘”...it’s really hard to get an apprenticeship...” It’s all negative, negative, negative, and the kids just switched off, and then it’s like “Why didn’t we get more kids on to apprenticeships? We did loads!” ‘ (STK11: 13).

The increasingly target-driven nature of CEIAG did little to dispel this view.

‘As long as you were under a Local Authority there weren’t any targets really up to 1996, I think it was You know [Careers Advice] wasn’t like a business...it became very target driven...’ (STK11:6).

Targets were not meaningful.

‘...you got half an hour with eight kids and they all had to be seen by the October half-term’ (STK11: 5).

The funding changes meant that the future of external careers advisers was threatened and the interviewee may therefore have painted a more negative picture of the situation than existed. STK11 stated that Headteachers were more business-driven and apt to keep money in-house, and to steer advice - and the accompanying funding - towards keeping learners in school, whether or not this was in the best interests of the individual. Parents and learners have been sold the view that the academic option was best purely because that was what was offered in the school and that kept the pupil – and the funding that accompanied them – in the school too.

‘How can you give impartial advice in a school 6th Form if you’re employed by the school?’ (STK11: 4).

Schools did not have the connections to give meaningful insights into potential careers and were concerned with the bottom line, not the learners’ next steps. This led to a situation outlined in some

detail by STK11. Learners were pushed to achieve a grade 'C' if they were on the borderline but sometimes even those with B and C grades were not considered able to pursue subjects such as the Sciences (even if they requested to do so – things have moved far beyond learner choice). Instead they were pushed onto courses such as BTECs in IT or PE, which, whatever their intrinsic value, were not wanted by the learner. They then either dropped out completely or tried to pursue other vocational courses, having effectively wasted their time - and public money - on something in which they had no interest, and was potentially of little cultural or employment value. The school however, has had the money associated with that learner for an additional two years.

'I think it's wrong for Schools to be funded as they are today, in such a way that they actively seek to hold students within their Institutions, when it is clearly better for some of those students to go to a different place of learning, and that, I think, is something that does need to be looked at, because we're seeing that really manifesting itself at this time). Headteachers...they're Game Players!' (STK6: 10, 13)

The language and imagery used around CEIAG saw one former adviser described as having '*real values and moral – strong morals...*' (STK11: 16). To counteract advice given with the intention of keeping 'bums on seats' (STK8: 5; STK11: 6) the Adviser found herself hiding advice that was in the best interests of the child.

'If I sent a child out with a Prospectus from a different College, I had to tell them to put it in their bag...they're being mis-directed, kids, seriously mis-directed, and [schools are] getting away with it massively' (STK11: 17, 19).

Summary

The chapter has shown that there is no shortage of opinion and reaction to the ET system and its elements in England. Employers have – at times unwittingly – provided evidence of the on-going historical and cultural influences on their own behaviours, and also demonstrated how these continue to shape and influence the system. Many of them appear to feel duty-bound to support policy initiatives, at least in their early stages, but continue to hold entrenched views about the suitability of certain qualifications for their own staff and children, which do not always tally either. There seems to be a benevolent acceptance of how the system works and at times the impression is given that interviewees are happy to support it – but on their own terms, particularly when it comes to having a personal involvement in the system. The sixth and final chapter will provide a theoretical analysis of employer responses. This chapter, however, serves to demonstrate the –contrasting views of employers within and about a system they are actively encouraged to shape. Some employers give their full and enthusiastic support to learners and trainees: they, however, appear to be in the minority, and to be selective about the role they play.

Chapter 6: Fragmentation and contradiction: why policy and system structures have failed to enable an effective role for employers

Introduction

This final chapter draws together the findings of the previous chapters to support the central argument of the thesis - that the relative failure of policy in relation to the employer role in 14-19 ET cannot be explained solely by a combination of its historical and cultural roots and the policy of successive governments. A large part of this chapter is a conceptual analysis of the interviewee responses, which reveals the complexity of the motives and drivers behind the behaviours of the interviewees, and the impact of these on existing and potential initiatives. Finally, it reflects on the implications of the research findings for future policy and practice, including the potential for a common framework to mitigate some of the issues uncovered, and more radical strategic reform to tackle their roots.

The research approach

Encouraging individual employers to talk in-depth about their relationship with full-time 14-19 ET provided a route into this complex and revealing area of policy influence. The influence of group behaviours, individual experiences and personal context came strongly - but often very differently - through each interview. Individual employers are shown to have behaved in ways - and contributed inputs - unexpected in representatives of an organisation or sector, even when the diverse nature, size and location of these are taken into account. The research findings broadly met expectations based on experience of working closely with employers. Surprising though was the frankness of many employers about initiatives with which they had been involved.

At first it was a source of concern for the validity of this research that reports continued to trumpet positive inputs from employers (The Edge Foundation, 2013), drawing on data from hundreds of employers. However, the in-depth nature of these research interviews complimented such broad reports, by giving a greater insight into the reasons behind what may be improved - but are still limited – levels and types of employer involvement in this area, and the implications for wider ET policy reliant on employer support for its success.

Established influences on the ET system

The first two research objectives, concerned with the contextual history of current stakeholder relationships within the ET system, and the dimensions of the employer role in New Labour and Coalition ET policy, are largely met by the findings of the literature review. This confirmed that the history and culture of the ET system in England continues to influence its current structure and related policy. Under New Labour it seemed that employers would be given new opportunities to influence and support full-time 14-19 ET – and there was an expectation or belief that employers would take advantage of these. They were certainly placed at the heart of many policies, but many of the issues preventing effective employer involvement were deep-rooted and could not be resolved by exhortation alone. A review of Coalition policy reinforced this view. The hoped reliance on employers to resolve some of the issues associated with ET policy and the system was coupled with an on-going failure to challenge the assumptions on which policies were founded and to acknowledge the impact of structures on the way employers engaged with the system.

The use of single elements of the infrastructure to effect change masks a political inability or unwillingness to drive significant, strategic changes to the ET system. It also makes a coherent and lasting relationship between employers and the system as a whole more challenging. Under the established system, any single solution attempting to address social, economic and educational aims

can only fail. Equally, the complexity of the issues behind these areas can only result in competing priorities and goals, which no one solution can address (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1995; Lumby and Morrison, 2006). As there are no consistent regulations to encourage more employers to play a greater role in full-time 14-19 ET – simply a series of levers and drivers – their lack of involvement may cause wasted resources, cyclical policy making, and unexpected policy continuity between government administrations (Hayward, 2004; Stanton, 2006).

On-going tinkering with elements of the system, particularly modifications to qualifications and infrastructure, appears based on an supposition that such changes will be meaningful and beneficial to employers. Instead of new initiatives learning from and emerging from the old, this lack of continuity of even single elements of the system results a policy amnesia (Hodgson and Spours, 2007; City and Guilds, 2014; Lum 2015), which perpetuates the very problems they are intended to solve. Such initiatives tend to be politically driven and clash with the need for the stability required by the system as a whole (City & Guilds, 2014). Nor do they recognise the identities of employers as citizens, parents, governors and other roles which might influence their priorities, and may result in a failure on their part to support or endorse an appropriate learning route for their trainees, or indeed, to secure suitable outcomes for themselves. Employers supporting a policy or project is perceived as a group sharing an agreed set of outcomes, but since they hold multiple views of those same outcomes, difficulties arise.

Arguably, engaging with the system as a whole is so complex and changes so rapidly, even employers who engage with policy and delivery do so in a limited way, and which suits their immediate or longer-term needs. These may not chime with those of many or any other similar organisations in a local area but may provide a way for the EBP or LEP to engage successfully with ‘an employer’. Taking unskilled young people into the business is considered a high risk strategy by

smaller employers and there is a case to be made for better financial incentives for such organisations (UKCES, 2011).

A coherent system and set of processes of engagement with it should support employers to share best practice as a way seen to improve industry performance and not threaten individual business, and to upskill an industry rather than an organisation. This in turn should minimise the impact of conflict, removing some incentives to behave self-interestedly and likewise some opportunities for conflict, in turn will increase the potential benefits to all involved. More recognition of this might elicit a less self-interested approach, (Jensen, 1994). Fletcher and Parry's (2008) suggestion of improved processes in the form of 'formalised arrangements, well-developed strategic plans and effective co-ordination' (33) remain highly relevant. Employers would welcome a 'no wrong door' approach to engaging with the system seeking training support (UKCES, 2011: 7).

There is limited discussion in this thesis of the structural forces driving the relationship of the organisations employers represent since these are already covered by the literature, far less the impact of employer behaviours and the nature of their relationship with the structures concerned, and on which this work focuses. On the one hand, employers find the young people they recruit tend to have the 'employability' skills they require (UKCES, 2011) but this very emphasis on employability and the narrowing of the skill set demanded by role- rather than occupation-specific training has trapped people in low-skill sectors of the economy, (Brockmann, 2011).

One does not have to look far for contradictory employer behaviours and attitudes. The Youth Enquiry (UKCES, 2011) appears to find employers both supportive of training and of the idea that they should be offering greater opportunities to young people as part of a wider strategy to upskill their workforce.. What often prevented them for being more active in offering opportunities for

young people were structural barriers caused by continual change to policy and the bodies charged with implementing this.

The employer role is considered 'vital' by policymakers, and they themselves feel they have a 'duty' to support young people into work through the provision of skills and job opportunities. Elsewhere, employers may be found recruiting people with a far higher level of skill than is required by the position held; entering higher value-added product markets but limiting the number of highly skilled employees and relying on the lower-skilled for the majority of work and employing 'considerable discretion over whether or not they chose to enhance the skill of their labour force' (6). In both these reports, systems, structures and levers are discussed in terms of their influence on and the employer relationship with them – yet employer 'discretion' remains the deciding factor in the creation of a skilled workforce.

Complicating the picture further are the number and nature of intermediary agencies with which employers must engage to remain current in their knowledge of initiatives and to enable them to draw down funding, for example. Education Business Partnerships, Sector Skills Councils and their predecessors, and other representative agencies are not the only intermediaries to have perpetuated barriers and issues within the structures of the system. From their origins to the present day, Trade Unions in England have failed to counter sufficiently the influence of the employer in the system and have protected the interests of their members over those of the industry or workforce as a whole, (Lum, 2015).

Conceptual analysis of the original research findings

The descriptive, thematic analysis of the data in Chapter 5 illustrated the ‘story’ of employer involvement in full-time 14-19 ET in the words of employers and a range of stakeholders. Here, a conceptual analysis of that data reveals patterns of behaviour in relation to those themes. Aspects of the original research confirm the existence of established historic and cultural influences, and the impact of policy assumptions. Attitudes to VET are mixed and often negative. A picture of the issues associated with the effective provision of Careers Education Information Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) serves as a representative illustration of how a mixture of policy clashes and barriers, coupled with individual behaviours, can impact negatively on a given part of the ET system.

The influence of individual experience and behaviours on the shape of policy and its outcomes is demonstrated along with the sometimes contradictory nature of employer behaviours and the variety of motives and barriers driving these. The theoretical framework enables an insight into the origins of these behaviours, and how policy might better respond to them. It sheds light on the assumptions identified in the first two chapters, and on how to support the employer role within the confines of the current ET system. It calls into question the importance of full-time 14-19 ET for employers, despite its apparent importance for successive administrations, and counters some of the assumptions made by that policy. It highlights the importance of shared goals to the successful development of any future policy aims and objectives in this area, whether to render more effective the on-going tinkering to the current system, or as a basis for a radical system overhaul.

