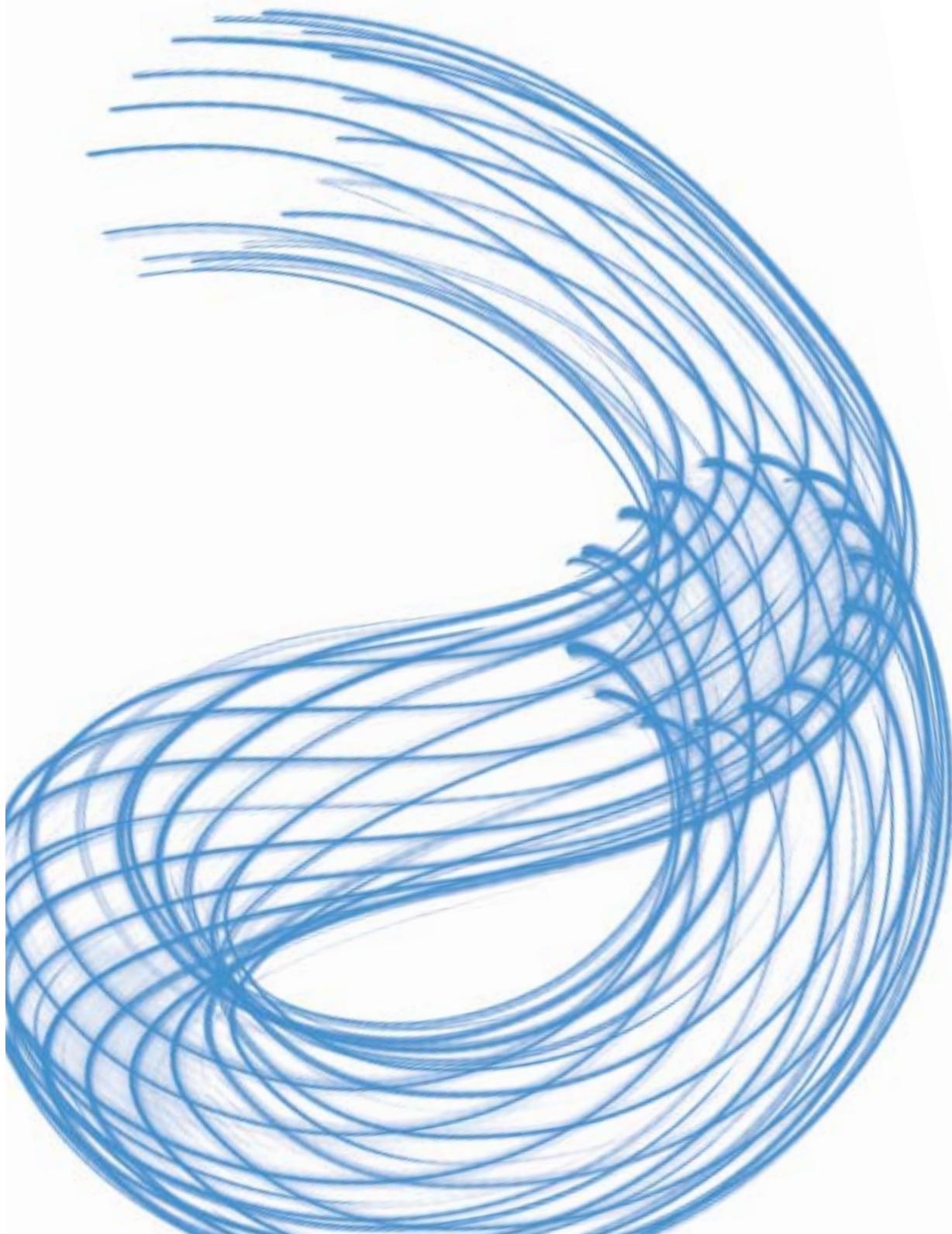


EVALUATION OF THE PATHFINDER SECTOR SKILLS AGREEMENT PROCESS

RESEARCH REPORT 15
NOVEMBER 2005



Evaluation of the Pathfinder Sector Skills Agreement Process

Sector Skills Development Agency

Final report submitted by GHK

[in association with SQW]

Sector Skills Development Agency: Research Series

Foreword

In October 2002 the Department for Education and Skills formally launched Skills for Business (SfB), a new UK-wide network of employer-led Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), supported and directed by the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA). The purpose of SfB is to bring employers more centre stage in articulating their skill needs and delivering skills-based productivity improvements that can enhance UK competitiveness and the effectiveness of public services. The remit of the SSDA includes establishing and progressing the network of SSCs, supporting the SSCs in the development of their own capacity and providing a range of core services. Additionally the SSDA has responsibility for representing sectors not covered by an SSC and co-ordinating action on generic issues.

Research, and developing a sound evidence base, are central to the SSDA and to Skills for Business as a whole. It is crucial in: analysing productivity and skill needs; identifying priorities for action; and improving the evolving policy and skills agenda. It is vital that the SSDA research team works closely with partners already involved in skills and related research to generally drive up the quality of sectoral labour market analysis in the UK and to develop a more shared understanding of UK-wide sector priorities.

The SSDA is undertaking a variety of activities to develop the analytical capacity of the Network and enhance its evidence base. This involves: developing a substantial programme of new research and evaluation, including international research; synthesizing existing research; developing a common skills and labour market intelligence framework; taking part in partnership research projects across the UK; and setting up an expert panel drawing on the knowledge of leading academics, consultants and researchers in the field of labour market studies. Members of this panel will feed into specific research projects and peer review the outputs; be invited to participate in seminars and consultation events on specific research and policy issues; and will be asked to contribute to an annual research conference.

The SSDA takes the dissemination of research findings seriously. As such it has developed this dedicated research series to publish all research sponsored by the SSDA and results are being made available in both hard copy and electronically on the SSDA website.

Lesley Giles

Head of Research at the SSDA

CONTENTS

LIST OF ACRONYMS	1
1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
1.1 The SSA Process.....	2
1.2 The Intelligence Phase	3
1.3 The Agreement Phase	3
2 INTRODUCTION	5
2.1 Background to the Sector Skills Agreement Process	5
2.2 Developing a Sector Skills Agreement.....	7
2.3 Evaluating the Pathfinder Phase.....	8
3 APPROACHES TO THE SECTOR SKILLS AGREEMENT PROCESS	12
3.1 Pathfinder-specific Issues	12
3.2 Overview of the Timetable for Development.....	13
3.3 Logistics and Planning	14
3.4 SSA Development Models	17
3.5 Management and Resource Issues	22
3.6 Summary of Key Findings.....	25
4 THE INTELLIGENCE PHASE	26
4.1 Stage 1 – Skills Needs Assessment	26
4.2 Stage 2 – Assessment of Current Provision	29
4.3 Stage 3 – Gap Analysis	33
4.4 Summary of Key Findings.....	36
5 THE AGREEMENT PHASE	37
5.1 Stage 4 – Scoping Collaborative Action.....	37
5.2 Stage 5 – The Action Plans	40
5.3 Review of the final Sector Skills Agreements	49
5.4 Summary of Key Findings.....	54
6 KEY LESSONS IN PRODUCING THE SSA	55
6.1 Planning and Managing the Process	55
6.2 Timetabling and Resourcing the Five-Stage Process.....	55
6.3 Using External Support	57
6.4 Using the Evidence to Drive Negotiation	58
6.5 Involving Employers and Other Stakeholders.....	58
6.6 Ensuring UK-Wide Coverage.....	59
6.7 Tactics for Negotiating ‘The Deal’	59
6.8 Presenting the Agreement	60

7	CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	61
7.1	The SSA Process	61
7.2	The Intelligence Phase	63
7.3	The Agreement Phase	65

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACCAC – Qualifications, Curriculum & Assessment Authority for Wales	LSDA – Learning and Skills Development Agency
ALI – Adult Learning Inspectorate	NESS – National Employers Skills Survey
ALP – Association of Learning Providers	LMI – Labour Market Intelligence
AOC – Association of Colleges	NEP – National Employment Panel
AWM – Advantage West Midlands	NIACE – National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
CBI – Confederation of British Industry	NWDA – North West Development Agency
CEO – Chief Executive Officer	ODPM – Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
CPD – Continuing Professional Development	OFCOM – Office of Communications
CoVE – Centres of Vocational Excellence	OGC – Office of Government Commerce
DELNI – Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland	ONE – One NorthEast
DfES – Department for Education and Skills	QCA – Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
DTI – Department of Trade and Industry	RDA – Regional Development Agency
DWP – Department for Work and Pensions	RIBA – Royal Institute of British Architects
EEDA – East of England Development Agency	RICS – Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors
EMDA – East Midlands Development Agency	RSP – Regional Skills Partnership
ELWa – Education and Learning Wales	SEEDA – South East England Development Agency
FE – Further Education	SFC – Scottish Funding Councils
HE – Higher Education	SQA – Scottish Qualifications Authority
HEFCE – Higher Education Funding Council for England	SME – Small/Medium sized Enterprise
HEFCW – Higher Education Funding Council for Wales	SQS – Sector Qualifications Strategy
IAG – Information, Advice and Guidance	SSA – Sector Skills Agreement
IGT – Innovation and Growth Team	SSC – Sector Skills Council
liP – Investors in People	SSDA – Sector Skills Development Agency
ILR – Individualised Learner Record	SWERDA – South West of England Regional Development Agency
ITQ – Information Technology Qualification	STUC – Scottish Trades Union Congress
LDA – London Development Agency	TUC – Trades Union Congress
LEC – Local Enterprise Company	UFI – University for Industry
LSC – Learning and Skills Council	ULR – Union Learning Representative

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the final report of the *Evaluation of the Pathfinder Sector Skills Agreement Process* undertaken by GHK in conjunction with SQW. Four Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) – ConstructionSkills, e-skills UK, SEMTA, and Skillset – undertook the pathfinder phase in partnership with a range of employers and partner organisations.

Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs) are an important test of the effectiveness of the Skills for Business network. SSAs provide the basis for collaborative action between employers and a range of education and training partners to meet future skill needs at sector level.

Developing an SSA is a five-stage process comprising:

- § a **skills needs assessment**, which is a forward-looking analysis of the drivers of change in a sector and how this translates into future skill needs (*Stage 1*)
- § an **assessment of current education and training provision** (*Stage 2*)
- § a **gap analysis** bringing together the views of demand and supply as the basis for identifying priorities for action (*Stage 3*)
- § an assessment of the **scope for collaborative action by employers** to address the identified skills gaps and weaknesses (*Stage 4*)
- § an **action plan** outlining the joint actions to be taken by SSCs, employers and partners to meet sector skills needs (*Stage 5*).

This evaluation covers the progress of the four pathfinder SSAs **up to July 2005** in England, Scotland and Wales.

1.1 The SSA Process

The findings of this evaluation project show that the five-stage process is logical in practice, although each stage is not necessarily distinct. Among the pathfinders there were multiple iterations of research and consultation (e.g. with employers), which meant that what could be termed the ‘intelligence phase’ (consisting of Stages 1 to 3) ran largely in parallel. The gap analysis, in particular, tended not to appear as a discrete activity, and work began on this at an early stage as the pathfinders set up high-level employer groups early on to ‘kick start’ discussions about priority areas. Involving employers in this way – to shape the very future of the sector – was a key hook in the early stages and throughout the process. All of the pathfinders also undertook a series of national and regional employer workshops or forums.