Attitudes towards VET

Negative attitudes towards VET are rooted in the history and culture of England and perpetuated through the schools’ culture, and it is in this part of the analysis that the third research objective, first picked up in Chapter 2, is also partly fulfilled. This, and later sections, provide evidence of links

between historical factors and the relative weakness of the employer role within full-time 14-19 ET. The lack of a common definition of VET (EMP2, EMP5, STK1, STK12) remains a barrier to establishing shared goals among stakeholders for such programmes. This research found that VET remained the accepted, if not acceptable, face of prejudice among the interviewees, and attitudes among them still have the power to shock. Language such as ‘thick’, ‘dumb’, ‘dead-end’ and ‘less able’ was used liberally, with young people also described as ‘very lazy’ (STK11). Whilst it might be argued that this was in the context of a conversational interview, it indicated deep-rooted negative attitudes towards the target audience for alternatives to academic learning, and their ability in general. Prompted by discussions about the employer’s own background at teacher training college early in the interview, EMP6 commented that they *‘always had specialised in slower learners and challenged learners’* (2), potentially indicative of a view about who was going to be discussed in terms of work. Such language was countered just as strongly – if less frequently – by dismissing criticism of, or justifying, the pursuit of VET with such descriptors as ‘preposterous’ (EMP4) and ‘ferociously bright’ (STK7).

Many employers attended schools where there either was no alternative to the ‘traditional route’ (EMP4) or where those alternatives were considered to be for the less able (EMP1, STK5). There were ‘good’ A-Levels (EMP6) and schools offering them are described as ‘normal’ (EMP3, STK8). Although interviewees were generally supportive of a greater involvement from employers, it is difficult to see how parity, or even respect for difference, could be achieved in the face of such ingrained attitudes. Even where an employer valued both they were aware of society’s attitude towards the two routes and the perceived ‘danger’ of muddling the two (EMP3). Choosing the vocational route had become a matter of ‘pride’ in some circumstances instead of simply being the logical choice for a learner with a particular skill set or interest (STK7).

Available employment opportunities have changed considerably since many interviewees were in full-time ET. Several related that when they left school the world of work was open in most

industries to anyone with a good education to the age of sixteen (EMP2, EMP6, EMP7, EMP8). There was the opportunity to rise through the ranks of a company (EMP2, EMP5, EMP8), and the lack of such opportunities now was adding to skills shortages as those further up the hierarchy retired. Yet instead of looking to pull greater numbers through this route, some employers wanted to recruit only from the best universities. They found apprenticeships to be an unsuitable learning method for the professional side of the business (EMP1, EMP8), despite their own promotion through the business from a junior role, and learning by being part of the organisation clearly being comparable with an apprenticeship. Employers demand what in their opinion is the best-qualified learner. For some, this meant someone holding high-status academic qualifications apparently unrelated to the job or industry. Others demanded experience and industry-related qualifications, which may have been difficult for young people to achieve before entering the industry.

It was not always the way of learning which was open for criticism but the potential impact on the intended audience - 'the cream' (EMP8) - and the potential failure to attract them to a role if it was associated with apprenticeship. This view maintains stereotypes and limits opportunities. Parents who must have also benefitted from such open employment opportunities now rejected it for their own offspring on the basis that academic achievement was simply better than the world of work (STK11). Policy has driven this in part through the emphasis on HE and the resulting credentialism, but it is also driven by culturally ingrained attitudes towards what is 'right' and valuable - values learned in school. When two grown men of thirty to forty years of professional experience still feel the need to argue the merits of their respective educational backgrounds (STK8), it is clear that history continues to have an impact on the current ET system in the shape of class bias.

Evidence revealed a 'stigma' associated with apprenticeships as a progression route in those schools which tried to keep employers out if they did not feel that this route was suitable for their pupils (EMP1, EMP8), perpetuating barriers, as head teachers 'protected' pupils from qualifications to

which they themselves were not exposed. The Engineering sector (STK6) promoted progression from the technical routes through to supervisory, leadership and management, a route referred to as 'wrong' elsewhere (EMP8). Some parents viewed apprenticeships as something to get their offspring 'out of the house' (EMP5). Several stakeholder organisations charged with promoting apprenticeships did not offer them in-house (STK1), or had a limited programme (STK5), admitting that organisational culture did not accommodate them. On a practical level, those promoting the solution to other businesses were ignorant of the practicalities and at best ill-prepared to offer the necessary support. Only one stakeholder (STK7) had embedded apprenticeships throughout their business. To paraphrase Wolf (2002), apprenticeships appeared to be a great idea for other organisations' staff.

The state had not helped to improve attitudes towards VET (EMP6) and interviewees demonstrated a lack of common understanding of its purpose. Some believed that vocational qualifications, however much they were promoted, were simply not valued by the labour market (STK6). This was in part due to the devaluation that had taken place in the name of equality of opportunity (STK9). Unfavourable comparisons were made, for example, between taking six months to learn to fly a fighter jet – with no qualification to show for it – and the eighteen months to achieve a qualification – not the skills – to lay a bitumen roof (STK9). New skills needs were being created and fulfilled in industry to complement new technologies, whilst the ET system took up to eighteen months to respond to these needs. In this time the 'unqualified' practised with the blessing of their industry (STK9), making a nonsense of the relevance of the system in terms of responsiveness to the skills market, immediate industry needs and by extension the concept of a 'licence to practice'. The latter was effectively granted by employers to those they recognised had skills at the level the 'business' required, whether this was the armed forces or a construction company, not because of a state-issued certificate. Not all certification lacks value but it is valued for reasons other than as an end in itself. It confirms genuinely valued skills but is not the only accepted proof of these.

Barriers, motives and drivers

Patterns may be discerned but they shifted kaleidoscopically depending on the combination of the individual stakeholder and a variety of factors, some of which were not transparent even to the individual interviewee. Barriers and drivers may be as numerous and personal as the individuals involved: they are in the eye of the beholder. It was difficult to separate barriers, motives and drivers without repeating findings, as what was perceived as a barrier by some was not by others. The policy prioritisation of the 14-19 age group was one such example. Some employers did not want to pigeon-hole learners at too early an age (EMP2) by teaching them sector specific knowledge and skills from fourteen. Signing up a 16-year-old for an apprenticeship which requires a driving licence, unobtainable until 17, could be off-putting to the young person (EMP2). Employment policy, which legislated against age discrimination, clashed with the policy driver to recruit apprentices aged 14-19 (EMP1). Employers raised barriers in their own minds with some sceptical that young people were sufficiently mature to be on site (EMP8) whilst others were quite open to this (EMP3).

The 14-19 age range was a priority for some employers and not for others (EMP2, STK4). Employers were frustrated by the age limit (STK8) and the accompanying lack of funds for demographics they preferred to target (EMP4). They did not want to be told who they must recruit (EMP1), arguing that the state acted to its own advantage in setting objectives for qualifications, for example, which relate to its targets but may suit no other party - including the learner. There are recognised benefits to profile-raising in relation to a particular organisation, an industry and society as a whole (EMP3, EMP4).

Where there was no obvious benefit to employers, such as increased productivity in the workplace (STK6), they did not get involved with the 14-19 age group (STK4). The state had not succeeded in

selling the importance of this age range to employers despite the policy focus on it. They had no shared goals. It was important to the state for the fulfilment of employment and performance targets, the purpose of which appeared unrelated to the priorities of the majority of stakeholders including the learner. If employers were expected to alter established and successful graduate recruitment policies (EMP8) then the advantages needed to be clear, just as organisations such as Goldman Sachs - which enthusiastically swapped or supplemented their graduate programmes for apprenticeship schemes (Evening Standard, 2012) - needed to ensure they could not be accused of hiring cheap labour. Advantages included profile-raising (EMP1), the altering of negative perceptions (EMP8) and a strategic answer to a lack of capacity (EMP3, EMP5).

One 'action' could have multiple drivers and outcomes perhaps motivated by self-interest, but altruistic in its resulting benefits to other stakeholders. Where the graduate cohort from a business supported the development of young people in Maths, for example, it combined staff training and the promotion of the business and sector with tangible benefits to the learner (EMP3). This might be viewed as an optimal outcome of policy implementation but it was actually a very local solution related to business activity in one town, and was unlikely to be replicated in that town once the project was finished. Some organisations acknowledged the benefit to their staff of working with this age group (STK2) and seemed genuinely to relish their involvement, believing that it was force for good (EMP3). Businesses have tried to create nationally useful materials from local activity (EMP6).

Figure 12 (below) shows how the spectrum of self-interest interacts with that of employer involvement. The chosen theories sit along both axes in a number of combinations.

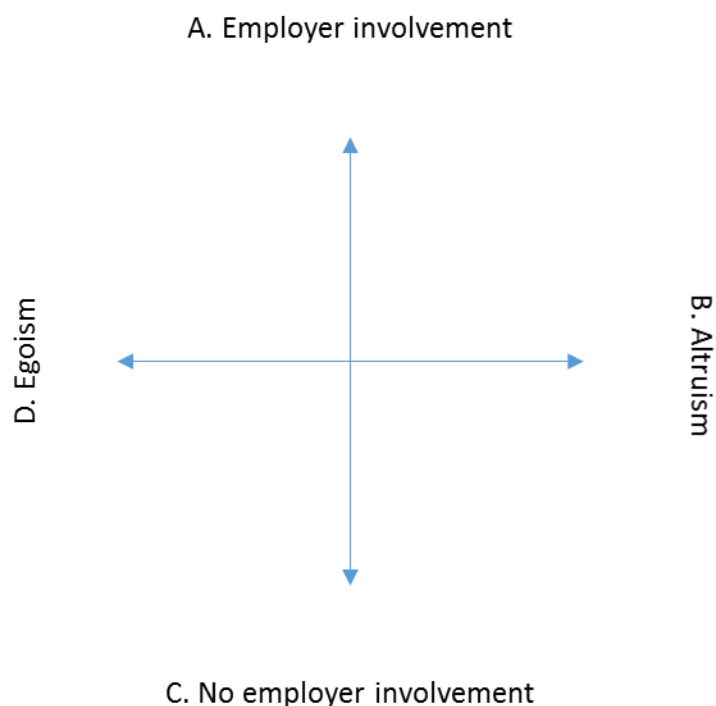


Figure 12. How employer involvement in full-time 14-19 ET and the spectrum of self-interest interrelate

Policy is necessarily based on the assumption that, in the absence of regulation, employers will engage in full-time 14-19 ET 'altruistically', yet a number of employers may engage because it is in their interests to do so. All employers using the outputs of the system experience some impact of regulation - in the form of qualification frameworks, for example. Policy or initiative benefits may be explicit in terms of outcomes but they may also provide a potential PR gain, or an opportunity for personal or organisational influence. Involvement may be driven by inputs which are not entirely 'voluntary', tempered as they are by a variety of regulation and mediation in the shape of intermediary agencies such as SSCs: however, these affect only the minority of employers who choose to be involved up front. The bottom right of the quadrant between no involvement and altruism (B-C) is the most populous in terms of employer numbers, perhaps indicating why policy has a focus on increasing numbers. As even apprenticeships are offered by only 10 per cent of employers in England, it is not easy to see why considerably more would engage with schools and other

institutions, since learners in a full-time setting have a range of options open to them. Conversely, investment in an apprenticeship has a greater possibility of the young person 'repaying' the investment of the organisation through a subsequent work role.

An employer receiving a request for involvement from a local school may approach it from an altruistic viewpoint, however self-interestedly. Even if they acknowledge that the main motive may be to feel good about giving his or her own time and experience for the benefit of others (Batson et al, 2011), there is an intention to offer the school the benefit of experience and knowledge in a particular area. The propensity for altruism, however self-interested, is driven not only by who can offer the greatest reward or which 'ask' most appeals to an individual, but also with whom they feel a degree of 'kinship' or the level of potential reciprocal reward (Humphrey, 1997). A school attended by immediate family or friends of family or located in an employer's home town may be more likely to receive a positive response than one in a distant location or with which an employer feels little personal connection.

Even the most altruistic-seeming individual can be shown to donate resources or take risks conscious of the later, often greater reward that will or could be reciprocated. The school, however, may be interested in a purely financial transaction (PWC, 2007), wanting a donation of funds. This may lead to disillusionment and even mid- to long-term disengagement on the side of the employer, who feel that they are being used only as a source of funding, not expertise, and ultimately a complete lack of input for the school. It is therefore critical to understand the drivers and barriers of both employers and stakeholders in order to manage and meet expectations. 'Outcomes are a function of preferences and not just the strategic environment' (Spaniel, 2012). The analysis of motivation may appear to be unrelentingly cynical at times, with even spontaneous help to a relative or friend or needy stranger viewed as being for the benefit of the one taking action. Some sectors, driven by policy promises, expect initiatives to deliver improvement and drive change and have no desire to be

altruistic. They see such developments as potential stepping stones where this is not the case (STK9).

Differences between what people say and how they act are prevalent in political settings, their actions dependent on the circumstances and what is motivating them. These may include a desire for esteem; a fear of not conforming; and a wish to sound pro-active or in favour of something that they would not actually do, and can see in advance would never apply to them (Brennan and Hamlin, 2008). It is easy to see how people might 'espouse' support for something in public but question policy decisions privately: helping to design qualifications for an as yet 'virtual' group of learners, but later declining to recognise the actual results in their recruitment (Argyris in Jensen, 1994).

Identity and contradiction

Social identity is a powerful driver of behaviour as individuals bring their experience - and bias - forward into their personal and working lives. There are a number of indicators in relation to identity including: the education background of the interviewee; the type of qualification offered at their former school; the level of qualification held; and the entry route to employment – many of these factors hark back to the 'class' element of English history and culture steering attitudes towards VET. Employers are also employees and may have little say in the level or extent of their involvement with an ET project, being told simply that the organisation is required to field someone to represent it, and that they have been chosen to do so. Such an instruction may be welcomed, and the resulting inputs both enthusiastic and helpful. This further assumes that the individual has been chosen to be more than a 'warm body', that is, to pay lip-service to representation but to have neither the personal nor organisational resources to support their position. It may be the case that the day-to-day role of the individual is sufficiently demanding without additional commitments and that their ability to delegate is limited, resulting in even an able representative being unable to fulfil

requirements . The organisation may be acting self-interestedly, hoping for reward from the outcomes of the project or as a payoff for granting it support, such as recognition of interests in business policy, but the individual may not feel that their interests are being served at all.

The more senior the representative fielded by the employer, the more likely they are to be able to commit resources to a project, make decisions and use their networks to gain further support. In a sizeable organisation, they are also more likely to be able to delegate responsibilities from their day-to-day employment to enable them to take on such commitments and to be more aware of the opportunities created by their involvement, both for their organisation and for themselves. Successful groups favour successful individuals for their membership and successful individuals want to be part of successful groups (Leary and Allen, 2011).

As long as none of these actions impacts adversely on the individual's main job - such behaviour would be non-rational - they may be seen to be acting according to preference to achieve the optimum outcome for themselves (Turocy and Von Stengel, 2001). Such 'rational' behaviour is defined as 'utility maximisation' by economists from Adam Smith onwards, but this work adopts the wider application given by Brennan and Hamlin (2008) which covers the political as well as the economic arena.

Privately held views influenced both professional and personal behaviour. This was evident by the often-subconscious use of 'academic' and 'vocational' as shorthand for 'better' or 'lower' achievement respectively (EMP3, EMP6) – it was simply ingrained, a cultural 'norm'. Construction was not for 'my girls' (EMP8); boys, and young people generally were 'lazy' (EMP5, STK11), and those not pursuing A-Levels not 'good enough' (STK5). When asked to define 'vocational', some feared saying the wrong thing or revealing attitudes that would not sit well with the organisation

represented, (STK4, STK5). Others sought to 'compliment' BTECs by referring to them as 'more academic' than vocational (STK1).

Seemingly illogically, employers kept their own children on routes they admitted may not be suitable on a personal level (EMP5, STK3). Ironically, in a discussion about how individualism has shaped society and the ET system, even this influence proves contradictory. STK4 described his daughter as being 'stuck' despite identifying a suitable alternative school within travelling distance. EMP5 also provided a mixed view of schooling with no desire – even if unfulfilled – to send his son to the UTC, the praises of which he so highly sang, and whose suitability for his son he identified. Society, and parental experience and knowledge of what will give the child the best, conservative progression opportunities, continued to reinforce structures and assumptions, rather than these being challenged by positive choices as to what would best suit the child's talents. Hence another set of assumptions is reinforced as the academic route becomes the 'traditional' choice and therefore apparently what the majority wants. This situation remains unchallenged other than by the odd exception who then expresses 'pride' (STK7) in a route which is the norm for a large proportion of the population. It hardly seems rational to continue to reinforce centuries' old class-prejudices rather than push for a change in culture to acknowledge the positive aspects of different routes.

A noticeable characteristic of the research evidence was how conflicted it could be, even within the same interview. Table H illustrates the tension between what is required of an individual as an organisation representative and how they meet their own expectations. It shows the tensions between self-interested behaviour, acting in the interests of other individuals and acting on the basis of personal belief or professional expectation.

Table H: EMP 8 and apprenticeships

| | | |
|--|-------------------------|---|
| Simultaneous and contradictory actions and attitudes | Supports | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes apprenticeships in schools • Promotes apprenticeships for those 'on site' • Runs a project to encourage young people, who may otherwise have little chance of a future, to pursue an apprenticeship locally with the company at one of its many sites |
| | Does not support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejects apprenticeships for administrative or professional roles • Recruits only from Oxbridge to fulfil key administrative roles in own team • Complains about schools' attitude to apprenticeships whilst making personal judgements about the merit of some qualifications and promoting accordingly • Observes that, although currently many of the company hierarchy came through from the trades, in the future this is unlikely to happen • Believes that some learning routes are more valuable than others |

This matters as policy assumes that employers know what they want and that given the right channels, they will communicate what this is. Further, that it is possible to address multiple issues with a single solution, and that those same employers will promote it. Stakeholders tasked with finding out admitted that it was false assumption (STK6), making it difficult for any generic solution in terms of style and purpose to suit more than a small group of businesses. The Coalition exhorted employers to promote apprenticeships at all levels. EMP8 may be seen both to support and reject government policy, depending on their own interests and those of the organisation at a given moment.

Such levels of contradiction are driven by the lack of shared goals among the various stakeholders. It is easy for a sector to dismiss an initiative as irrelevant to them because the content contains no skills specific to their needs, and equally misleading of them and of policy to suggest that a full-time qualification for young people, deliverable within reach of a young person in the 14-19 age group could provide a *skilled* entry route to all sectors and trades. Recent Conservative policy appears to address this issue (DfE, 2015) but has in fact left AOs trying to differentiate provision pre- and post-

16 within the fixed boundaries of policy, rather than policy being fixed on the basis of evidence of the required purpose and audience for pre- and post-16 qualifications in different sectors. The enthusiasm and support shown by employers at the introduction of a new initiative soon wanes, and may even end, as the project becomes a policy, which leaves government to resolve any issues.

The 14-19 Diplomas were seen by some as an opportunity to change both practice and attitudes, but it should not be the role of a qualification to bring about cultural change (EMP5) independent from - or on behalf of - other elements of the system and wider society. Expectations of the powers of one element of the system to change the remainder are unrealistic, a factor potentially exaggerated by the position of the stakeholder within the system: thus, awarding organisations must promote the transformative powers of qualifications for the individual and the wider economy and society (STK13), for reasons of profit as well as education. Changes to qualifications cannot drive deep reform, they can only bring about superficial change. The cyclical nature of development, promotion and political jettisoning in relation to qualifications is non-rational, damaging and wasteful.

The failure of policy to mitigate behaviours, drivers and motives, and remove barriers

A fragmented picture of employer involvement in full-time 14-19 ET emerges from the data, showing that the majority of those interviewed have some relationship with ET for this age group, but that involvement at any stage of the ET process is not necessarily effective. Inconsistent behaviours include those of words versus action, action versus action and own word versus own word, meaning that some employers say one thing but do another, some take action in one circumstance but do not in another, and finally some express conflicting views within the interview. Both individual and collective behaviours reinforce the issues arising, yet policy continues to focus on 'employers' as though they were a coherent entity.

Reflecting the legacy of class division, whilst there are complaints in the media about internships being for the children of the wealthy, there was no such compunction about recruiting reliable relations or acquaintances as apprentices into trades (STK9, STK10). Even where businesses actively promoted apprenticeships they recognised the need to change the profile of young people benefitting from work placements as they tended to be the children of people working at the company (EMP6). Some had no issue with discriminating in favour of what is best for their company (EMP8) or industry (STK6). It is easy to accuse employers of class - or other forms of prejudice when they recruit from specific backgrounds to meet business needs, but valuing 'productive' Grammar School pupils could be viewed in a similar way to recruiting a particular set of technical skills. The system must consider to what extent it is the responsibility of employers to improve the employment and social chances of young people from a variety of backgrounds when the success of their organisation is also a factor in the future success of the same. Arguably, they are making use of the best to maintain and improve the economy. It is self-interested behaviour but it also rewards achievement and serves wider society. To discriminate positively in favour of lower-achievers or those who have had fewer opportunities is still to discriminate. It adds confusion to the definition of the employer role to have it address issues in society where the state, society and culture have failed to do so.

A lack of coherent regulation has enabled employers to decide whether and how they support ET policy (Hodgson and Spours, 2008). Recently, the CBI (2013) promoted the initiative of employers working with schools to provide high-quality practical experience for young people, as one of the best ways to tackle issues of work-readiness, but called for schools to be 'incentivised' (5) to make this happen rather than proposing ways to motivate, or in any way formalise, the employer role.

Even where employers support - or object to - ET policy, they may do so from a perspective unrelated to their job role, or industry or sector needs. They are acting not only as 'an organisation'

whose first priority is profitable success, but as parents and members of society, for example, and these influences are not left at the door when they join a group of 'employer-representatives'.

Examples of behaviours include a wariness of speaking on behalf of their organisation resulting in personal opinion - individual identity - coming to the fore, even when acting in the capacity of employer-representative (EMP6); the use of prejudicial language in relation to learners and learning routes (EMP1, EMP6, STK11), and, on a personal level, the dismissal of certain qualification types or routes as low-value, when they appear to support them professionally (EMP5, EMP8). Existing literature does not sufficiently explain the impact of individual employer behaviours on current or future policy - yet all organisations are made up of individuals, none of whom necessarily behaves according to a 'corporate' template. Instead, many individuals are motivated to play a role – or to avoid doing so – by aspects of their identity that lie outside their corporate one.