Beyond these common activities, however, approaches varied and different ‘SSA models’ were developed. The key distinctions were based around:

- § whether a sectoral or sub-sectoral approach was taken to the SSA, something that was largely dependent on the SSC ‘footprint’;
- § whether large-scale new primary research was undertaken for Stages 1 and 2, which depended on existing SSC capacity and the nature of the existing intelligence base;

- § if significant external resources were used as part of the process;
- § whether the employer commitment was based around groups of employers or around individual named employers signing up to act.

As a result of these different SSA models, the allocation of resources varied considerably across the pathfinders. The funding provided by the SSDA is an adequate contribution. However, the real challenge for SSCs relates to their existing capacity – whether enough senior resources can be levered in over a long enough period of time to deliver the ‘deals’.

1.2 The Intelligence Phase

The demand-side assessment (Stage 1) was much stronger than that of the supply-side (Stage 2). However, there is an evident thread between the priorities that emerged from the analysis and the shape of the final action plans.

In substance, the skills needs assessment provided increased breadth, depth and foresight of knowledge, rather than ‘new’ insights as such. The analysis tended to give greater prominence to the SSCs’ own research rather than external intelligence sources, though the new research undertaken as part of the skills needs assessment provided a very solid basis for analysis.

The assessment of current provision was the weakest component of the SSA process. This partly reflected the lack of an existing evidence base and issues relating to data access and comparability. It also reflected a lack of an analytical framework which made it difficult to undertake a targeted analysis.

As noted above, the gap analysis (Stage 3) was the least distinct of all of the SSA stages, partly because the process undertaken is dynamic. The pathfinders were continually refining and testing priorities for action. These tended to be embedded in a relatively thorough analysis of the drivers of change, although much less so in a rigorous analysis of the underpinning supply of skills, reflecting the weaknesses in the Stage 2 analysis.

1.3 The Agreement Phase

While the SSA provided the basis for a new and richer dialogue with employers, the pathfinder SSCs found it difficult to translate that into a substantive commitment to action. This is partly because those involved in shaping the SSA represent a small number of employers. In addition, in some sectors, getting employers to work jointly in this way – with their competitors – is a new approach.

Much of what has been achieved is either through individual employers ‘signing up’, or groups of larger employers committing to participate in a particular activity. Some of these commitments are about employers acting in the vanguard to change how the sector operates and how it delivers skills and learning.

The key test will be whether a particular employer – or more likely a group of employers – can lever wider change by committing to new ways of working. The weakness is where the employer contribution is either ill-defined or unambitious. Examples such as a commitment to engage in further research, or to promote the use

of training plans may contribute to achieving change, but are of a different order to the original ambitions of the SSA.

There are, however, some industry-level agreements and examples of major employers coming together to commit funding. Where explicit funding is identified, it is typically a contribution to set-up costs. This is an interesting approach because it is effectively a challenge to education and training partners to match employer commitment to create real change and make a material movement towards delivering a demand-led skills agenda.

Partner engagement in the final action plans has been comprehensive yet variable. The main government departments are widely included, although the nature of the deals vary widely from 'helping to promote' to providing significant funding. In numeric terms, some partners have signed up to a lot of activities. The trade union presence is strong. The remit of the SSA seems less clear in the English regions and some of the nations (Scotland in particular), although there is some evidence that targeted regional strategies can work in areas where skills is recognised as the main driver of economic development.

At the start of the SSA process, it was difficult for key partners and actors to articulate what an SSA would look like. For most respondents though, their language referred to strategic change; employer commitment; two or three 'big ideas'; and/or a challenge to current education and training provision. However, the sheer number of activities and deals in some of the pathfinder SSAs makes it difficult to see this big picture – where the strategic shift in both thinking and call for action lies.

The most impressive aspects of the final SSAs are deals struck around activities the SSCs had already been planning or piloting. In these cases, the SSA has played an important role in either making these activities a reality and/or enabling them to significantly grow in scale.

At the end of the process, it would seem that the SSAs offer comprehensive workforce development plans with: a solid foundation of analysis; a widely conducted referencing or validation process with key partners (including employers) that gives weight to the arguments presented; and agendas for action that will shape programmes of work for the pathfinder SSCs and partners for some years.

If the SSA can be said to posit a new dialogue on skills issues, the pathfinder phase had the function of showing how this translates into practice. The pathfinder SSAs are not the short, pithy, challenging and exciting documents that may originally have been envisaged by some. Instead they are robust, 'workman-like' strategies that reflect not only the complexity of the challenge but also the complexity of the solutions and partnerships required.

2 INTRODUCTION

This is the draft final report of the *Evaluation of the Pathfinder Sector Skills Agreement Process* undertaken by GHK in conjunction with SQW on behalf of the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA).

2.1 Background to the Sector Skills Agreement Process

Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs) are critical to the work of the Skills for Business network. They provide the basis for collaborative action between employers and partners in the field of education and training to meet future skills needs at sector level.

The UK Government's Skills Strategy published in July 2003 announced that Sector Skills Agreements would be developed by each of the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) to set a *'longer term agenda for raising productivity in each sector, the skills needed for international competitiveness, and how employers might work together on a voluntary basis to invest in the necessary skills'*¹.

The specification for the scope and delivery of the SSAs in England further described the Agreements as *'a means whereby employers and employees in each sector can identify skills and productivity needs, the action they will take to meet those needs, and how they will collaborate with providers of training and skills so that skills demand can directly shape the nature of supply'*².

Similarly, the specification for Scotland describes SSAs as *'the mechanism used by SSCs to influence the supply of relevant training and skills and to raise employer commitment to skills'*³. In Wales, the specification outlines that the development of SSAs *'will provide a vehicle for bringing together all the main agencies that have an interest and role in meeting sector skills needs'*⁴. The Agreements are therefore a key tool in the shift to a more demand-focused skills agenda.

This evaluation covers progress to July 2005 only in the development of the four pathfinder SSAs in England, Scotland and Wales.

2.1.1 Aims and objectives of the SSAs

The full **SSA objectives** are as follows:

- § To identify the drivers of productivity and competitiveness in a sector, and what constitutes leading-edge practice around the world, as a basis for setting ambitions and goals for raising productivity.

¹ 21st Century Skills: Realising our Potential, July 2003

² Specification for the Scope and Delivery of Sector Skills Agreements (England), SSDA

³ Specification for the Scope and Delivery of Sector Skills Agreements for Scotland, Scottish Executive/SSDA

⁴ Specification for the Scope and Delivery of Sector Skills Agreements for Wales, Welsh Assembly/SSDA

- § To support measurable improvements in business performance against international competitors (or other performance benchmarks where there is no international competition).
- § To identify the skills that will be needed in order to achieve those ambitions and targets, at different levels and in different generic and specialist areas.
- § To agree how those skills are best secured, through training of new entrants and those already in the sector's labour force.
- § To set a framework of occupational standards which can drive the design of training programmes; and give employers an effective role in steering the content and delivery of learning provision to meet key industry requirements.
- § To agree with funding partners and training providers how publicly available funding can best be deployed to support achievement of those goals, including flexible delivery of training in ways that suit employers and learners; thereby securing the best match between identified skill needs, and the response of the training supply side.
- § To identify any elements of current training and skills policy and operations that place significant restrictions on the ability of employers to meet the skill needs of their sectors, and to provide a mechanism for resolving these issues.
- § To review the range of potential mechanisms for voluntary collective action by employers in pursuing skills and productivity needs; and identify which mechanism(s) will best suit the circumstances of the sector.
- § To broker agreement with sector employers on the best means of implementing those mechanisms; and articulate the employer contribution to developing and delivering world class learning opportunities.
- § To co-ordinate and combine existing training and skills policies to make them work to best effect to meet the needs of the sector; and to align and co-ordinate existing sector-based productivity initiatives so that they deliver greatest impact.

2.1.2 Key actors involved in the process

The policy original specification for the SSA project was cleared at Ministerial level in England at the end of 2003. Four SSCs were identified as 'pathfinders' in order to trial the process. The pathfinder SSCs were ConstructionSkills, e-skills UK, SEMTA and Skillset. These SSCs were well-established, and therefore ideally placed to 'test' the process.

Project Boards were set up in England, Wales and Scotland (with Northern Ireland to follow). These Boards have responsibility for the delivery of the SSA project, including the design of the initial policy, development, implementation and wider roll-out. Membership of the Project Boards was fairly comprehensive and encompassed the key policy and delivery partners working alongside the SSCs:

- § The Project Board in England included SSDA, DfES, DTI, QCA, LSC, NWDA (the RDA leading on skills issues), DWP, Jobcentre Plus, HEFCE and the pathfinder SSCs.
- § The Project Board for Scotland included SSDA, Scottish Enterprise, the Scottish Executive, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the Scottish Funding Councils,

SQA, Careers Scotland, Future Skills Scotland, Learndirect Scotland, STUC, Jobcentre Plus and the pathfinder SSCs.

- § The Board in Wales included SSDA, ELWa, the Welsh Development Agency, Jobcentre Plus, Careers Wales, ACCAC, the Welsh Assembly Government, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the pathfinder SSCs.

The Project Board in England was established at the start of the SSA project, while those in Wales and Scotland followed later, meeting for the first time in Autumn 2004. A Project Board for Northern Ireland was not established at the time of the evaluation research, and will not sit until well into 2005. The staggered starts were partly the result of the need to establish the operation of the SSAs and protocols in each of the nations, and also because the Skills for Business network was still building its capacity (e.g. the SSDA establishing network managers in each of the nations).

The Project Boards came together through the UK Sector Skills Policy Forum Working Group, which co-ordinated the overall SSA Project Plan. The SSDA in particular had a role in ensuring consistency across the various Project Boards on a day-to-day level. One of the responsibilities of the Project Board in England was to report on progress and key issues to the DfES Skills Strategy Employer Sub-Programme Board and to the Skills Strategy Steering Group and the Skills Alliance. In this way, key partners such as the CBI and the TUC were involved formally in the process.

2.2 Developing a Sector Skills Agreement

The SSA development process is split into five stages, which were set out in the original project specification. The stages were anticipated to run sequentially as follows:

- § **Stage 1 – Skills Needs Assessment** (an analysis of the drivers of demand within the sector and how this translates into current and future workforce development/skill needs)
- § **Stage 2 - Assessment of Current Provision** (the supply side assessment of the effectiveness of current workforce development activities in meeting the requirements identified through the skills needs assessment)
- § **Stage 3 - Gap Analysis** (bringing together the view of demand and the view of supply, this stage scopes the gaps between the two as the basis for agreeing priority areas for action, through the development of a range of scenarios)
- § **Stage 4 - Scope for Collaborative Action by Employers** (an assessment of what action employers can take to address the identified skills gaps and weaknesses)
- § **Stage 5 - Action Plan Costed Where Appropriate with Key Delivery Partners** (the final stage of the Agreement involving a range of partners ‘signing up’ to undertake joint, quantifiable actions to address the identified skills issues).