The research provides evidence that employers and organisations choose the extent of their involvement based on their individual requirements, availability and relevance to their needs (EMP2, EMP6). Employers showed enthusiasm at the beginning of an initiative but that support waned at other stages of a project or policy cycle (EMP8, STK2, STK13). Voluntarist systems do not produce a strong dominant culture. Effectively, the 'voluntary' pool has been kept small by changing policy and employers, perpetuating the 'low-participation' equilibrium, with elements of the system interacting in a way that hinders rather than promotes involvement (Finegold and Soskice, 1990). Interviewees argued for a boost to vocational provision whilst admitting both to recruiting the best academics for their own team (EMP8), and stating an opinion on the type of role for which vocational provision is suited – one which often contradicted the very policy to which they were contributing (EMP1). Evidence suggests that employers espoused a type of qualification in a public group but were 'honest' in an interview situation, 'what employers say is not what they do' (Stanton, 2006).

Those holding academic qualifications gain a wage premium far higher than those holding qualifications such as NVQs, which are based on employer-written standards. Since employers were apparently closely involved with the creation of the 14-19 Diplomas, that might indicate that those holding the qualification would also be treated less equally at recruitment than their academic counterparts – by the very people creating and ‘endorsing’ the resulting qualifications.

Hughes (1998) and Mann et al (2010, in Haynes et al, 2011) acknowledged some key motivations for the participation of employers in ‘school-to-work programmes’ (22), including philanthropy, raising the profile of their organisation, having a ready supply of cheap labour and fulfilling longer-term skills shortages within the organisation. Keep (2005) had already acknowledged that employers were not a homogenous group and that other stakeholders such as parents might be influential in the success of an initiative. This reflected the experience that employers on the Diploma project would often mention their own children or background when putting forward an opinion on qualification content or purpose. If the majority of individuals in an employer working-group for vocational qualifications is pro-academic, this may have a considerable impact on the nature of the final product.

There is a demonstrable difference in the relative importance of full-time 14-19 ET for employers and policymakers: the latter have been granted a privileged role in policy which seems to be neither merited nor wanted (Hodgson and Spours, 2008). Negative attitudes towards VET appeared to have been learned in school (EMP 2; EMP3, EMP4) so that many employers, later asked to contribute to policy development, brought these attitudes to the task, a phenomenon which may be magnified in a group. These attitudes are closely linked to the on-going issue of ‘class’ in England. It is still strongly the case in England that, although VET might suit some individuals better, the academic route is preferred socially and as a method of progression, as it appears to confer an

advantage in terms of earning and status (Stanton, 2006; EMP5, EMP8, STK3, STK8, STK11). Gender-based and social stereotypes remained about who certain training and careers are suitable for (EMP 6).

Supportive employers used naturally arising opportunities to contribute to the ET system, such as planning local site visits (EMP3, EMP6). It may not be possible to replicate some activities on a national or regular basis owing to business patterns and locations, meaning that employers' support could not be consistent across nationally available qualifications – yet this is often demanded. A group of employers may contribute to the development of a product they never use, but which is used by other stakeholders, including employers within their sector, under the impression that the role played by the employer in its creation indicates endorsement or use. If employer support is insufficient, other stakeholders may be reluctant to contribute - or to use the outcome - assuming that it is not worthy of their support.

There will always be a 'reward' both for that employer and for the recipient of their input, but the value of these rewards will rely in part on the individual employer and institution concerned. The experience or 'reward' for two schools of similar size and make-up obtaining input from the same organisation may differ depending on the knowledge, capability and enthusiasm of the person donating their time, for example, the Project Literacy reading scheme (www.projectliteracy.com, 2015). The organisational skills of the individual within the school tasked with organising and facilitating the input, and his or her attitude towards an 'outsider' potentially contributing a means to success where he or she has 'failed' also influences the outcome.

Even public endorsement by employers of a qualification on a website cannot guarantee its acceptance as a recruitment filter. In many cases therefore employer behaviour is characterised by gaming: they may be involved in the early stages, with the payoff of being seen to support both the

new policy and the qualifications. Government will be gratified that their policy - as measured through letters of support to the regulator - has at least been partly implemented. After all, most involvement from an employer is trumpeted as employers playing a valuable role. However, the loss to the awarding organisation will always be greater. It must invest resources into the development of the product and also persuade employers to support it stage by stage, so - as illustrated by the frustration of STK8 - offers little response to requests for new qualifications unless such investment is justified in business terms. The perceptions of both employer and stakeholder are not always based on a complete picture and schools consequently feel obliged to force learners down a particular route to maintain funding and achievement rates.

The founding of University Technical Colleges (UTCs), whilst a boon for learners, providing an opportunity for high quality technical education in their local region, is a loss in financial terms for the established local school or college competing for that learner – or rather, the funding which accompanies the learner. This sum of money - the learner funding - received by the UTC in this instance, represents in gaming terms the reward or payoff known as the ‘allocation’. It is an efficient allocation since a benefit to the UTC would result in the school or colleges being worse off as the whole reward is finite in nature. The allocation would be inefficient if the school or college were to continue to receive funding, even though the learner has moved to the UTC, which in turn also received funding: in other words, making one party better off resulted in the other being no worse off (Lumby and Morrison, 2006). This would be an expensive inefficiency in the system, despite the fact that a truly marketised system should have – and therefore fund – some empty spaces to function.

Currently those same market forces drive each institution to compete for the individually funded learner with the ultimate penalty of closure through lack of funds, if unsuccessful in attracting and maintaining sufficient numbers – a fate that has already befallen Hackney UTC, for example (The

Hackney Citizen, 2014). This represents a strictly dominated strategy in which one obvious course of action is open to the institution. Even if one or more of the other institutions does not compete for the learner, it makes sense for any or all of them to do so. There is no sense in cooperating since the learner/funding cannot be 'shared'.

Institutions making up 14-19 partnerships are as likely to act to their own advantage as for the good of the group (Lumby and Morrison, 2006). The altruistic institution - at least, altruistic decision-makers within that institution - may encourage the learner to follow the best route for them even where this results in a loss for that institution. They would be viewed as playing a zero sum game 'cooperatively'. More self-interested individuals may misadvise or fail to advise the learner or will provide some form of programme within their institution in order to keep the learner and the accompanying funding. Such players are playing 'uncooperatively', keeping as much of the 'reward' for themselves as possible, even to the detriment not only of the other institution but also the learner.

Formal social partnerships, under which clear outcomes are agreed and transparent to all partners, based on widely available information and which is less reliant on agent behaviours, may be effective in flattening out the impacts of extreme behaviours. Although one might still designate either the employer or the Government as either agent or principal - since both require the input of the other for success - the agents would be working towards clearly defined outcomes, agreed with all partners. A failure to meet obligations would result in a weakly dominated strategy, that is, one in which the payoff for one player is *at least as good as* that for another (Spaniel, 2012), because the outcomes have been explicitly agreed in advance.

Game Theory proved to be a useful framing tool in terms of understanding some previously identified parameters and drivers of behaviour. It was less useful, however, as an analytical tool for

the research data because employer behaviours seemed to follow no predictable pattern: some who had succeeded through a vocational route themselves rejected it for their employees; some who supported initiatives in terms of writing, marketing or otherwise resourcing the development of new qualifications did not promote these for young people or recruit to their organisation on the basis of young people holding them, or spoke disparagingly of qualifications apparently supported by them in public. These behaviours occurred within sectors as well as across them. The lack of 'rationale' behind decisions made it very difficult to identify and analyse individual or collective patterns of gaming behaviour.

Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance

Issues with CEIAG reflected wider issues with the ET system as a whole, and it was therefore valuable to explore it as a separate topic. It provided a detailed insight into the combined failure of policy reinforced by individual behaviours for one element of the system, but also illustrative of issues throughout it. Careers advice seemed to be gleaned from a variety of places, and the identity of those proffering the advice had a powerful influence, in addition to the practical barriers caused by policy drivers and local delivery. Sectors which have found themselves historically to be very male dominated continue to be so to this day. Construction provided a rich source of data applicable to the topic as a whole but also some sector specific insights. Long-established attitudes towards women remain in the industry. The image of an 'old boys' club' for a membership organisation (STK4), a reluctance to accept that there are careers' pathways within a sector for girls (EMP8), and a recognition of the value of women within a sector, but in roles not ordinarily associated with men, such as administration (STK4). Also, the idea that 'muddy boots and bad language' are exclusively male and the reality that these factors put girls off (EMP6) are all factors which served to maintain the low level of women in Construction, and to illustrate this male domination. The examples were rife with historic and cultural images about career paths for

females, which would be acceptable in a paragraph written about the issue in the 1950s. Equally, some schools ignored offers of help from the industry (EMP3; EMP8) as they found the negative association for both girls and boys of the 'biblical trades' too difficult to countermand among parents and learners despite the wealth of other opportunities available in the industry. Issues with careers advice and individual prejudice about a sector appeared based on attitudes held by generations two or three above that of the present day learner.

Young people appeared let down by those who should help them make the right choices.

The per-pupil funding model has driven self-interested behaviours in ET institutions. In many circumstances, CEIAG has come to mean what is best for the school and not for the pupil. Thus learners may be prevented from pursuing interests and courses more suited to their needs, because of their financial value to the teaching institution. Those advising learners often reinforce perceptions on the basis of their own experience, or from what they would choose for their own children, sometimes contrary to the best interests of the individual learner, thus denying them an informed choice.

Teachers cannot keep up with the wide range of information they need to truly inform. Research showed that CEIAG had an element of public relations to it, and where employers saw an opportunity to promote all aspects of an industry and all levels of a technical and professional career (STK10) a lack of - or negative personal - experience of teachers has led to only the most basic facts being shared and young people remaining uninformed. Even with the correct information, teachers often have a 'careers' duty tagged onto their full-time role, making success unlikely in the face of competing teaching priorities (STK8). Employers are often blamed for a lack of input into CEIAG but, where schools had taken advice in-house, their authority could be misused to keep those most likely to succeed in 6th form – and therefore grant the school success in state targets and inspections – regardless of how appropriate the progression route may have been for the learner. CEIAG

appeared to have become a conspiracy of misinformation with parents, schools, and employers pursuing their own agenda rather than promoting the interests of those being advised (STK11).

Young people have been let down by the system as a whole.

Improvements to CEIAG perhaps need to start with a learner-centred approach, or at least an honest admission about the intended beneficiary, since the best progression for the learner may often not coincide with the interests of the institution. This is not something that employers can address by supplying better information about their sector. This is the thrust of Lumby and Morrison's (2006) main argument against the all-pervasiveness of (voluntary) partnership working in education. It is flawed in its assumption that all partners have sufficiently similar overarching goals - superobjectives - to tip the balance of self-interest in the favour of the group - the partnership - or the individual learner. It is one thing to repeat the rhetoric of the learner being at the centre of an initiative but another to enable the reality through policies – in this case funding policies – which drive the desired behaviours. Issues with CEIAG illustrate the wider impact of poorly implemented policy beset with conflicting drivers.

Shared goals

Identifying the drivers behind behaviours is challenging, as individuals themselves may not be fully aware of - or honest about - their reasons for acting in a particular way. Batson et al (2011) identify two types of goal - ultimate and instrumental - and a third factor, 'unintended consequences' (104). Clashes between sets of legislation, for example, the requirement to develop a 14-19 prudence strategy by the National Apprenticeship Service with that of the the Department for Business, Innovation and Science (BIS) to ensure equality for all under employment law (EMP1) cause administrative and moral dilemmas. The DfE and BIS have different goals to those of employers, learners and other end users.