2.2.1 The timetable for development

The initial **timetable** for pathfinder SSAs in England ran from January to December 2004. The main project milestones, as outlined in the England Project Board Terms of Reference, are shown in the box below. It was anticipated that Stages 1 to 3, which can be considered the ‘intelligence phase’, would run from January until June 2004.

The period from July to December would focus on Stages 4 and 5 – the scoping of collaborative action and the final action plan.

In practice this initial timescale shifted somewhat, partly because of a late formal start (the pathfinders signed contracts to begin SSA development in earnest in April 2004) and partly because specific stages of the process became elongated. This is described more fully in Chapter 3.

Initial Milestones for the pathfinder SSAs (England)

The headline milestones for the SSA Project were to:

- To have signed off the policy specification, to be cleared with Ministers by the end of December 2003.
- To have signed off the policy for wider roll-out of Sector Skills Agreements, to be cleared with Ministers by February/March 2004.
- SSCs agreed and signed off with their employers their priorities and proposed action plan by June 2004.
- SSCs and partner agencies to have agreed initial solutions, collaborative action and implementation plan by August 2004.
- To have developed the first Sector Skills Agreements by the end of December 2004.⁵

Initial drafts of the research and analysis (in some cases Stage 1 and in other cases a compendium of Stages 1 to 3) appeared from June 2004, although these were typically 'works in progress', especially in terms of the assessment of current provision. Draft SSAs for all four pathfinders were published in December 2004. They provided an encapsulation of priority areas for the sector and some discussion of possible areas for collaboration with partners. The final SSAs for England, including Action Plans, were signed off by the SSCs around May-June 2005.⁶

2.3 Evaluating the Pathfinder Phase

The SSA pathfinder phase was critical in informing an understanding of the potential benefits of the Agreements, to identify good practice in developing them and to test the capacity of the skills infrastructure to deliver them successfully. It highlighted the practicability of developing Agreements that meet the needs of employers. It also provided an opportunity to demonstrate how well the main public sector funding, planning and delivery partners, as currently constituted, can operate in support of identified and prioritised employer needs.

⁵ Terms of Reference of the Sector Skills Agreement Project Board (England)

⁶ Final SSAs for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are to follow, but were not complete at the time of writing.

The pathfinder phase also offered a rigorous test of the capacity of the skills infrastructure, and to help better understand how to minimise the burden of SSAs (e.g. by staggering delivery of SSAs or prioritising). The pathfinder phase effectively provided an assessment of the flexibilities required to make the SSAs work.

On the employer side, the pathfinders could test the extent to which employers can genuinely collaborate (or network in the case of small and medium-sized enterprises) in their investment in skills. The pathfinder SSA process also provided an opportunity to look at 'preferred' approaches to collaboration, and to illustrate employer skills needs across all levels.

2.3.1 Evaluation objectives

The evaluation had the following objectives:

- § Assess the effectiveness of the pathfinder SSCs in carrying out an assessment of future skills needs by testing their successes in drawing upon labour market intelligence allied to qualitative research with relevant employers.
- § Assess the effectiveness of the pathfinder SSCs in terms of their assessment of current private and public education and skills provision.
- § Make recommendations about the ways in which the pathfinder SSAs can increase influence on education and skills provision within sectors.
- § Examine the extent to which the skills provision and barriers to participation have been re-shaped.
- § Assess the appropriateness of the resources made available by the SSDA.
- § Consider the appropriateness of the approaches adopted in the different UK countries and the English Regions.
- § Identify lessons to be learned and barriers to be overcome as SSAs are taken forward by the rest of the SSCs.

2.3.2 Methodology

The evaluation was based around a series of qualitative case studies tracking the progress of the four pathfinder SSCs. The case studies included interviews phased as appropriate with a range of key actors: SSC staff (both strategic and operational); contractors; stakeholders and partners; and employers across the UK.

The research involved on-going contact and interviews with many of the key players, such as the SSA leads within each of the pathfinder SSCs, in order to build a detailed picture of how the projects evolved. The case studies also included a review of the documentation produced throughout the development period.

Among the areas discussed within the case studies were:

- § **issues relating to the development of the SSA** (e.g. what was achievable within the timeframe; negotiation and collaboration between partners; dovetailing the SSA process with the forward planning requirements of key funders);

- § **reflections on the SSA process** (e.g. the five-stage process; understanding of the role, purpose and function of the SSA; complementarity with the work of other stakeholders);
- § **meeting the needs of the sector** (e.g. how the characteristics of the sector have impacted on the design of the SSA);
- § **quality of the process** (e.g. robustness of the skill needs assessment; appropriateness / adequacy of the picture of current provision);
- § **expectations** (e.g. anticipated added value from the SSA process; short-term and long-term expectations – and how these shifted over the course of the development process; the information requirement to inform judgement and decision making – i.e. what is a ‘fit for purpose’ assessment);
- § **key success factors and barriers to the SSA process** (relating to articulating the LMI evidence base; providing a coherent strategy; partnership developments; and employer involvement).

The evaluation was effectively split into two parts. The first part focused on the intelligence phase. It addressed the overall approaches followed by the various SSCs, as well as some of the important technical issues related to carrying out and presenting the skills needs assessment and the assessment of current provision. The main contact at this stage was with the SSCs themselves as well as some of the key partners who had been involved early on. Two workshops were also held: one with the SSA project leads, and one with the research leads within the pathfinder SSCs.

The second part of the evaluation focused on Stages 4 and 5 of the process. It concentrated on how the SSCs were able to move from the priorities defined in the research to tangible joint actions between employers and delivery partners. This involved wider consultation with stakeholders and partners, as well as employers (where available).

2.3.3 Methodological considerations

Among the key methodological considerations for the evaluation was a need to assess a continually evolving body of evidence, particularly in the form of a variety of consultation materials and iterations of the component stages of the SSA.

From an analytical perspective, it was also important to separate out some of the issues which were a function of the pathfinder phase itself (the newness of the process). This is discussed in Chapter 3.

The intensity of the process for SSCs, their employers and stakeholders also meant that it was challenging to achieve the required evaluation contacts in all cases. This was particularly the case in relation to employer contacts. Not all pathfinders could provide these within the evaluation timescale, although it is not clear the extent to which this was a timing issue or related to wider sensitivities (e.g. the fact that some SSCs were still firming up the precise involvement of some key employers up to and beyond the notional completion of the SSA). This does, however, limit the degree to which the SSA evidence could be triangulated with all the key actors.

2.3.4 This report

The remainder of this report covers the following main sections:

- § Chapter 3: Approaches to the SSA Process (approaches and development models used by the SSCs; management and resource issues).
- § Chapter 4: The Intelligence Phase (skills needs assessment; the assessment of current provision; gap analysis).
- § Chapter 5: The Agreement Phase (scoping collaborative action; the action plans; review of the final SSAs).
- § Chapter 6: Key Lessons in Producing the SSA.
- § Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations.

The report looks at the SSA process as it has taken place in England, Scotland and Wales and the degree to which that provides the basis for UK-wide action. It does not focus in detail on the SSA process in Northern Ireland, where the timescale for the process was considerably later than the other nations.

In Wales and Scotland, the process – though more advanced than in Northern Ireland – had not been completed by the time this evaluation concluded (i.e. final Agreements / Action Plans were still being developed). This means it is difficult to talk in substantive terms about the final outcomes in Wales and Scotland. However, draft material had been produced, so it is possible to draw out lessons from the SSCs and stakeholders in these nations. These are incorporated as relevant throughout this report.

3 APPROACHES TO THE SECTOR SKILLS AGREEMENT PROCESS

This section looks at the overall SSA process. It addresses the common approaches across the four pathfinders, as well as how they differed from each other. As such, it describes the main 'models' for SSA development. Other key process issues, such as management, logistics and planning are also discussed.

3.1 Pathfinder-specific Issues

It is important to separate out issues relating to the process itself and the specifics of the SSA pathfinder process as a development exercise. There were evident challenges faced which may not reflect weaknesses in the SSA as an overall process, but relate instead to the newness of the approach.

It is worth noting upfront that although the stages of the SSA process had been agreed in advance, the operational detail was to be fleshed out during the pathfinder phase. This gave the pathfinder process certain characteristics that are important to capture so as to understand how the SSA process evolved.

Critically, as these were the first SSAs, there was a lack of detail about what the whole process was working towards. The broad objectives were clear, but what that meant in terms of an actual Agreement had to be 'made real' through the pathfinder process itself. A key part of the pathfinder work has therefore been around **articulating what an SSA is**. This inevitably complicated the process, requiring SSCs, the SSSA and partners to work jointly towards an outcome that, beyond a broad template, had not been previously specified. A question that persisted from a range of actors involved in the process was 'what will the SSA actually look like?'

A similar pathfinder-specific challenge involved **getting partners on board with the SSA process**. Where the pathfinders have been working with specific agencies – particularly at the regional level – initial work was required to explain the role of the SSA. This was an inevitable part of communicating a new approach, but it put extra pressure on the pathfinders as 'trailblazers' for the SSA. The benefit for subsequent tranches of SSCs putting together their SSAs is that the pathfinders provide examples of potential joint actions that can make the process more meaningful to regional and national partners.

The staggered nature of the set-up of the SSA infrastructure across the nations also meant that much of the groundwork in terms of the skills needs assessment had been undertaken in England. This led to problems further down the line, particularly in Scotland, where the basis of much of the work was not deemed to effectively reflect the Scottish situation. The UK-wide coverage was always anticipated, but the problem for the pathfinders was that their **work plans in terms of research and consultation had been set before the protocols for the process in the nations had been agreed**. There are wider issues relating to the role of the SSA in the nations, and these are discussed in Chapter 5, but there was a lack of unity of expectation in this respect among the SSSA, the SSCs and partners.

There were other practical constraints for the pathfinders, which it would be hoped were learning points rather than essential parts of the process. **Information availability** was an issue, particularly in relation to the approach to the assessment of current provision. There were particular information and data feeds required, especially from the LSC, the Scottish Funding Councils and ELWa as the main holders of further education participant data.⁷ It was clear that protocols needed to be introduced for this to happen effectively, typically through the provision of more practical guidance for each of the nations (i.e. to understand what data was available, where it was available from, the time period required to compile it for specific sectors). This highlights how the newness of the process introduced specific barriers that made it more difficult to complete each constituent stage.

3.2 Overview of the Timetable for Development

As noted in the introductory chapter, the planned timetable for pathfinder development had milestones of June 2004 for the completion of Stages 1-3, and December 2004 for the completion of Stages 4 and 5. In practice, the SSAs were completed around May/June 2005⁸.

The original timetable was predicated on work beginning in early 2004. However, the pathfinders signed contracts to begin SSA development in earnest in April 2004. This provided an ambitious timetable for the completion of the early stages of the process by the end of June 2004.

With the exception of e-skills UK, which started the process later⁹, the pathfinders largely met the timetable of producing initial drafts of Stage 1 research around June 2004, although they continued to undertake substantive work on this material up to the end of the year when 'draft SSAs' were published. The Stage 2 assessments appeared later, typically around October 2004. It is difficult to pinpoint the start and completion of the Stage 3 gap analysis as this was the least distinct phase of the process, and did not lead to separate outputs.

The draft SSAs produced in December 2004 tended to include finalised research and priorities for action. In practice though, consultation with employers (translating the priorities into collaborative solutions) was still ongoing, so the 'shape' of the final messages was still shifting.

The draft SSAs did not include firm employer commitments in all cases. More significantly, there was little in the way of agreed initial solutions or an implementation plan with partners at this stage. Action plans with employers were originally expected in June 2004 and the implementation plan with partners was expected in August 2004. **The implementation plan with partners is perhaps the area in which SSA**

⁷ NB: The example of FE data is used as it was the most widely reported as an issue, although the similar points pertain to HE data

⁸ NB: All deadlines in the overview of the timetable for development refer to the action planning process in England. Final SSAs for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were still in development at the time of writing

⁹ It was agreed that e-skills UK would start three months later than the other pathfinders because of the capacity of the LSC to respond to requests for supply side information

development was most out-of-sync with the anticipated milestones for development.

While it took additional time to close down the intelligence phase, **the balance of effort overall seems to have been on the later agreement phase (Stages 4 and 5)**. This is a critical message for future SSCs undertaking the process. Moving from the intelligence base (the case being made) to putting the deals together required significant time and resources. This included a lot of senior SSC staff time to broker the deals. Given the large number of deals presented in the final Agreements and, significantly, the multitude of partners with which an SSC could attempt to broker a deal, the time-consuming nature of this phase is not surprising.

3.3 Logistics and Planning

There was a broad consensus among the pathfinders, key employers and partners that the five-stage SSA process represented a coherent model. The stages were not necessarily distinct in practice but they provided a rational way of conceptualising the process.

In practice, each stage tended to operate through multiple iterations driven by the consultation process and the way in which they were inter-linked. There were, therefore, areas of overlap between the stages rather than these being undertaken strictly sequentially.

Each pathfinder had to manage a balance between the need for pragmatism and ensuring that the integrity of each stage of the process was maintained.

There are two critical messages from the pathfinder experience in this regard:

- § **Laying the foundations for Stages 4 and 5:** Stages 4 and 5 have to be seen as operating as threads throughout the SSA process.
- § **Maintaining the integrity of the intelligence stages:** As a function of the above, there is pressure to by-pass the logic of undertaking Stages 1 to 3 sequentially, which can potentially neutralise the value of the assessment of current provision and weaken the gap analysis.

These two issues are discussed in more detail below.

3.3.1 *Laying the foundations for Stages 4 and 5*

It is critical to lay the foundations for Stages 4 and 5 early on in the process, both in order to give all partners a sense of what they are working towards and because, in the experience of the pathfinders, *'employers and partners take time to absorb the messages'*. This is crucial for putting the building blocks in place for a smooth transition to *'the deal'*. Significantly, even though the pathfinders showed an upfront awareness of the importance of laying these foundations, it did not necessarily mean that the deals were easily struck. This is partly a function of the delicate dialogue at the heart of the SSA, and partly a function of the multitude of deals the SSCs tried to make. Yet it seems also to have been partly a result of **a need for even more on-going negotiation with partners throughout the process**.

Involving employers throughout the process

The **pathfinders were generally stronger in terms of on-going engagement with employers than with stakeholders**. This may have reflected a concern that delivering meaningful employer commitment was one of the main imponderables initially (particularly where there was no proposed levy commitment). One of the pathfinders reported in this context that SSCs should run the five stages sequentially *'at their peril'*. A tactical response was to start testing priorities with employers and the 'what lies ahead' component of the Stage 1 analysis before, say, the research had been drafted. The aim was to create early buy-in and involvement on the part of employers. It was also about ensuring an on-going 'sense check' on the more quantitative evidence that was emerging. As such, this represented a sensible approach from the pathfinders.

The **pathfinders faced different challenges in terms of delivering the employer commitment**. The position of SEMTA and e-skills UK was distinct from that of Skillset and ConstructionSkills as for the latter the SSA start point included either progress towards agreeing a substantial employer financial commitment or a levy. It is also important to recognise that the pathfinders represent some of the more-established SSCs, typically with a long history and a relatively strong research presence. It was felt that any SSC's ability to 'jump start' the process by undertaking early testing would be a function of how well it knows the sector, and the quality of the information base and networks it starts with.

Involving partners throughout the process

Partners tended to be directly involved later in the process, effectively to respond to the case being made in the Stage 1 to 3 analysis or even at the point where potential joint actions had been drafted. There may have been a degree of upfront contact with these partners to raise awareness about the process, or to ascertain a conceptual commitment on joint working (the letters of commitment provided by the DTI and CBI among others, for example), but effective dialogue came much later. This was not the case for all partners, and where the regional dimension was emphasised, there was greater on-going dialogue with partners at that level during the process.

This model of partner involvement is to some degree inherent in the five-stage process: partners need a case to be made on paper before tangible actions can be bottomed out. However, the on-going dialogue with employers undertaken in parallel to the research, which was rightly seen as a pre-requisite for collaborative action, could have been mirrored with partners to *'test the waters'* in terms joint actions. Many of the main partners were formally involved in the process through the various Project Boards and the Skills Strategy infrastructure, but the lesson is that **more focused interaction with specific SSCs is also required by some organisations**.

The twin dangers for SSCs in not adequately involving partners throughout the process are that:

- § A **latent agreement to collaborate is more difficult to translate into meaningful action**. Some partners clearly did not understand – or actively buy in to – what would be expected of them in terms of joint action. There is a need to get beyond a tacit acknowledgement that partners 'support the process' to provide on-going dialogue about what that support is likely to look like on the

basis of the early evidence and some of the 'blue sky thinking' that initially shapes each of the SSAs.

- § There is potential for SSCs to progress relatively far down the road of SSA development without **addressing fundamental concerns or potential deal breakers at an early enough stage**. Partners are effectively lost to the process. This is most clearly shown in terms of pathfinder engagement with partners in Scotland. There were specific issues in relation to the process in Scotland that related to ownership and the position of the SSA, which highlights again the importance of early and on-going dialogue from both the SSCs and the SSDA to keep the SSAs on track. Another benefit of engaging with partners early on (i.e. before the initial cut of the skills needs assessment research has been undertaken) is that they can usefully help to shape the focus of the research i.e. what do they, the partners, need to know in order to inform change/action.

There were some exceptions in terms of on-going engagement with partners. The LSC, for example, was actively involved throughout. Not only was it part of the project team overseeing the process, but it also worked to ensure that it had systems in place **corporately to respond** to the likely SSA feeds from all of the pathfinders.

For other partners, a systematic response was more difficult. In the case of the TUC, for example, there was groundwork required in terms of defining which trade unions should engage with which SSCs and, more fundamentally, ensuring buy-in to the overall aims of the process (i.e. that actions to improve productivity would not have a negative impact on the workforce). Here, the pathfinder process may pay dividends for future SSCs.

3.3.2 ***Maintaining the integrity of the intelligence stages***

The need to move to substantive discussions with employers and partners put time pressure on the pathfinders to complete the skills needs assessment, the assessment of current provision and, to a lesser extent, the gap analysis. Both the scale of the research required (for Stages 1 and 2) and the complexity of the analysis created difficulties in terms of providing the intelligence feed into the negotiation phase of the SSA.

Where an SSC has a strong grasp of the key drivers underpinning the sector, **it is sensible to begin testing and refining possible messages while additional primary and secondary research is on-going**. This helps to give employers ownership over the messages. However, for the pathfinders it meant that discussions about priorities for action effectively predated the completion of the research.

Even within the theoretical model for SSA development, it was always anticipated that the SSCs would undertake a 'sense check' on the emerging evidence with stakeholders. As noted, in practice this took place with employers first and foremost.

The risk here is that the integrity of the evidence base for the SSA is lost, because formative discussions do not take place on the basis of the fullest analysis. However, SSCs can mitigate this risk by managing the SSA as an iterative process – something the pathfinders largely did. The pathfinders had to be sensitive and responsive to the fact that findings may emerge that challenge employer (and

partner) perceptions or indicate different emerging priority areas. The way in which the pathfinders successfully managed this process was through clear planning and ‘document management’. The early iterations of evidence were presented in the form of consultation materials and there was an explicit focus on working towards a small number of ultimate priority areas. The evidence was therefore used actively during consultation to inform a dialogue about what those priorities should be and, indeed, whether the evidence fitted on-the-ground employer experience.

A significant challenge with this iterative approach to the intelligence phase is where the Stage 2 assessment of current provision fits in. Stages 1 and 3 are the most closely aligned in terms of parallel development – both of which have a forecasting and scenario-building component. However, Stage 2 can act as a break on the process because it feeds in to the gap analysis (or, at least, it *should* feed into the gap analysis).

What happened in practice was that a number of the pathfinders firmed up their priorities before the assessment of provision had been fed in. This was partly a function of timing and partly the apparent difficulty in executing Stage 2. It meant that priorities were, in some cases, being set without full reference to the evidence base in terms of supply. At the same time, it also meant that the SSA process was not necessarily fully addressing the root of the ‘blockages’ in terms of supply. There was a focus on what should be the supply side priorities (in terms of skills needs, training content and delivery), but this was not set against an in-depth picture of the current ‘state of play’.

3.4 SSA Development Models

There were distinct models for SSA development across the four pathfinders. As noted above, all of the pathfinders approached the five stages more in parallel than consecutively. The other main area of commonality was the inclusion of systematic employer consultation workshops at national and regional level.

The key distinguishing characteristics were in terms of:

- § overall SSA coverage;
- § whether new primary research was undertaken;
- § the degree to which the process was undertaken in-house or externally;
- § and whether the employer commitment is based around groups of employers (‘macro deals’) or around individual employers signing up to act (‘micro deals’).

The table below shows how each of the pathfinders approached the process. The implications of each distinguishing characteristic is discussed below.

Table 3.4: Approaches to the SSA process

	Skillset	Const'Skills	SEMTA	e-skills UK
Core common elements				
Stages largely undertaken in parallel?	U	U	U	U
National/regional employer workshops?	U	U	U	U
Structural factors				
Sub-sectoral approach to SSA?	U	x	U	U
Sector-level employer commitment?	U	U	x	x
Operational factors				
Large-scale new primary research?	U	x	x	U
Significant external resources used?	U	x	x	U

3.4.1**Structural factors****SSA coverage**

The pathfinder experience highlights a number of possible approaches to covering the sector footprint. ConstructionSkills developed a single SSA with comprehensive sector coverage, while the other three pathfinders either undertook a single process covering part of the footprint (e-skills UK) or multiple processes covering sub-sectors (SEMTA and Skillset).

There are a series of key questions that need to be addressed in order to determine the scope of the SSAs:

1) Will the SSA ultimately provide comprehensive coverage of the sector footprint or will only partial coverage be provided?

There was a case made by at least one of the SSCs that the overall aims of the SSA process meant that the scope may not necessarily be comprehensive (in SSC footprint terms), but rather it should focus on the parts of the sector of greatest strategic importance. This raises a question in terms of what the role of an SSC should be. It is difficult to see how an SSC could be said to be the employer voice for parts of the sector where an SSA is not planned. Indeed, there was some evidence that employers from parts of the footprints not initially covered by the pathfinders wanted to know how and when they would get their SSAs. The overall Skills for Business proposition also implies that the SSC footprints taken as a whole are strategic sectors. Some SSCs may, however, hold the view that a part of their footprint forms a strategic sector in its own right.