A number of ultimate goals may be identified in relation to an employer spending time in school to support a careers programme. Employers may encourage young people to pursue a career in a particular industry or in the employer's organisation. Less likely but possible, employers may discourage young people from entering the industry or organisation, or the specific company or the world of work in general. Other goals are possible. Instrumental goals may also be numerous, and interchangeable with the ultimate goals. A learner enthused by an industry may in the future coincidentally work for that employer's organisation. The speaker or their career path may discourage learners from pursuing the promoted route. Young people may be misled by the success of a senior figure whose career path is open only to the very few.

This may lead to unintended consequences, such as a decrease in the number of young people from the area taking an interest in a career path, or a change of career for the employer, who may realise that working with young people is actually his or her forte. What this demonstrates is that, since goals and consequences can be unclear even when a transaction is agreed along apparently well-defined lines, motivation – and the ability to exploit that for further gain within a framework of engagement – is extremely complex. For this reason, Baston et al (2011) emphasise the importance of motive over goal, as appealing to the former ought to result in the latter.

The involvement of employers in the creation of the content and assessment of qualifications, and their consequent support for those successfully achieving the end result, must have appeared to be a clear set of ultimate goals for the Diploma project. Gaining employer support to promote, and in part resource, the qualifications were perhaps equally clear instrumental goals. However, that would presuppose a shared set of superordinate goals among employers (Lumby and Morrison, 2006), which does not appear to have been the case. The mixed enthusiasm for this age group among interviewees (STK4, EMP3, EMP8) suggested that shared goals for it either do not exist

between stakeholders, or that the employer or sector should decide how and when to accommodate prospective employees.

It is not feasible for a single qualification to address all the skills issues within a sector, drive social and cultural change in the shape of parity of value for vocational and academic routes, and offer equality of opportunity within all technical areas of a sector. Policy sets such expectations, however, and the stakeholder responsible is then 'surprised' by employer disengagement. Unrealistic expectations placed on elements of the system, whether qualifications, the ability of employers to service nationwide networks of UTCs and Studio Schools on a one-to-one basis, or the ability of schools to resource – again with employer support – technical ET on a national basis, highlight a gulf between what is expected and what is possible within the system. Even where a qualification contains learning which a proportion of industry finds helpful, inconsistent and improbable policy drivers, such as national entitlement coupled with technical resource requirements, tend to set them up to fail. Successful networking between ET institutions and employers has foundered on the impossibility of expecting young people to travel many miles between sites, an issue currently being experienced by UTCs in their turn.

Employers were frustrated by the lack of flexibility in terms of what can be studied (STK4, STK9, STK10), which seemed driven by funding rather than sector need. One element of the system was constrained by another with the practical consequences – the inability to upskill appropriately and quickly – subjugated to administration and accountability. Intermediary agencies were considered to be out of touch with the needs of employers and unable to represent their views fully, and to make conflicting demands of those they were supposed to support (EMP1; EMP4, STK8, STK13). The single track approach of these organisations also offended, as they approached employers as though apprenticeships were a new idea when in reality it was the intermediary which was new and the

employer who was left feeling as though previous good work had gone unrecognised – which in some cases it had (EMP1, STK4).

Employers too, however, had inflated expectations about what full-time learning could achieve in terms of transforming entry into their sector (STK9) not only from a technical perspective but in terms of PR. Some wanted the relevance of all learning to future employment to be made clear from primary school onwards (STK10), whereas others, either indirectly through their choices for their own children (STK3, EMP5), or recruits (EMP8), had no desire for full-time education to be explicitly vocational in nature. Others appeared to prefer experience and the initiative taken by those who had gained it, rather than to train those foisted on them by government policy (EMP2, STK6).

The most recent guidance for 14-19 vocational qualifications (DfE, 2014; 2015) did not count the involvement of employers in their development as substantive proof of their longer-term support. There is another drive to put vocational provision on a par with its academic-level equivalent, but A-Levels and GCSEs still dominate. In terms of vocational qualifications, employers will now face learners who have achieved Applied General Qualifications, Technical Awards, Technical Levels, Technical Certificates or a Technical Baccalaureate, and awarding organisations are tasked with distinguishing the pathways, content and assessments which separate these, whilst also seeking various levels of employer input and support for their development and delivery. AOs are further hampered by the requirement to evidence a target number of supportive employers rather than demonstrate the quality of the support to hand. Learners pursuing a qualification on the notion of employer support may discover it has little value in terms of progression. In trying to serve all interests, few are served.

Yet where previously young people may have combined school with day-release at college for a taste of a more independent style of learning, a different relationship with their teacher and potentially sector-focused skills (McCrone and Morris, 2004), the policy focus was largely on academic achievement to 16 (DfES, 2015; DfES, 2015b). Furthermore, young people who had been able to progress to level 3 without a Grade C in their English and Maths may no longer have that option, creating what Hodgson and Spours (2015) term ‘the Missing Middle’. With FE funding capped, learners wanting to get away from schools whose budget has at least been ring-fenced, and with neither provider potentially wanting to deal with those who have ‘failed’ at this level, the future looks bleak for non-academic young people. Learners on programmes such as the new Technical Awards (DfES, 2015) will be taught in the main by non-vocational teachers, a strategy Stanton (2006) criticised even for ‘weakly’ vocational qualifications as having a negative effect on ‘credibility and learner motivation’ (4) - an issue that therefore looks set to continue through the current policy cycle.

Recommendations to achieve a more effective employer role

Some of the solutions put forward in this chapter to the issues identified may seem rather conservative. Their presence, however, serves to reinforce the reality that a number of these issues have been identified in the past - and solutions proposed - without success. This may be partly because, as Raffe (2015) suggests, that although many elements of the system are ‘broke’, there is little urgency to fix them. Efforts would be better focused on ‘slowly consolidating good practice’ (151) rather than in creating and responding to new initiatives, (City and Guilds, 2014). It is worth reflecting on the problem of policy making in general in the England: ‘how it works, what it does, whose interests it serves’ (Ball, 2008: 4). Ball (2008) is concerned with the rhetoric and discourses associated with education policy, how they exclude both groups and ideas, whilst promoting others. Since the problems addressed by policy keep moving and changing, policy is characterised as a

process rather than a 'fact'. The fragmented nature of the elements of the system with which employers interact, such as local employer partnerships or Sector Skills Councils, coupled the frequently changing responsibilities of government departments, encompassing different constellations of business, higher and further education, primary and secondary education and wider children's services, mean that it is at best difficult to test or even speculate about the impact of an individual policy on other parts of the system. As Perry and Fletcher (2008) observe, 'tidy patterns...are rare, and becoming rarer' (5).

The employer role can only be strengthened if the system itself becomes less fragmented and more coherent. Clearer points of communication may encourage more employers to 'choose' to participate. The weak relationship of the state with business has resulted in the full-time ET system becoming a substitute for high-quality VET. The emphasis on academic study and the rise in the school leaving-age to 18 appears counter-intuitive, although there are well-documented political reasons behind it. Post-16 training must be of high quality, with a real promise of progression, to differentiate it from poorly-valued 'vocational' options in school.

Ways must be found for teachers of vocational subjects to keep technical skills current, and better training and pay provided for teachers of both academic and vocational subjects to drive change. It is easier to define, if not address and assess, more generic skills – although teaching these in any meaningful way without a context has also proved problematic. Young people are required by law to stay in ET until they are 18 and yet their choices are treated with apparent contempt by policymakers who appear to comment on - and alter - them on a whim. The impact of such behaviours on teachers, their workload and reputation is often well-documented. Frustration (EMP7), cynicism (EMP3, EMP7) and a sense of reality abound among employers who have been called on time and again to solve issues that either cannot be resolved by the tools on offer or where there are no shared goals on which to establish policy aims. When they are not fit for purpose,

qualifications are not valued by any end-users – employers, schools, parents or learners.

Qualifications reform should ensure a defined principal cohort and progression based on learner, rather than system, need. Despite Ball's (2008) observation that their purpose has been colonised by economic policy imperatives, qualifications are designed to be taken by individuals. A system would need to be created that would allow qualifications to recognise learner success (STK9), rather than be used to shape the system.

A presumption by some stakeholders is that equal importance is placed on all subjects offered under one qualification type - for example A-Levels - whereas a hierarchy of qualifications exists in the minds of employers and other stakeholders. Funding models reinforce this misperception by treating each subject equally. Consequently, new initiatives continue to fail, as a large proportion of them do not meet the needs of any stakeholder and reputation damage is caused to the qualification type, rather than being confined to the problematic subjects.

There is lack of consensus as to what age it is most useful to inform young people about an industry, to allow them to access it, or to train them to take part in it, which reflects a lack of honesty from both government and employers about what is required from and for the 14-19 age group. This may be due in part to the expectation that learners can study, at different ages and stages - Traineeship, Apprenticeship, for example – for qualifications based on a similar set of subject matter, relevant to current occupations available, and remain engaged (DfE, 2015), instead of being guided into, and pursuing, the occupation at an earlier age (Stern et al, 2010).

A critical policy assumption about the involvement of employers in ET is that an individual can represent the skills needs and business interests of an organisation, and that by extension a group of such individuals represents the interests of a sector or industry. Improvements suggested by employers tend to give them more power (EMP4), allow them to decide priorities (EMP1, EMP8) and

to recruit to meet individual business, not sector, needs. Yet, to date, granting 'power' to employers in terms of additional funding or the ability to define content and assessments, for example, has neither significantly increased the number of employers involved in full-time 14-19 ET, nor raised the status of or standards of achievement in certain types of provision (Wolf, 2011). This suggests either that the barriers to effective employer input are too great, or that employers are not the right supplier of solutions for this particular set of issues.

Whilst they may be able to provide some ad hoc and effective support, political faith in employers' ability or willingness to drive the necessary reforms to the ET system seems misplaced. If 14-19 were a key recruitment demographic for employers, one might expect to see a greater presence in terms of meaningful work experience offered to 16-18 year olds to counter apparent concerns about lack of work-readiness among the age group, a greater willingness to train at 18 in spite of this, and an obligation to fund at least 50 per cent of any training offered. If employees have the necessary skills to fulfil their role, employers are unlikely to commit resources to certifying those skills where there is no obvious business benefit. Employers may exploit what is convenient for business, using existing projects as ET opportunities rather than creating artificial, qualification-specific solutions. Even where such activities are the result of public-private partnership (PPP) contractual obligations, in a voluntarist system this is a form of regulation which at least achieves positive ET outcomes.

One or two demands on employers are more frequently fulfilled than others, whilst yet others rely on a limited number of organisations whose ability to fulfil them is based on their size and the availability of resources, rather than their capacity to best represent the interests of stakeholders (Payne, 2008). The use of performance measures sharply highlights the problematic nature of treating publicly funded services in a similar way to privately run facilities - the citizen is not synonymous with the 'customer' (Olsen, 1988; Stewart, 1998). Where the involvement of more employers is necessary to learner success, for example, in the provision of work placements, then

targeting these in part by number may be appropriate, taking into account the type of employer by size or location, where this is significant. There needs to be honesty and clarity about the purposes of outcomes, and whether performance measures benefit the learner or the system. Whilst the current government has tried to reduce the impact of these ‘perverse incentives’ (Wolf, 2011: 8), it has inadvertently created a new set of barriers in relation to progression with the introduction of the EBacc (Hodgson and Spours, 2015), further demonstrating the dangers of policy reform within the system straitjacket.