2) If the SSA is comprehensive, will it be undertaken as a single process for the sector or a series of processes at sub-sectoral level?

The degree to which the SSA is tackled on a sub-sectoral basis seems to be a function of the scale and structure of each SSC (i.e. the number of self-defined sub-sectors covered and existing operational/governance structures). The case for a sub-sectoral approach is based around relevance and functionality. As employers are key drivers in the process, it is important that the change drivers and scenario building being discussed are meaningful and relevant to them. Focusing on specific sub-sectors

enables the SSCs to be more coherent and concrete in terms of the challenges facing groups of employers and to get greater specificity of and buy-in to solutions.

3) If a series of sub-sectoral processes are followed, will these be undertaken in parallel or in stages?

Approaching the SSA sub-sectorally effectively multiplies the work required to develop the Agreement. There may be some economies of scale, but these are outweighed by the additional volume of research and having to effectively undertake multiple processes. There are also potential implications in terms of engaging with partner processes, multiplying the number of feeds that each partner has to respond to. **This was a manageable task while only four SSCs were undertaking the process, but is unlikely to be as feasible as subsequent tranches progress.**

None of the three pathfinders taking the sub-sectoral approach tackled all their sub-sectors during the pathfinder phase:

- § e-skills UK covered one of the three broad areas within its footprint, focusing on IT rather than telecommunications or contact centres (although it did include its cross-sectoral focus on IT User skills). Given the differences between the component parts of the footprint in terms of the likely drivers of change and associated skills issues, this was a logical approach.
- § Skillset covered three out of its nine sub-sectors: TV; film; and interactive media.
- § SEMTA covered five out of its 12 sub-sectors: automotive; electronics; bioscience; aerospace; and marine sectors (note that the marine sub-sectoral SSA has been financed separately through the Treasury).

Partial coverage of the footprint in this way raises questions in terms of how to resource coverage of the remaining sub-sectors. The pathfinders are committed to covering the other parts of their footprint – although the timing of this is to be confirmed.

4) If a series of sub-sectoral processes will run in stages, how will different parts of the footprint be prioritised?

In terms of choosing priority sub-sectors, Skillset took a tactical approach, focusing initially on the sub-sectors where it had the greatest leverage. Hence, the prioritisation of the TV sector, where the co-regulatory framework between OFCOM and the SSC gives a clear framework for skills development, and of the film sector, where discussions were taking place with employers about introducing a voluntary levy.

SEMTA focused on the areas where there were already DTI IGTs in place, which gave it a head start in terms of scenario building, particularly given an overlap between the key employers involved in both SEMTA's Sector Strategy Groups and the DTI work.

The critical question for the Skills for Business network is to what degree can the sub-sector approaches be aggregated to sector level? **Where a sub-sectoral approach is undertaken, the SSC has a responsibility to draw together the priorities for action from each sub-sector** in order to present a coherent and manageable 'wish list' to education and training partners. At the point of the final action plan, Skillset had

drawn together its three strategies (for TV, film and interactive media) into one action plan, while SEMTA had to some extent also done so (bringing the automotive, aerospace and electronics sectors into one action plan).

One of the key difficulties in pulling various sub-sectoral processes together into a single strategy is that it can serve to challenge employer ownership over the process. The SSC has a delicate role in negotiating that particular process – which is ultimately critical for producing a meaningful action plan. This also implies that each sub-sector is broadly working in parallel in the development of the SSA, which was largely the case for the pathfinders. SEMTA, for example, could read across the work of the Sector Strategy Groups to produce four high-level priorities that were relevant more corporately (e.g. the integration of bite-sized, just in time training with programmes delivered in the workplace). However, even these broad areas were not relevant for the bioscience sector, where the distinctiveness of the issues faced was such that an overall action plan was deemed unworkable. The evidence is that **no matter how nimble an SSC is, there will be cases where a single strategy is not appropriate.**

A sub-sectoral approach should not necessarily be followed for each Stage of the SSA process. **There is a case for Stage 2, in particular, being undertaken as a single task for the sector (although disaggregated to sub-sectors where possible).** This is a result of the level and quality of the information available. Skillset covered all of its nine sub-sectors in its Stage 2 report. SEMTA, while aiming to ultimately produce 12 strategies, has undertaken a single Stage 2 across the sector. Conversely, e-skills UK undertook partial coverage of its footprint¹⁰ for the entire SSA process.

Group or individual employer commitments

The employer commitment within the SSA takes a number of forms. The nature of the commitments themselves are discussed in Chapter 5 but, in terms of overall approach, **it is possible to distinguish between Agreements primarily based around groups of employers and those to which specific employers have signed up.** The distinction is slightly artificial, but it is an important one to note because the employer commitment is at the core of the SSA.

The SEMTA SSA, for example, is predicated in the first instance on commitments made by the employer members of its Sector Strategy Groups. These groups tend to represent the major employers. As part of the SSA development process, the Sector Strategy Groups are a mechanism for delivering the employer commitment, but it is basically a series of individual employers that have 'signed up' to act. Some of the Skillset commitments resulted from a similar approach.

The e-skills UK SSA provides an even clearer picture of the individual employer approach. It identifies the broad type of employer contribution with named employers and illustrates examples of what that contribution will be. This is a potentially powerful way of articulating the employer commitment to 'the deal', although it is ultimately a series of 'micro deals'.

For ConstructionSkills and Skillset, the employer commitment can also be articulated in terms of industry 'groups'. In the case of ConstructionSkills, the Major Contractors

¹⁰ Note that e-skills UK also included a cross-sectoral component to its SSA focusing on IT user skills

Group, the National Federation of Builders, and the House Builders Federation are included as the main contributors to the employer action plan, alongside institutions such as RIBA and RICS. Skillset's employer commitments are also referenced through industry groups in the film and TV sectors. Significantly, these are the two SSCs in which there is some kind of levy commitment underpinning the SSA, so that 'macro deals' are possible.

3.4.2 **Operational factors**

Undertaking new primary research

The pathfinder SSCs varied in terms of whether they used existing LMI (both SSC-produced and secondary sources) or new primary research as the main quantitative evidence base for the skills needs assessment and the assessment of current provision (Stages 1 and 2). The **approach selected was largely a function of the existing LMI base and the currency of information held by the SSC.**

This meant that there were significant differences in terms of the main costs of SSA development. For some pathfinders, undertaking large-scale primary research was the main resource cost, while for others the more qualitative employer engagement process was the main cost.

It is recommended that SSCs make full use of existing information sources, and develop new primary research (qualitative and quantitative) specifically to fill key information gaps. They should also use the research process as a tool to engage and involve employers.

Using external resources

External resources were typically used by the pathfinders for Stages 1 and 2. The degree to which the pathfinders made use of external consultancy in drawing together the early stages of the SSA varied. The SSCs with largest existing research capacity, SEMTA and ConstructionSkills, made less use of external consultancy. Skillset and e-skills UK, on the other hand, both undertook large-scale employer surveys as part of Stages 1 and 2. All of the pathfinders drew on external experts to undertake econometric forecasting.

There were however, other areas in which external support was engaged for discrete aspects of the SSA work:

- § SEMTA resourced a piece of work benchmarking National Employers Skills Survey data at sub-sector level in England.
- § ConstructionSkills brought in a project manager and set up a reference group of experts. This helped the SSC further build its knowledge and profile as the repository of sector information.
- § e-skills UK used a portfolio of external experts in drawing up its *IT Insights: Trends and UK Skills Implications* document. It used separate experts in terms of: forecasting; an employer survey; and, uniquely, to focus specifically on the strategic level.
- § Skillset also used contractors to co-ordinate the research inputs and to act as 'import authors' on several of the sub-sector and regional strategies. These worked closely and collaboratively with Skillset's own staff and, **importantly,**

the process of bringing research findings into the employer domain was largely facilitated by SSC staff.

3.5 Management and Resource Issues

The intelligence phase of the SSA is demanding. Broad indications were provided in terms of the number of days required to undertake each of the early stages of the process (e.g. at least 150 person days for each of Stages 1 and 2; 40 person days for the preparation of the gap analysis). Some of the pathfinders reported over-running those estimates and, given the vast scale of the task, this is not particularly surprising.

The additional preparatory work in being a pathfinder also made the process more resource-intensive than it would normally be. There was an additional need for meetings, briefing and learning, as well as more revision of research material than may be expected for future SSCs undertaking the SSA process.

Each of the Pathfinders was originally allocated £500,000 by the SSDA to fund the development of their SSA. Further additional funding is now promised by the Scottish Executive to enhance the SSA research process in Scotland. What is most interesting from the pathfinder experience in resource terms is that **the SSCs seemed to use the funding quite differently, depending on whether significant new research was commissioned externally** (as in the case of e-skills UK and Skillset). Where the existing LMI was relied upon, it may have been anticipated that the production of the SSA would be a much less costly exercise. This was not, however, the case. Instead the project expanded in other directions. For example, SEMTA effectively undertook multiple SSA processes (although it did so largely in-house, so the significant cost was in terms of substituting its planned research programme). This SSC also used significant amounts of funding to undertake in-depth employer consultation. Such a process adds credibility to the SSA process, although it is difficult to translate into a tangible employer commitment.

However it was spent, **much of the resource input was front-loaded into the intelligence phase**. What was unanticipated among the pathfinders the significant allocation of resources (time) of senior staff (including the CEO) required in putting Stages 4 and 5 together. **A point made throughout the development phase was the degree to which the SSA process was seen to ‘consume’ the entire SSC organisation.**

3.5.1 SSC management of the process

The pathfinders show a number of different approaches to managing the SSA process:

- § **Using external support to manage the process:** ConstructionSkills used an external project manager to draw together the various parts of the research being undertaken in stages 1 to 3 (*‘We felt it was important to have a “fresh set of eyes” to look at the research, draw it together and ensure it was understandable and consistent’*). The issue with this approach is that it devolves important responsibility externally.
- § **Managing multiple SSAs in-house:** SEMTA managed the process internally for multiple sub-sectoral SSAs by appointing a UK Operations Director with overall responsibility for the project and a lead Director was also appointed for each stage of the project.

- § **Division of labour:** e-skills UK operated a classic project management model. It had a lead on the SSA overview, a lead on the research (including liaison with the LSC and SSDA research team), and a lead on developing the action plan. It also had separate leads on regional consultations with employers and for stakeholders. The Chief Executive also led on external links. The project was co-ordinated and managed through the use of project planning tools, regular updates from leads and project team meetings.
- § **Including the English regional perspective:** Skillsset had an overall SSA lead augmented by leads for each of the three sub-sectors it produced strategies for. There were also leads on each of its regional strategies, who were steered from the centre but devolved significant autonomy to work up action plans for each of the key regions.
- § **Covering the UK nations:** Each of the pathfinders also had a lead individual in Scotland and Wales.

The UK-wide management of the SSA process emerged as a major issue in the pathfinder process. The SSCs lacked the capacity, and in some cases the expertise, to effectively engage in all of the nations. There has been a question of presence, both at network level and at the level of SSCs within some of the nations. This is partly a development issue. The SSA process started for the pathfinders while the network's spatial infrastructure was still being developed.

There is a more fundamental point here about how much SSC managers within the nations can do to effectively carry the process, given its scale and diversity (e.g. from handling data, to undertaking strategic policy dialogue). **The obvious solution is for each SSC to contribute more senior-level resources to the process in the nations, although there may be questions in terms of how viable this is given the scale/complexity of the wider SSA process.** Over time this should form part of a selective approach to policy influence relevant to each sector.

3.5.2 **The SSDA role in managing the process**

The SSDA has had a key role in:

- § developing the initial guidance for the SSA process (Stages 1 to 3 at least)
- § co-ordinating the ongoing Project Boards and Project Teams which have managed the process at the level of each of the nations
- § providing feedback to the SSCs on component parts of the SSA
- § day-to-day support for the pathfinders.

Providing guidance

The provision of guidance as part of the SSA was difficult given the organic nature in which the process evolved over time. Guidance was provided by the SSDA for each of Stages 1 to 3. One of the main points of confusion among SSCs and some partners was why guidance was only provided for Stages 1-3 of the process. The approach was understandable given the fundamentally different nature of Stages 4 and 5, but it served to reduce clarity about how the SSA process would work in practice. In effect, an early sample 'SSA template' provided the main upfront articulation of the SSA end-point.

Across the board, the guidance for Stage 1 was felt to be a useful tool. **There were, however, a number of weaknesses with the guidance for Stage 2.** First, it was obvious early on that additional guidance would be required to contextualise the process within each of the nations. At its most basic level, this needed to provide an outline of the different sources of data available. Second, it was also clear that the pathfinders had already embarked on the Stage 2 process before they received the guidance. However, the main weakness with the Stage 2 guidance was the way in which it encouraged the SSCs to follow a difficult and comprehensive mapping exercise, rather than focusing in on specific issues for the sector to add further insight about *what* the supply issues were. The Stage 3 guidance was felt to be broadly sensible, although it bore little relation to SSA development in practice because gap analysis was not treated as a discrete exercise.

Co-ordinating the Project Boards

The Project Boards were essential for providing a formal basis for the involvement of a wide range of key partners. All of the main actors were represented through these forums, which was arguably the best mechanism for ensuring stakeholder involvement. The different phasing of the Project Boards in each of the nations meant that each were facing different issues – those in Scotland and Wales were engaged in taking ownership of a process that was already partly underway.

The SSDA had a challenging task in ensuring coherence across each of the Boards. The task would undoubtedly have been easier if each Board had started at the same time. However, there were fundamentally different interests at play, which meant that the Project Boards, particularly in Scotland, provided a strong challenge to how the process evolved. It is, according to a cross-section of participants, testament to the credibility of the SSDA staff in place that the process remained intact at particular pressure points. There was a need for more high-level dialogue from both sides before the process started to ensure that there was common understanding. As one stakeholder noted on reflection, *'we didn't realise what we'd signed up to (at the time)'*.

The corollary of having a fairly comprehensive infrastructure to manage the SSA development process was the additional pressure it placed on the pathfinders (and key staff within those SSCs) to attend meetings. This was one area where the 'stretch' in SSC resources around the negotiation and management of the SSA was evident. As the SSA process becomes more established, this requirement should become less resource-intensive for subsequent tranches of SSCs, although it is likely to remain a significant management pressure.

Day-to-day support

The day-to-day support for SSCs on an individual level seems to have been a particular strength. The view from SSCs was uniformly positive in terms of the facilitation from those leading on the SSA pathfinders at the SSDA end. Practically speaking, the process seems to have been undertaken in a spirit of partnership, which is important for the Skills for Business network. There is less clarity about what involvement SSDA should formally have in the process. For example, a recommendation from at least one SSC was that SSDA should play a greater role in brokering some of the key relationships in order to lever change.

Formal feedback

More formally, the SSDA was involved in co-ordinating the responses from partners to the draft SSAs. It also provided critical responses on early drafts of the research output. While the skills needs assessment and the assessment of current provision are owned by the SSCs, it is important that SSDA plays this role in questioning the research findings and focusing on areas of weakness. **It is in the interests of the Skills for Business network as a whole that the research – across the board – meets a minimum standard of robustness, analysis and credibility. Assuming that SSCs take the input constructively there should be no need for the SSDA to muddy the ownership issue by ‘signing off’ the research.**

Overall, there was a lack of clarity about some aspects of the process (the format and some of the key requirements of the SSA) which made the SSCs’ job more challenging. A degree of guidance was provided by the SSDA, but the pathfinder SSAs were exploratory for both SSDA and the SSCs. This was, therefore, a sensible approach to a new process.

3.6 Summary of Key Findings

The pathfinders and their partners faced challenges in articulating and reaching a consensus on what defined a SSA. Partly as a result, the process extended beyond 12 months. The intelligence phase was elongated, but this is an inevitable risk given the ambitious scale of Stages 1 and 2. More significantly, translating key priorities into a workable action plan required more on-going dialogue with partners throughout the process than was originally anticipated.

The five-stage model is broadly coherent, although the way in which the stages are inter-linked carries some risk (especially in terms of ensuring that the Stage 2 assessment of current provision is effectively fed in to the analysis).

Different SSA models were used by the pathfinders. Key differences related to: the scope of the project (whether a sectoral or sub-sectoral approach was taken); whether large-scale, new primary research was undertaken; and whether significant external resources were used. There were also differences in how the employer commitment was structured – either primarily through industry groups or through individual employers ‘signing up’.

As a result of the different SSA models, the allocation of resources varied considerably across the pathfinders. Although the funding provided by the SSDA is an adequate contribution, the challenge for SSCs – which relates to their capacity – is whether enough senior resources can be levered in over a long enough period of time to deliver the deals.

4 THE INTELLIGENCE PHASE

The initial stages of the SSA provide the bedrock to the process. They are the evidence base and foundation to the Agreement itself. The assessments of demand, supply, and the analysis of the gaps between the two need therefore to provide a robust and logical case for action. This section looks at each of the component stages in turn: the Stage 1 skills needs assessment; the Stage 2 assessment of current provision; and the Stage 3 gap analysis.

4.1 Stage 1 – Skills Needs Assessment

The skills needs assessment underpins the SSA process. The credibility of the final agreement is dependent on the strength of this initial analysis, which in essence provides the basis for action. The evidence from the pathfinders is that while **the messages are not in themselves profoundly new compared to the previous labour market assessments produced by SSCs, it has provided a wholly new approach to LMI and research** as a process for the SSCs – *‘the report is not the output, it’s the start point’*.

The pathfinder skills needs assessments essentially provide the narrative evidence base for making a case. They provide increased depth and foresight of knowledge rather than ‘new’ insights.

The distinctive characteristics of the skills needs assessment research can be outlined as follows:

- § It is based around **greater dialogue within the SSC organisation** – because the SSA is research ‘to make a case’ rather than ‘pure’ research in itself.
- § An important aspect of ‘making the case’ is that **employers are directly involved** in scoping and shaping the findings.
- § A crucial distinction with the skills needs assessment is that what emerges for employers is **the picture of the sector according to the sector itself** rather than according to the SSC (as it has been in the past). Done effectively, this both adds credibility to overall messages emerging and ties employers into delivering the agreed priorities. **It does, however, require skill from the SSC in terms of managing a highly reflexive process of drawing together research, data and direct employer consultation in parallel.**

One of the key messages for future tranches of SSCs undertaking the SSA process, is not to underestimate the degree to which the SSA research stages go on to shape future SSC actions and business planning corporately. The important point for SSCs is to ensure that the SSA remains focused on of the key priorities for change rather than attempting to become a comprehensive presentation of all SSC activity (i.e. effectively mirroring the SSC business plan).

It has emerged from the pathfinder phase that the issue of **what constitutes evidence** is not necessarily the same for all partners. Some key partners have engaged with the SSCs and requested *‘blue sky thinking’*, while others have emphasised the need for a

quantitative statistically robust approach. The SSA needs to be flexible enough to do both. The fact that the Stage 1 output has evolved into distinct materials for presentational purposes helps here.

4.1.1 **Skills needs assessment structure and content**

The SSSA guidance proposes that the skills needs assessment be structured around sections looking at: what drives skill demand; current skills needs; what lies ahead; and geography. These areas were broadly covered by the pathfinders. The section on geography, where it is covered distinctively, tends to be in the form of distinct action plans for each of the nations (although the ConstructionSkills Agreement attempts to provide UK-wide coverage within a single action plan). Both e-skills UK and Skillset provide further regional coverage in the form regional analyses reports or, in the case of Skillset, nine regional strategies.

As the initial focus for the pathfinder SSCs was on England, this led to challenges in terms of widening the scope of the skills needs assessments to a UK-wide focus. For the most part, employers in the other countries of the UK were included as a matter of course in the research and consultation exercises undertaken by the pathfinders. **However, all of the pathfinders had to revisit some of their early stage research to reflect the infrastructure in the different UK countries. This too has had resource implications.**

In terms of **added value**, some of the areas identified as gaps in previous SSC research remain (for example, inconsistent depth of coverage across all part of the footprint). More recent data is used where available but this tends not to alter the assessment. The skills needs assessments are generally less descriptive than previous LMI assessments, such as those put together as part of the SSC licensing process. **Rather than providing a new raft of evidence, they tend to offer a deeper analysis of what was already known.** The volume of the evidence base is roughly similar, but it has been better used, often providing a more dynamic picture. It gives a clearer sense of context and direction of travel, which makes the LMI more meaningful.

Across the board, the **key drivers** outlined in the skills needs assessment material all provide strong, focused encapsulations of the issues facing the various sectors. In some cases these are effectively prioritised. There is variation in the degree to which the global / international perspective has been addressed. The government agenda (in terms of specific policy developments) is also sometimes underplayed where it might be considered relevant.

There are aspects of the pathfinder assessments of **current demand** that do not tally with other national sources. This is an area that still requires further elaboration, because the divergence may be a function of how specific research is framed. Two employer surveys may cover the same ground (e.g. priority skills or skills shortages) yet be interpreted differently as a result of how specific questions are framed.

It is not always clear how the qualitative work with employers has fed into the development of the **'what lies ahead'** component, although the final Agreements provide a comprehensive outline of all the actors consulted (which at least provides a strong case of the 'effort' undertaken as part of the process). However, it is this component that has largely driven the SSA process. The futures work *'excited*

employers' – and was a key driver for intensive engagement. What is clear from the final Agreements is that this is not in itself enough to translate into substantive joint action. The more substantial parts of the employer commitment (as outlined in the following section) tend to have had their roots in place before the SSA process was undertaken.

4.1.2 **Use of Stage 1 Sources**

The strength of the skills needs assessment case is predicated on the SSCs using a valid and robust evidence base, and making use of a range of timely, comparable sources. Amongst the pathfinders, the SSCs' own research and sector sources were given much greater prominence than the national data sources/academic research listed in the SSDA guidance, but a high quality analysis requires the use of both.