There is a tension between employer demands for the education system to deliver young people who are not only occupationally trained but employable, and the belief that cultural norms, behaviours and knowledge must developed at least partly in the workplace, (Unwin et al, 2003). Apprenticeships are a highly visible form of VET and would benefit from a raising of their profile, and shared agreement of their purpose and audience among employers. Many who do offer them express a high level of satisfaction with the qualification, (UKCES, 2011). In the absence of a social partnership arrangement or similar framework to counter some of the vagaries of individual and organisational behaviours, and the supply-led nature of the system, potential solutions are as complex as the issues (EMP1). The policy to drive up apprenticeship numbers, and the imposition of arbitrary numbers of apprenticeship places on an employer, devalues the nature of the apprenticeship as the fulfilment of a required role leading to a permanent position, and fails to take into account perhaps legitimate fears about the poaching of skilled labour. Conversely, employers are not obliged to offer apprenticeships despite government initiatives to involve and persuade through funding, and employer complaints about the lack of work-ready young people. Flexibility has resulted in devaluation and confusion, and in a two-tier view of apprenticeships in some cases – as views on suitability and the willingness to train are again at the mercy of individual opinion and willingness rather than being planned and regulated. Such inability to plan or to predict to what extent policy will be successful is a key weakness of the ET system in England.

Intermediary bodies in the shape of business-funded trade associations or - at least in part - government funded industry or national training organisations, often represent 'the employer voice' in policy. Such bodies must be set up on the assumption that a majority of employers will have, or at least compromise towards, a common approach within the sector. In some sectors, SSC representation became synonymous with larger corporations speaking on behalf of both their sector and effectively on behalf of the intermediary agency. Since some employees may be wary about speaking on behalf of large organisations and may speak as individuals, the 'steadfast minority' (Payne, 2008) becomes not simply a minority of organisations shaping the system for the majority, but a collection of individuals, their identities thus possibly rendering industry levers ineffective. Other issues include the lack of policy learning where 'new' - or often rebranded - organisations emerge post-election, with a similar remit to a previous incarnation, and an approach to employers that ignores what has gone before, causing frustration at wasted resources. A long view of the solutions, supported by research, sufficient lead in time, and policies tailored to segmented groups of employers with communications specifically targeted at them, would result in better relationships between elements of the system and its stakeholders. Explicit rules of engagement coupled with targeted benefits would make clear why employers should invest.

The delivery system needs to be redesigned to include credible, career-providing vocational pathways for all learners. It is not a matter of improved CEIAG, but of all stakeholders being convinced - and convincing - about vocational routes as a positive choice. Future administrations need to put a stop to politically motivated change in education and training. Quality and performance measures should be based on the realities of the pupil intake coupled with regional skills planning: government should let go of poor practice adopted from industry, and performance measures unsuited to the quality measurement of public goods. This need not mean an end to all individual choice, but perhaps different levels of funding could drive training for skills deemed in short supply, and part-fund those lying outside planned requirements. For a fifteen year lead-in

period of change – or however long is deemed necessary – employers should be rewarded, or penalised, based on their recruitment policy of high quality apprenticeships and other training aimed at meeting economic goals.

During the research interviews, employers and stakeholders made very few direct suggestions of how to improve the relationship between the economy, labour market and the corresponding role of employers in full-time 14-19 ET for a number of reasons. Some had no active involvement in this area and therefore no direct interest in improving this relationship. Some are involved and value the role they currently play. The conflicted opinions of the majority, however, mean that some recommendations for improvement in relation to the fifth research objective, concerned with the identification of the changes needed to improve the relationship of employers with full-time 14-19 education and training, come out of the weaknesses identified rather than from direct suggestions.

Where VET is viewed as a way to engage more young people for longer in full-time education, then false hopes should not be raised in relation to progression. 'Work-ready' for the average school-leaver cannot mean 'versed in vocational skills in one or more industry'. Rather than further misconception or deception about the purpose and outcomes of vocational learning, a degree of honesty about the sector as a context and the pursuit of a qualification as an alternative to doing nothing - would be a more honest policy: stakeholders are wary that learner achievements are not deemed to have been as demanding as in previous years, and that formerly respected qualifications might be rejected by top institutions, causing them and the learners to feel misled about apparent achievements. There is an assumption that employer-defined content and assessment will automatically increase the value of qualifications - but change will not automatically increase value, unless perhaps, the up-dating reflects new technological developments.

A common framework as the foundation of an apolitical ET system

This research does not seek to offer a way to increase, exponentially, the number of employers offering their input into 14-19 ET, as there is little evidence in either the literature or among interviewees, that this age group represents a priority other than for policy-makers (EMP2), who control school leaving ages, and the funding and running of the ET infrastructure. In the absence of a social partnership – or similar framework – to counter some of the vagaries of individual behaviours, and the supply-led nature of the system, potential solutions are as complex as the issues. Reflecting Raffe's (2015) observation that 'the process of change is at least as important as its content' (161), a common framework could provide a short- to medium-term consolidation of initiatives and good practice.

Ideally, a coherent re-shaping of the system should be undertaken in a single - if lengthy and financially draining - period of time. In the meantime, the necessity of continuing to educate young children in a way that allows them to progress successfully, may delay the re-shaping of policy. Older students could perhaps continue and complete their education using current choices available to them, whilst younger pupils could spearhead policy changes.

Policy cannot force employers to be involved, but in a new framework, levers and drivers would be made fit-for-purpose. It is possible to combat the effects of voluntarism through regulation, but the latter must also be supported by political and business will. Modification to the system may currently create barriers to employer involvement and contributions, but, to observers, employers' absence indicates policy rejection and failure. Possible risks to employer and stakeholder need to be tested and evaluated in terms of reputational hazards, to enable them to make clear commitments to project outcomes.

A common framework would need to actively acknowledge the multiple identities of employers and recognise the impact they might have, and would ensure that policy and its consequences are evaluated before and during implementation, and that lessons learned would be applied to new initiatives.

Table I: Aims of a common framework for the development and implementation of ET policy

| Aims of a common framework |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gain consensus on, and drive ET aims and purpose, apolitically • focus on meeting defined purposes and maintaining quality, not measuring • enable access to proposed apprenticeships etc through new policies and trusted old ones • raise awareness of the length of time necessary to define, organise and put into practise necessary skills, for different occupations, and allow for tailored education and training to meet specific industry needs, rather than to meet an abstract policy model • gain formal – not pledged - commitment to involvement by interested parties through regulation • employers to send the same personnel to meeting to ensure continuity of knowledge and information arising from each meeting, being passed on to trainers, trainees etc • continue to encourage schools to request help from employers • evaluate policy in order to learner lessons, and apply the experiences to new projects and policies • include research-based predictors of success, thus reducing wasted resources |

The framework would encompass a clear definition and purpose for involved organisations, which could be adhered to apolitically. Employers would benefit from a raising of their profile, and a shared agreement of their purpose. Policy would be broken down, scrutinised and analysed by employers and other stakeholders. This would necessitate a shared understanding of required outcomes at each stage of reform – even if gaining that agreement caused the shape of the project to change. This in turn would require specific commitment from all involved. Since the intention would be to create long-lasting, apolitical systems and products, the investment in resources would

be sustainable and worthwhile. Systematic evaluation at each stage of implementation would allow lessons learned to be applied to future reforms.

Concluding arguments: another policy (re) cycle or radical strategic reform?

There are a number of implications if improvements to the ET system and policy effectiveness are to be achieved either through radical system change or in the current voluntarist context. At a macro-level, there are issues of cost: any strategic overhaul of the system would come at a high financial price, as it would require restructuring and retraining as only changed practice can achieve the necessary change in culture required. This would also have a high political cost, as education and its associated infrastructure is a key element of state power. This would be lost in the necessarily 'neutral' structures required to ensure long-term cultural change outside of any political party manipulation. ET initiatives would have to become apolitical although this would result in any administration losing a powerful political tool, a factor Blair was aware of when he pulled back from radical A-Level reform on the publication of the Tomlinson report. The Conservative-led Coalition replaced their Secretary of State for Education when it was deemed that the teaching profession in particular had reached the end of their patience with reforms in this area.

The key meso-level implication is that without a ground-up attempt to remove the deep-rooted cultural barriers which beset ET in England, there is little hope of achieving the kind of vision for the system that is often discussed, such as a respected vocational route. Employers and stakeholders are often products of the system they are now working with. If it were one day possible to legislate that people forget about their experiences and preferences and blindly implement policy, then a voluntarist system might have a chance of success. Employers are above all business people with a responsibility first and foremost to the success of that business, not only for shareholders but as a place of opportunity for current and future employees. Some may have a personal, altruistic

interest in the shaping and education of young people but they may be more likely to do this in the role of 'influential citizen' than employer. Only when one or more generations of young people come through an ET system that educates them to respect equally the routes available will it be possible to call ET reform in England a success. Such views would also need to be embraced in teacher training.

The cyclical nature of ET policy demonstrates the on-going inability to achieve cultural reform in the current political landscape. For this reason, the adoption of a social partnership approach in England would not obviate the need for the root and branch cultural changes. Localism (Hodgson and Spours, 2012) offers potential solutions but raises further issues. It is difficult to see, if local employers are agriculture-based, for example, what responsibility they would feel, if any, to inform young people more broadly of the careers options open to them (STK10). Where a business has a large base in one town - as had many of those organisations interviewed - it is not feasible to view that company as 'local' when it is likely to recruit employees further afield. In a global market, 'local' policies may need to include policy specific to large organisations and their particular requirements above and beyond their physical location, whilst ensuring opportunity for those who may want to work for them but are not 'local'. This may be separate from - albeit linked into - the more familiar categories of urban or rural communities, with funding and ET policies enabling a targeted response to need. What is required are selectively applied levers applied from the bottom up: local partnerships must be encouraged within a broad framework of possibilities which acknowledges the diverse and contradictory nature of employer involvement and the precarious nature of business investment.

There are two key micro-level implications arising from the research. Where employer groups contribute to policy, there is a need to better manage individual and group inputs from employers, and also to remove some of the key barriers and negative drivers of behaviour. The former links

directly to the need for a clear purpose for each element of the system, managed and driven apolitically. The theoretical analysis discussed how skewed apparent 'employer' input may become when the individual person or organisation is able to dominate outcomes. The associated risks include the commonly experienced failure of projects which have no long-term support; young people being let down as they are encouraged to study subjects which it is not in their interests to pursue, or which may not allow them to progress as they wish; and the dominant voices in an 'employer-led' group being those that are culturally prejudiced against the very element of the system they are tasked with reforming.

The push to disassociate some 14-19 Diplomas from the word 'vocational' because those for whom the word had a negative connotation dominated those for whom it was more positive, is one such example of this. Whilst the rules of a group may not be set before it meets (Buchanan, 2003), the potential negative impact of the employer role in relation to an initiative, development or input may be mitigated by defining it very clearly in relation to its specific purpose. This requires more work and greater confidence on the part of those demanding the input. One solution may not suit all members of the stakeholder group. It may not need to. It may not be possible to control all aspects of a development without regulation but a clear vision and set of processes *fulfilled but not controlled by employers* (Billett and Seddon, 2006) would go some way to achieving this.

The creation of a coherent infrastructure would be costly as it would need to provide equal opportunity for all learners, and this would mean ensuring the availability of all routes to all individuals. Yet this cannot mean, for example, that all schools should offer all types of qualifications in all subject permutations. Whilst initiatives such as UTCs may be a step towards providing high quality VET, they are necessarily limited in what they - and therefore sector specific VET - can achieve by their location and the requirement for a substantial employer input. Employer support will not be available consistently nationwide, an issue with any future qualifications with a national

entitlement status which demand this. As STK8 observed, learners in England are not used to having to choose their progression route based on what is locally available and leads to employment, rather than on individual preference. The increasingly flexible infrastructure renders remote (Raffe, 2011) the ability to implement a coherent national curriculum to age 16 in England - as Wolf (2010) observes is the case in Germany and other European countries.