In terms of **SSC quantitative data**, the new primary research undertaken provides a very solid basis for analysis. It provides adequate samples for generalisation and for a degree of disaggregation in terms of sub-sectors, nations (Northern Ireland excepted) and regions. For those SSCs relying on existing primary research, the key issue is one of **timeliness**. The conclusions here are two-fold:

- § The acceptable basis for sector research in terms of timeliness should be considered at network level (and with key partners) so that protocols can be agreed.
- § Acquiring annual current data is likely to put a significant resource strain on SSCs. It should in most cases be justifiably acceptable to use two-year old quantitative data where it has been enriched by timely employer consultation.

While the sector trends and current needs have to be based on quantitative data, the Skills for Business network should avoid an overly mechanistic approach. The strength and richness of the message is likely to emerge from **qualitative employer consultations**. Where these are used, it is important that the SSCs make reference to how representative this view is of the employer base.

The main areas in which the **secondary sources** have been used are:

- § **Headline figures** used selectively to add credibility to SSC-own data. The National Employers Skills Survey in England was used more often than other sources. What is missing is an explicit explanation of why one national source is preferred to another. This makes it difficult for the supply side to have full confidence in the information and to engage fully with the case being made.
- § **Scenario planning sources** (for Stages 1 and 3), which were felt to be very useful preparatory materials for qualitative employer consultations. While the pathfinder SSCs tend to have their own econometric forecasting models, what has been notable about the SSA scenario planning is that the pathfinders have used a variety of feeds.
- § There was also across-the-board use of **competitiveness indicators** (e.g. the DTI Productivity and Competitiveness Indicators), which shows the skills case being closely articulated in terms of productivity drivers.

There is a need to **better balance employer or SSC-owned material and other sources (e.g. government, academic)**. All are required to make a compelling case. It

is important that the approach is comprehensive in order to provide meaningful entry points for people outside of the sector to engage with the case being made. Even if there are issues relating to sector definition or approach, greater reference to a range of secondary sources would strengthen the analysis, although SSCs may wish to qualify the use of some sources.

4.2 Stage 2 – Assessment of Current Provision

The assessment of current provision gives the context for how the SSA will meet the skills needs identified in Stage 1. This is a question of both quantity and quality of provision. As with the skills needs assessment component, the assessment of current provision needs to offer up credible, robust evidence to support the proposals for action identified in later stages.

The SSA will work only insofar as it can understand provision and reshape it to fit each sector's skills needs as identified in the first stage of the process. Understanding provision means identifying: who delivers; where, what and how much they deliver; and then making an assessment of the effectiveness of provision in meeting employer needs now and for the future.

Stage 2 is therefore a potentially complicated task. It was the weakest component to the pathfinder analysis. The real challenge for the pathfinders in terms of Stage 2 was the identification of evidenced gaps and quality issues on the supply side. There was an imbalance in detailed coverage between the skills needs assessment and the supply-side analysis, although the two elements are not necessarily presented separately.

4.2.1 Barriers to an assessment of provision

The imbalance in quality between the skills needs assessment and the assessment of provision appears to be the result of several factors. These relate to both the approaches chosen for Stage 2 and the context within which the process was undertaken.

First, there was a lack of targeted analysis. The initial guidance for Stage 2 outlined a requirement to map and quantify various types of provision (public; private; informal) and to make a quality assessment. This is too ambitious a task to be undertaken comprehensively, certainly within the scope of the SSA. It is not necessarily practical to attempt to map all skills and qualifications relating to a sector. **Instead, the focus should be on key occupational areas and skills that are the most important within the sector both now and in the future.** It is therefore critical that the assessment of provision **builds on the Stage 1 findings.** This did not happen with the pathfinders.

There were also issues relating to data access, comparability and how fit for purpose the existing sources were:

- § **Data access** issues included information gaps in the assessment of public provision. For example, quantifying provision at sector level was not always easy. There was also a lack of existing evidence base in terms of private provision. This was both a barrier to the development of the Stage 2 assessment, but an area in which the SSA could potentially add value.

- § The **comparability** issue stemmed from the fact that sources such as the National Skills Surveys ask employers slightly different questions. The secondary data therefore has to be treated separately at the level of each of the nations. It is important that SSCs reflect the data in each of the nations, although the sample sizes at sector level – particularly outside England – are typically quite small. The SSC research teams also seemed to be less familiar with the data sources in Wales and Scotland than those in England.
- § More fundamentally, there were question marks about how **fit for purpose** some of the main existing sources were. In terms of HE statistics for example, the HESA figures only outline what an individual is doing six months after Graduation. The main source of FE data in England – the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) – is primarily an administrative tool to manage funding and cannot be easily manipulated to provide analysis at sector level. The ILR database requires SSCs to map relevant courses/qualifications against the footprint – which is a potentially large task, although arguably a core one and a task with longer-term value. Not all of the pathfinders even attempted to use the ILR data. One SSC relied on its own database of employer-recommended courses.

4.2.2 **Framing the supply-side analysis**

The **SSCs also lacked an analytical framework to guide and shape the focus of Stage 2**. There are distinct aspects to supply that are discussed by pathfinders and partners in the context of Stage 2 that could become conflated and which need to be unpicked in order to provide a meaningful assessment. Stage 1 sets out skills needs/demand and gaps. Stage 2 sets out current supply. Where there is a mis-match between the two, there is then a need for a sophisticated analysis to understand where the solutions lie.

For example, a gap in skills supply does not mean there is a *commercial opportunity* for the training sector to fill. **A difference needs to be drawn between improvements to skills supply that employers expect to recruit-in through the labour market; versus improvements to skills supply they are willing to pay for through a training market**, i.e. investment in additional training of current staff. These are two entirely different dimensions of the analysis of supply.

The two components are not necessarily congruent, and unless both aspects are addressed, it is possible that a dialogue may take place ‘at cross purposes’ and the solutions proposed may not be appropriate. For example, from the LSC perspective, there is a dual motivation in terms of both having a funding budget to discharge on the one hand (and demanding evidence to drive its effective distribution) and wanting employers to invest in and purchase additional provision on the other.

Stage 1 should generate questions and issues for the Stage 2 analysis to explore and explain. Each of these questions, issues and projections will have implications for provision: the qualifications, modes of delivery and types of learning and these should provide the basis for the Stage 2 assessment. When the analysis of provision, qualifications and progression is complete for the critical skills areas, an assessment can be made whether issues relating to skills supply are either:

- § funding issues (i.e. where levels of provision/investment public and/or private do not match need, nationally or regionally);

- § or development issues (i.e. there is inadequate provision in relation to particular skills needs that requires course or qualification development or other innovation).

The analysis of provision for the SSA should include a high level presentation of the skills supply infrastructure, but the detail should focus on those actors, relationships or components that address the priority skill needs and issues identified in Stage 1. The diagram on the following page presents a schematic of skills supply. It illustrates the key actors, relationships and components to explore as needed.

Underpinning any assessment of a mis-match between demand and supply should be an analysis of the costs of learning. It is important to estimate these costs – from the employer, learner and provider perspectives. The main problem is in defining which ‘externalities’ should be used in calculating the costs of provision. For example:

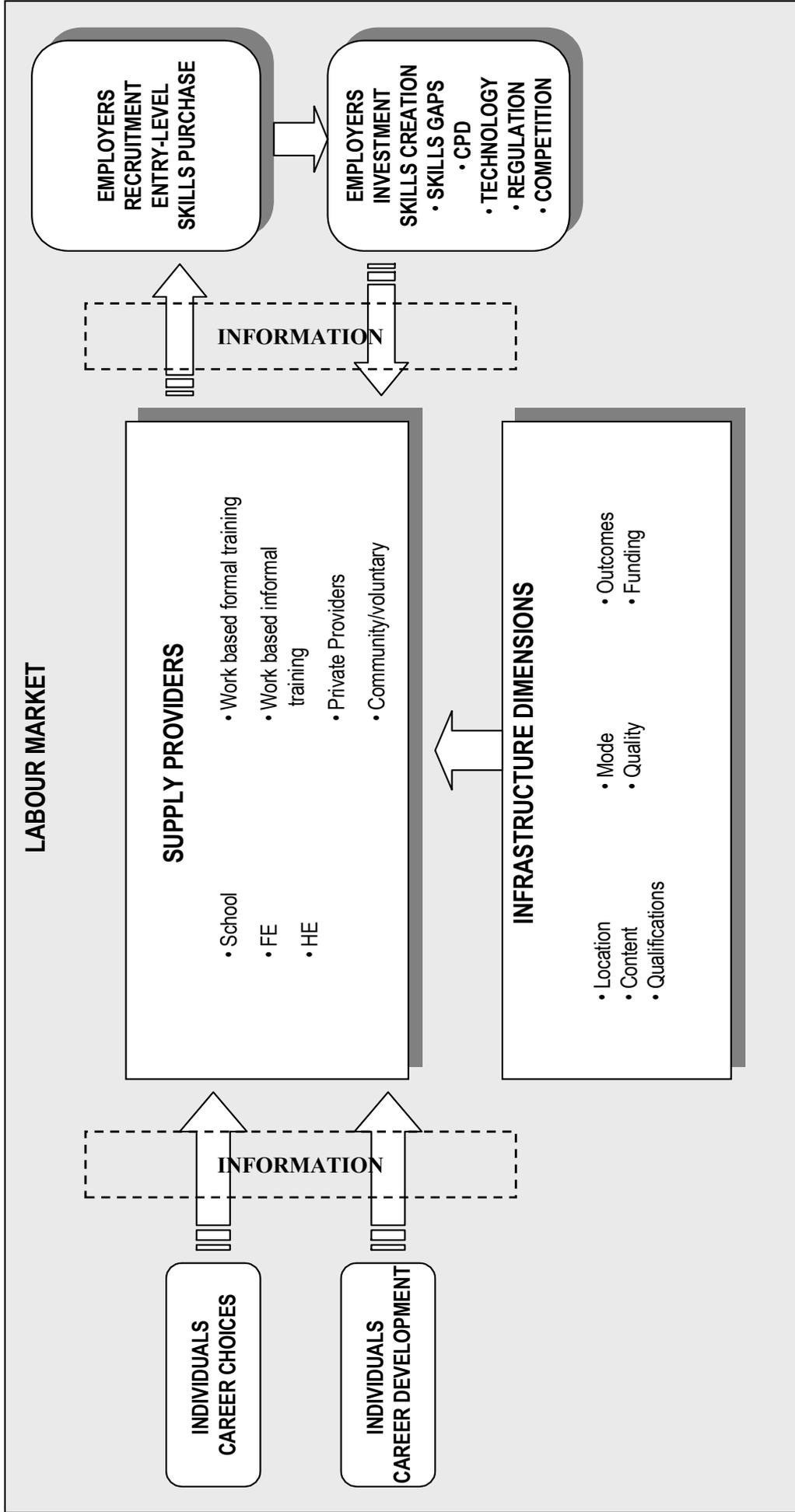
- § For learners there may be costs over and above the course fees (e.g. travel, subsistence, childcare, equipment etc).
- § For many employers a considerable cost of training is losing staff time and the costs of backfilling that time.
- § Providers’ costs may also vary, especially in developing new provision or delivering existing provision in a different way (e.g. additional administrative support, accommodation, equipment and materials etc).