The report on the future of 14-19 ET from the Edge Foundation (2013) calls on employers to 'make a commitment to placing education and training at the top of their organisational agenda' (9) - more voluntarism, and no change from Leitch's (2006) invitation. System reforms, or the regulation of organisational movement, and more effective policy, require an understanding of why organisations and individuals act as they do, and how they might act in order to create and implement successful ET policy. Constantly repeating the mantra that employers ought to make education and training a priority will not make it so. Even if policy continues to insist that employers are the most effective policy-delivers, for far no one knows a sure way to encourage them 'en masse'. Instead, individual projects must target groups of employers, some of whom are now proposing charging for such support (STK13) - further spurring marketization in education and training.

Modification to the system elements may currently create barriers to employer involvement and contributions but, to observers, employers' absence indicates policy rejection and failure. State recreates policy in areas over which they have control rendering it piecemeal, incoherent and ineffective. Organisations contribute to initiatives as they are able to in order to improve standards, regardless of the historic and cultural issues which may deter employer participation. Employers would be need to be persuaded that the policies created by the state in relation to elements of the system over which they have control, will be coherent and effective. A shared understanding of this purpose, coupled with a clearly defined and managed role for employers within that, would appear to be a more feasible solution to a more effective but still problematic ET system.

In the absence of ground-up reform of the ET System, Figure 13 below illustrates a potential approach to a common framework to maximise employer involvement within a partly regulated system. Within this, superordinate goals supported by co-ordinated policies, and more effective communication, would lead to more appropriate solutions, the impact and effectiveness of which would be fully understood and supported by stakeholders.

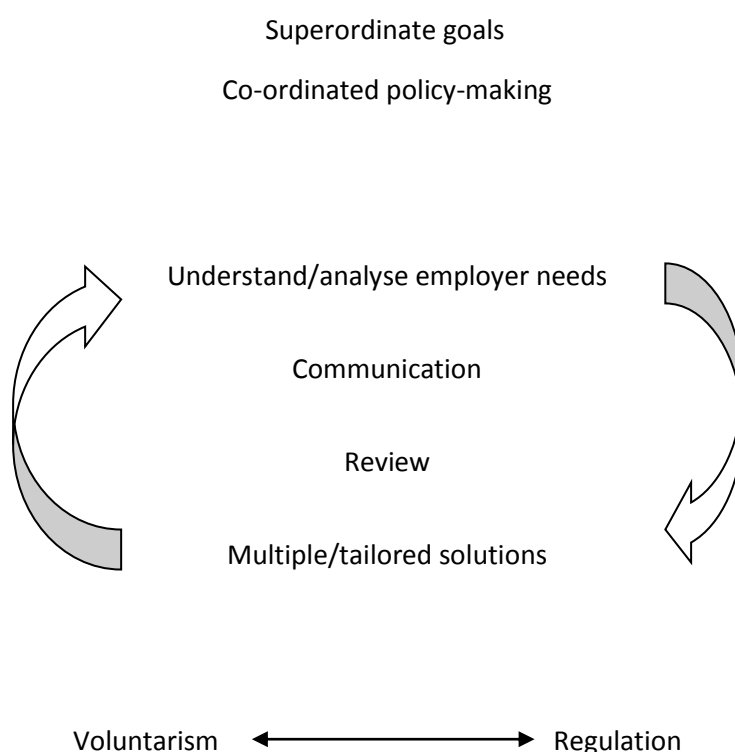


Figure 13: Triangulating goals and policy-making within a common framework

Employers are not infallible: they are not 'an' organisation; they do not have all the answers; and the system should arguably stop wasting resources on the disinterested, or giving them more credit than they deserve. Policy should acknowledge contributions for what they are - as awareness raising or a publicity opportunity, for example. There may still be a need to engage at a deeper level but perhaps that level of commitment can only succeed among the 'steadfast minority'. There is no limitless pool of untapped employer input waiting to be released by a given formula, set of actions or modifications to the current system. Under the voluntarist system it will always be possible to

increase participation yet new barriers will emerge to prevent active organisations and individuals from carrying out a role. Could some, however, be identified proactively?

Government and policy cannot deny past influences and their impacts but can move to break the consensus by making the ET system a cross-party responsibility rather than it being a tool for the scoring of political points and the wasting of huge sums of money recycling ideologically-driven change, which is doomed to fail in the face of the same barriers successive governments have failed to identify and remove. Cultural transmission should be a key part of the system but the traditions and citizenship learned should grow with - and support - society, not constrain it through historically learned behaviours and attitudes.

The expectations of all parties must be managed and tailored outcomes agreed rather than 'one size fits all' solutions being attempted, the latter point revisited again most recently by Raffe (2015).

When employers commit to a project, they should be required to commit to it at every stage, yet this seems an impossible thing to achieve, since no parent can be forced to educate their child on a particular route and the recruitment process includes many more filters than simply qualifications.

The parent-child education and training relationship in England contrasts starkly with that found in Switzerland, for example, where both are seen as social partners and the expectation is that the parent will support the state in identifying the most appropriate progression route (Stern et al, 2010).

Perhaps Wolf's view (2011) of the German system and a common curriculum for all to age 16 has some merit in terms of a similar curriculum offering to learners – although it too condemns many young people to poor or no achievement. STK6 proposed a role for employers that might recast the employer role not quite as mentoring, but certainly as a way to shape expectations and achievements without the outcome-based pressures of summative assessment. This may be an approach already in place at UTCs, but they are necessarily limited in their sector and learner reach.

STK6 would like to see employers having a role in assessment at Key Stages 4 or 5, although the linear nature of this - following Gove's reforms - mean that this would probably need to be in formative rather than summative assessment.

The individualist approach of the UK system lacks the socialist history and culture of places such as Germany, which differentiates young people at a young age and places them in a careers – and effectively into their allocated place in society - often for life. Without creative ways to combat the impact of 'individualism' within the ET system - everyone being skilled according to personal choice rather than to what supports local economic needs - regional skills gaps and national skills shortages will remain unchecked. Access to provision needs to be tackled imaginately and cost effectively. Perhaps UTCs should offer state boarding facilities, enabling young people to access high-quality, labour-market targeted education and training opportunities, and employers to have access to the best young people from all areas of the country without the blind application of 'national entitlement' resulting in stretched resources or sound plans abandoned as they cannot be delivered and accessed 'equally' in remote rural areas and urban conurbations.

If it were to acknowledge the findings of this research, Conservative Apprenticeships policy would not now be reliant on a short-term, exponential increase in the number of employers. Policy alone cannot create an effective role for employers. A forthcoming article will expand on the implications of this research for current and future reliance on the employer for the creation and implementation of policy and the shaping of the ET system.

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Appendix A – Interview schedule: Employers

There are four main areas for discussion:

1. Personal background
2. Organisational structure and culture
3. Activities undertaken by you as an individual, colleagues or the organisation as a whole in relation to 14-19 education and training
4. Reflections on the activities undertaken

There will then be an opportunity to discuss any related matters that may not have been covered during the course of the interview. Prompts for key information have been provided under each section but more/different aspects may be covered under each.

1) Personal background, for example

- Highest level of qualification held personally
- University or other HE/FE establishment attended
- Qualifications achieved by the end of full-time schooling (broad brush e.g. A' levels, GNVQ, AVCE, BTEC etc)
- Relatives or friends studying for 14-19 qualifications
- What is your understanding of the term 'vocational' in relation to 14-19 education and training?

2) Organisational structure and culture, for example

- Industry or sector, size of organisation, number of employees, international offices
- Management style, opportunities for progression
- Recruitment e.g. does the organisation recruit post-16, undergraduate, Apprenticeships, graduates? In which departments/roles?

3) Individual and organisational activities undertaken in relation to 14-19 education and training, for example

- National policy initiatives/development
- The type(s) of in-house training provided (certificated?); are Apprenticeships/HND/Cs offered/supported externally?

- Activities undertaken as an organisation/personally in full-time education e.g. contributions to curricula, teaching materials, other resources, work placements, teacher training, careers advice, academy sponsor school governor, membership of a Local Employer Partnership

4) Reflections on 14-19 full-time education and related activities undertaken

- Among the activities undertaken by you as an individual or your organisation, what works well?
For example,
- Activities of particular value undertaken by individuals or the company as a whole (How is this measured?)
- Specific policies in place both internally and externally which currently seem to support the activities undertaken
- Ways in which individuals/the organisation normally become involved

If you or your organisation does not participate in activities relating to full-time 14-19 education, please reflect on any personal or professional reasons/barriers that prevent this

Post-Coalition

- Changes to the type or extent of involvement in relation to the activities undertaken under the Coalition government
- Where you believe your input/resources could best be targeted 14-19
- Elements of the system in which you think employers should be more involved or should not be involved in at all, for example, qualifications, schools, delivery, training, sponsorship etc
- Suggested improvements? For example, specific policies/systems/barriers/drivers in place both internally and externally

5) Additional information

An opportunity for the interviewer and the interviewee to clarify or further explore any aspect of the preceding information

Thank you for your participation

Appendix B – Interview schedule: Stakeholders

There are four areas for discussion:

1. Personal background
2. Organisational structure and culture
3. Activities undertaken by your or the organisation in relation to 14-19 education and training
4. Reflections on the activities undertaken

There will then be an opportunity to discuss any related matters that may not have been covered during the course of the interview. Prompts for key information have been provided under each section but more/different aspects may be covered under each.

1) Personal background, for example:

- Highest level of qualification held personally
- University or other HE/FE establishment attended
- Qualifications achieved by the end of full-time schooling (broad brush e.g. A' levels, GNVQ, AVCE, BTEC etc)
- Relatives or friends studying for qualifications in the 14-19 area.

2) Organisational structure and culture, for example

- Industry or sector, size of organisation, number of employees
- Management style, opportunities for progression
- Recruitment e.g. does the organisation recruit post-16, undergraduate, Apprenticeships, graduates? If so in which departments/roles?

3) Organisational activities undertaken in relation to the employer role in 14-19 education and training, for example

- Curriculum development, teacher training
- Policy development, research
- Networking, Documenting/recording
- Reasons for this involvement (policy, local need etc)

4) Reflection on the role of employers in 14-19 full-time education and training, for example

- Your understanding of the employer role in 14-19
- Your understanding of the term 'vocational' in relation to 14-19 education and training
- What motivates employers to get involved

- Impact of local and national policies pre- and post-election on activities undertaken or the role of the organisation as a whole
- Should or could employer involvement in 14-19 education and training be different? In what way(s)?

Post-Coalition

- Changes to the type or extent of involvement in relation to the activities undertaken under the Coalition government
- Where you believe your input/resources could best be targeted in 14-19 ET
- Elements of the system in which you think employers should be more involved or should not be involved in at all, for example, qualifications, schools, delivery, training, sponsorship etc
- Suggested improvements? For example, specific policies/systems/barriers/drivers in place both internally and externally

5) Additional information

An opportunity for the interviewer and the interviewee to clarify or further explore any aspect of the preceding information

Thank you for taking part in the interview

Appendix C: Table L – Assumptions on which policy for full-time 14-19 ET is based, the behaviours this drives, and external perceptions of these

| Assumptions | Behaviours | Perceptions relating to these behaviours | Impact of these on future policy |
|---|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Large scale employer involvement in 14-19 ET is desirable There exists a way under a voluntary system to effect this – it just hasn't been found yet | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some employers contribute, some do not | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If employers do not want to be involved, they do not value the outputs of the project/initiative Some employers will not play a role whatever the incentives Some employers seem willing to play a role whatever the incentives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each new initiative starts from the premise of how to get employers involved – apparently ignoring good work already happening and being 'surprised' that more or different employers are not playing a role Previous good work is lost with the political ending of an initiative Measures are put in place to 'count' instances of involvement rather than to evaluate their effectiveness |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'Employers', regardless of size, location or other differentiating factors hold similar opinions about ET both generally and within their sector Employer representatives speak as or for an organisation – not as an individual | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some employers contribute, some do not | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is valued and contributed by a representative is valued by the organisation as a whole, and by extension the sector Employers who do contribute are 'right', their contribution is 'valuable and effective' and what is needed is 'more of the same' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Future policy is based on the mistaken premise that the contribution from an individual reflects the views not only of the organisation but of the wider sector, (Laczik and White, 2009). |

| Assumptions Contd. | Behaviours | Perceptions relating to these behaviours | Impact of these on future policy |
|---|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Businesses exist for reasons other than to make a profit • Employers will therefore voluntarily contribute to ET with the right policy drivers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some employers contribute, some do not | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers who do not contribute are selfish and have only their own business interests at heart – after all policy has gone out of its way to address their perceived needs • Employers are reluctant to become involved, particularly if that involvement incurs costs over and above what will be publicly funded • Employers expect to be rewarded- at an individual or organisational level - for their involvement even though they benefit from the end result. The taxpaying status of organisations and any non-publicly funded training carried out by them is often ignored in this context or dismissed as irrelevant. • Employers prioritise the economic health of their business (profit) before all else | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placing employers at the heart of ET policy when it is not their first priority can only lead to disengagement or policy failure. • Since work experience or careers advice, for example, require similar outputs whatever initiative they are attached to, a more consistent policy on these elements may be more effective than re-establishing them as ‘new’ each time there is a policy initiative requiring similar (the same) type of employer support • A ‘centralised’ policy need not be managed centrally but may exist to fix minimum criteria for the types of input required – what appears to happen is that a central measurement of criteria turns them into something which may result in a penalty rather than something that is used to improve quality. |

| Assumptions Contd. | Behaviours | Perceptions relating to these behaviours | Impact of these on future policy |
|---|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making more/diverse financial incentives available to employers means they will contribute • Employers will act in the best interests of trainees/the economy etc. when public funds are made available to them for training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers contribute in the ways listed in Table C • At times the availability of public funding has driven fraudulent, dishonest and selfish behaviour | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public funding encourages employer contributions • Employers have enough of their own money to fund ET within their sector/organisation • Employers and the state are in tacit agreement about the distribution and use of public funding and know how to make a profit from it • Public funding is open to corruption if not monitored closely | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceptions are contradictory: employers have the funds but are unwilling to pay for ET; employers are willing to pay but have no incentive to do so as government funds what is required – funding supports a supply-led system which arguably keeps opportunities alive for young people whilst in full-time education and training but is also unrealistic in terms of future progression, and costly. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the ET system achieves an optimum shape all parties will work together to achieve the optimum outcomes • The optimum shape and outcomes for the system are known or definable | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some employers contribute, some do not | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some employers are unwilling to work with the system • Lack of clarity around policy prevents some employers working with it • Where employers do not support an initiative it is they, not the project, that is at fault | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy churn: successive administrations continue to tinker with the system in the hope that revised qualifications and infrastructure will somehow successfully address issues they have failed to address in the past (because these are not related - or at least only partly - to the actual problem). |

| Assumptions Contd | Behaviours | Perceptions relating to these behaviours | Impact of these on future policy |
|--|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a government focus on full-time 14-19 ET policy because employers have a particular interest in this age group • Employers have a greater interest in this age group than in others, e.g. returners to work, as potential employees • An employer role in 14-19 ET is critical to successful provision for this age group • What is learned and achieved by this age group is important to employers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers demand other benefits in return for engaging in this area of policy • Agreement to contribute only as part of a wider package, for example, to Apprenticeship frameworks or other committees • Unrealistic expectation of what can be achieved in terms of the readiness of young people to enter the workplace, teachers ability to prepare them for this etc | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This area is not a priority for employers • This area is a priority for employers but what government offers does not meet their needs. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholders received mixed messages about the level and meaning of employer support for a variety of initiatives: qualifications that appear to have employer endorsement are discontinued by a subsequent administration; different HE institutions place different values on outcomes • Stakeholders become frustrated that their needs are apparently unknown and unmet as funding is ploughed into an age group which is not necessarily a priority for them. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualifications are responsible for – and can resolve – systemic and cultural issues currently preventing optimum achievement and skills acquisition • The use of qualifications as the primary way to meet ET needs is supported by ‘end-users’, including employers as recruiters | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers recruit based on qualifications with which they are familiar • Employers ignore some qualifications when recruiting even where they have contributed to the design and development • Employers contribute to a limited number of local or otherwise necessarily selected | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers favour one type of qualification over another • Employers favour particular styles of learning and assessment • Employers discriminate/recruit on the basis of certain qualifications and subjects • Employers – particularly those less easily represented such as SMEs – are less knowledgeable | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is confusion in the system as to the value of ET outcomes • Qualifications and other aspects of the system try to resolve issues such as performance of the institution etc rather than being fit for purpose for the learner as a priority • Money is wasted • Perceptions of employers are negative when the impacts affect |

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certain qualifications are so highly valued by parents and employers that they cannot be altered even if this has a negative impact on revisions to the rest of the system • All institutions are equally capable of resourcing new qualifications – including technical qualifications - despite local differences • New qualifications will enjoy equal status alongside existing provision in terms of progression to F/HE and employment • A single style of qualification can address the needs of learners in all sectors • The content and assessment methods of a qualification delivered in full-time 14-19 ET will be considered by employers using it as a recruitment tool • Increased employer involvement would improve success rates of qualifications, the education experience and the economy • Qualifications endorsed by employers are a viable way to | <p>school partners or work through an EBP, for example, with a limited number of schools</p> | <p>about what is needed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers who do not help to define content or assessment do not want to help young people to progress • Employers are familiar with the content and assessment of qualifications delivered in full-time 14-19 ET • Some employers – and some schools – are unwilling to create the relationships necessary for successful ET • If more employers were to ‘play their part’ then the quality, relevance and acceptance of new qualifications would increase • Employers fail to support an initiative for many reasons but the perception is rarely ‘because it does not meet their needs’ | <p>them also</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Vocational’ qualifications try to address issues which have little to do with their original purpose |
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|--------------------------|--|--|--|
| fulfil a skills shortage | | | |
|--------------------------|--|--|--|

| Assumptions Contd | Behaviours | Perceptions relating to these behaviours | Impact of these on future policy |
|--|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If some employers are willing to support a policy then – with the right drivers in place – so is the majority • Reluctant employers must be encouraged to become involved: they all have sufficient resources to do so • Government policy and system structures prevent larger/more effective contributions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some employers support policies, some do not | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many employers do not contribute time or resources or even verbal support • Some or all employers are unwilling to support improvements to the system even though they will benefit from the skills of successful learners • Barriers prevent employer involvement • the wrong drivers are in place • The policy is at fault • Employers want greater/other rewards in return for their contribution • Any ET endorsed by employers (at least those with a significant national or local profile) will be accepted as a quality product by end-users - other employers, parents, learners FE and HE | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy is often predicated on driving up numbers of employer involved even where this may not be possible or desirable, resulting in certain policy failure |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government-funded and other third party agencies are able to represent effectively the employer voice • The 'voice' of an | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some employers support the work of intermediary agencies and lend their name to their work • Some employers do not contribute owing to their size or other factors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers who do not agree with the view of a representative agency are against the prevailing opinion of their sector or do not support a given policy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intermediate agencies are given powers – and performance measures – which are often impossible to fully implement or achieve (with the exception perhaps of a minority of sectors) |

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|--|--|---|--|
| <p>intermediary agency is synonymous with the employer voice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agencies in some industries which have been more successful in engaging with employers are simply better organised than less successful ones | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In some sectors, the relationship between employers and the agencies concerned are so limited that the latter cannot properly be said to represent employer interests – but are often assumed to be doing so |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The state is responsible for preparing and supplying young people ready for work The state is able to define and resource ET covering skills and knowledge across all industries and this will lead to jobs within those industries and success for those holding government-funded certification | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ET is left to the state Employers select the best qualified young people or complain that there are no young people with the correct skills base Employers train unskilled young people [as they are cheaper than skilled] | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employers expect the state to fund the future profitability of their business by paying to educate and train their future workforce | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government policy often appears in practice – if not intention – to be based on this aim leading to further assumptions about what employers want and therefore what routes young people should take Young people are often disappointed or excluded from progression routes because of this mismatch between expectation and reality |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tacit agreement exists of what skills and knowledge are required by entrants to a sector at different levels Organisations within a sector will accept at recruitment a qualification which has been endorsed by other employers from that sector | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employers recruit based on qualifications that are familiar to them and may bear little relation to defined sector-related skills and knowledge Employers within the same sector have different attitudes towards the same qualifications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some qualifications (often vocational) have little value in the eyes of employers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners and other stakeholders are misled as to the value of the learning or training undertaken Funds are wasted Skills remain in short supply |

| | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers place a high value on the previous practical experience of recruits to their industry • Work experience, especially industry specific experience, is critical to the success of all learners therefore some learners are disadvantaged by their location/school connections etc | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is possible for employers to inform local and national careers advisers effectively • It is possible for schools to inform pupils of all potential careers options open to them | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only some employers contribute directly to Careers Advice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government and employer opinion of the skills shortage differs • Opinions of the usefulness of Careers Advice are divided • Some employers are unwilling to help young people access their sector | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A variety of stakeholders are blamed in turn for policy failure in an area which requires root and branch reform |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key skills – and their variants – are valued by employers • Such skills are better taught and assessed separately | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers say that these skills are valued but do not appear to value the qualifications on which they are based | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confusion on the part of learners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills qualifications are revised, used and discarded creating confusion for learners • Employers appear to demand skills development through education and training which may be better achieved in the workplace |

| Assumptions Contd | Behaviours | Perceptions relating to these behaviours | Impact of these on future policy |
|--|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All young people must have some qualifications Some qualifications have a higher value than others | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers recruit learners with the 'best' qualifications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers do not always behave as the public has been led to believe they will | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualifications are not always valued for their content, rather for their 'status' e.g. A' levels • The true value of a given qualification has become lost in debates about parity, (Lum, 2015) • Progression is often unrealistic or unattractive in terms of repeated learning opportunities ('vocational' subjects available pre- and post-16 with the main aim of keeping learners in school rather than preparing them for work) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any employer input is more effective than no employer input • All employer input is to be welcomed • The giving of time to a project indicates on-going support for the outcome, for example, through to recruitment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers contribute what they want to rather than what is needed • Employers contribute to the attractive elements of a project i.e. those providing the biggest reward to the individual or company rather than those taking effort or long-term commitment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employer input is what is needed by the system and it will be high quality by virtue of the fact that employers know best what is needed • Employer input is beyond criticism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The power relationship between employers and the ET system is very imbalanced, with the influence of the former taking precedence over other considerations |