ConstructionSkills undertook a scoping study to explore the range of current information available on employer investment in training that fed into its SSA work. Not surprisingly it found inconsistencies within different training spend figures. The amount of spend per employee in the construction sector varied from £276 (NESS) to £1,111 (Learning and Training at Work).

Ideally, Stage 2 should estimate both the overall volume of training spend from public, private and individual sources and the respective levels of investment by type of investor, occupation and skills level. However, the pathfinder process has demonstrated the difficulty of the task and the degree of variation likely to be associated with any estimates. The main focus though needs to be on an assessment of whether:

- § There is sufficient investment in skills
- § Who makes that investment
- § Is that investment well made.

UNDERSTANDING SUPPLY



4.2.3 *Assessing the infrastructural dimension*

Even though the analysis was not always systematic, there were some examples of how the pathfinders had tried to consider the infrastructural dimension within their assessments of provision. Furthermore, some issues such as qualifications and modes of delivery were considered at some depth outside of the Stage 2 assessment. The location and delivery of learning was an important issue for SEMTA in discussions with employers around improving the supply side, although this was analytically underplayed in the Stage 2 assessment, which arguably makes it difficult to build a persuasive case for delivery partners to respond to.

There were sporadic indications of elements that would constitute quality provision. For example, employers highly rate hands-on experience and see the amount of placement time and work experience as a way of improving qualifications. The assessments do not go as far as synthesising and extracting potential quality criteria despite the fact that there may be interesting and useful findings relating to this embedded in the wider analysis.

The main secondary source suggested for an analysis of quality in the Stage 2 guidance was ALI grades. However, these can only be used very broadly as a guide for quality of provision, partly because learning areas do not necessarily map against SSC footprints. Further work on measuring quality of provision may best be done in parallel with other SSC initiatives. For example, Skillset includes within its SSA a plan to develop its own kite mark of excellence. On a slightly different tack, the e-skills UK SSA addresses the issue of quality as part of its deal with the AOC to address the professional development needs of teachers and lecturers in the sector.

4.3 *Stage 3 – Gap Analysis*

The gap analysis ‘stage’ puts identified sectoral weaknesses and gaps in current workforce development in the context of the skills needs analysis. It is described in the guidance as being the ‘link between the first two and the last two stages’. By bringing together the view of demand and the view of supply, it scopes the gaps as the basis for priority areas for action. A range of scenarios should be developed, looking both at what happens when existing supply meets likely future demands.

The priorities for action should emerge through an exploration of the potential scenarios developed in terms of both market and institutional gaps. The priorities are also shaped by an analysis across the scenarios of the likely case, the preferred case and the core case (which looks beyond the variables underpinning specific scenarios to identify the basic priorities for the sector). The guidance also suggested this should be a dynamic analysis.

4.3.1 *Gap analysis within the wider SSA process*

The gap analysis in practice was not a distinct stage. As a matter of course the pathfinders addressed the question of mismatch in demand and supply, but not necessarily as part of a specific strand. It was wrapped up in the employer consultation (surveys and workshops) and underpinned the more in-depth work with key employers at the start and throughout the SSA process. It was therefore closely tied with Stages 1 and 2.

There are three major reasons why the gap analysis ran in parallel with its preceding stages:

- § **The logic of the process:** Scenario planning is an integral part of both Stages 1 and 3 (*both in the guidance and in terms of common sense* – SSC Research Manager).
- § **Timing and logistics:** To wait for the completion of Stage 1 and 2 would extend the entire process unacceptably.
- § **Practicalities:** The exploration of scenarios and the identification of priorities can be used upfront to create employer buy in.

The pathfinders were able to build in a fairly organic process in which the scenarios were developed over a period of time, so that by the time the final priorities were agreed there had been numerous inputs. The challenge was to avoid repetition in the process – as at least one pathfinder experienced. The process is logical but because there were weaknesses in Stage 2 (both in terms of timing and quality), revisiting scenarios added less value.

While the pathfinder SSCs tended to have their own econometric forecasting models, what has been notable about the SSA scenario planning is that they have used a variety of sources. In terms of useful external sources, the following were noted:

- § DTI IGT scenarios were used by SEMTA to provide a head start on its thinking. Many of the employers in its Sector Strategy Groups fed into the DTI work, so it was decided there was no need to replicate.
- § Foresight (Manufacturing 2020) – SEMTA used this scenario to calculate the likely employment change over time sub-sectorally. This then fed in to consultation with employers.
- § LSDA: Learning from the Future (post-16 scenarios) – Described by one SSC as providing *‘thought-provoking scenarios identified very effectively and succinctly’*, and strongly recommended as preparatory work and a model for approaching futures work.
- § Forethought: Britain in 2020 – Flagged up by one Pathfinder as *‘a very helpful source’* in terms of inspiring creative thinking.
- § Working Futures - Sector definitional problems meant that some SSCs only used this very broadly. One pathfinder chose not to follow these forecasts because they provided a more pessimistic picture of the sector in comparison with the Foresight projections.

4.3.2 **Running a gap analysis exercise**

The clearest example of a formal gap analysis process was undertaken by SEMTA as part of its consultation exercise with employers. Taking groups of employers through the logic of the gap analysis process was an ambitious task, but it is possible to see how this enabled a more substantive discussion with employers about possible solutions. It helped the SSC to cement a mandate about who needed to take what action in order to address the identified skills issues. The steps to the process are outlined in the box below.

The main challenge with this approach was that the base information of the current supply of skills was introduced iteratively throughout the consultation process. It was difficult to produce large-scale data on, for example, employer investment in training. This was related to the problems with the Stage 2 assessment noted earlier in this section.

Key questions for employers in the gap analysis – SEMTA's approach

SEMTA's on-going consultation workshops with employers show how the analysis and key questions that emerge can be put to employers. It has four parts.

1) The consultation starts by looking at the **provision of training**. The nature of current public provision and commercial provision is presented (in terms of the types of learning funded). Provision of public spending is also mapped against the sector age profile. *Key questions for employers are then: what type of information is missing from the picture of provision? What should be the focus of public provision? Are providers able to supply the necessary training? Is supply able to meet demand?*

The outcomes should be an understanding of what is wanted and why, as well as guidelines for integrating commercial and public provision (i.e. a better return on what is already being funded). Key process issues are around capturing the commercial data and distinguishing what is a general issue across all of the sub-sectors.

2) The picture in terms of the **demand for skills** is presented in terms of occupational trends and how this might map in terms of specific targets (e.g. to reach 50% of the 2014 occupational forecasts in three years). Targets are also presented in relation to each of the key industry drivers. This is all translated into a picture of what parts of the workforce need to be trained in terms of occupational skills mapped against current occupational standards. *Key questions for employers are: Are the employment projections realistic? Is the redistribution of occupations realistic? Is the view to 2020 the correct driver to achieve global competition? Do you know where you are now with regard to this view? Is the target of 50% of the workforce up to global standards good enough? What needs to be ring fenced in current provision to cover 'new' recruits? How should we pass on the knowledge and experience of the retiring workforce?*

The outcomes should be a picture of employment projections and occupational mix and a strategy for selecting who gets trained first (i.e. those at the heart of the 'added value'). One of the challenges is producing a picture that the whole sub-sector can sign up to. It is very difficult to plan an SME profile up to 2020 and the occupational make-up is also less meaningful for very small employers.

3) The **gaps** are presented in terms of current investment in provision, three cost/resource scenarios and a comparison of what should be kept that compares the drivers emerging from SEMTA's Stage 1 analysis, current commercial provision; current public provision and new public qualifications to be developed. *Key questions for employers are: What will make it possible for the sector to increase its investment? Should funds be ring fenced? Should the driver for change remain with the OEMs (original equipment manufacturers)?*

4) Finally a series of **possible solutions** are put forward as the basis for developing an action plan supported by lead responsibilities. A series of strategies are put forward

relating to a wide range of different leads (industry; employees; trade unions; trade associations; Government; providers; the SSC). *Key questions for employers in this context are: Is it right to show lead responsibilities and if so who is missing? Will these discussions change your plans in this area?*

4.3.3 ***Influence of the gap analysis component***

However the gap analysis outputs were developed as part of the SSA process, it is clear in most of the final pathfinder SSAs that the futures work has had a strong influence on the action plans.

If nothing else, the gap analysis provided the pathfinders with an impetus for maintaining an improved focus on future skills needs beyond SSA development. This is critical for mainstreaming the SSA as a tool over time. For example, ConstructionSkills has set up a Skills and Productivity Observatory to provide the basis for ongoing review of its SSA priorities (both nationally and regionally).

4.4 **Summary of Key Findings**

The skills needs assessments produced by the pathfinders provide increased breadth, depth and foresight of knowledge rather than bringing 'new' insights as such. One of the main ways in which they have added value has been in providing a new type of engagement with employers, in which they are directly involved in shaping the analysis.

The assessment of current provision was arguably the weakest component of the SSA process. This partly reflected the lack of an existing evidence base and issues relating to data access and comparability. It also reflected the lack of an analytical framework with which to undertake a targeted assessment.

The gap analysis was the least distinct of all of the SSA stages, partly because the picture is dynamic. The pathfinders were continually refining and testing priorities for action on the basis of future scenarios. These tended to be embedded in a relatively thorough analysis of the drivers of change, although much less so in a rigorous analysis of the underpinning supply of skills (reflecting weakness in the Stage 2 analysis).

5 THE AGREEMENT PHASE

This chapter looks at how the analysis undertaken in Stages 1 to 3 translated into an Agreement for the pathfinder SSC sectors. The Stage 4 scoping of collaborative action by employers and the Stage 5 action plan with key delivery partners are the crux of the SSA process. As such, they are the most complicated aspects of the development work. They are, in many senses, the true test of the SSC, as the process puts them firmly in the brokering role.

As noted earlier in the report, Stages 4 and 5 run like a thread throughout the SSA process. The pathfinders retained a clear focus on the outcome that they were working towards, even though there were often significant question marks in terms of what both employer and a partner commitment would look like.

The chapter also addresses the detail and substance of the SSAs themselves. It looks at their structure and scope (the scale of ambition), themes and priorities across the pathfinders, and at added value.

5.1 Stage 4 – Scoping Collaborative Action

One of the main areas of added value from the SSA process is the way in which it provides a new basis for dialogue between SSCs and the employers in their sectors. A strength of the process has been the way in which employers were central to the evolution of the SSAs for all four pathfinders. Employer involvement started early in the process, which was critical for creating ‘buy in’.

The scenario-building component to SSA development (the ‘blue sky thinking’) has acted – across the board – as a significant ‘hook’ for engaging employers in the process. Yet involving employers effectively is only one part of the challenge. Translating that involvement into substantive action was far more difficult.

5.1.1 Employer involvement

The model for employer engagement has revolved around three levels, which tend to have occurred sequentially:

- § **Small strategic groups of key employers** typically meeting on multiple occasions over the course of SSA development
 - 4 e-skills UK worked closely with 24 major employers to shape the SSA messages alongside consultation with Gartner Research Fellows.
 - 4 SEMTA used its Sector Strategy Groups to manage and drive the process within each of its sub-sectors. It therefore had multiple groups of key employers (and trade unions) working in parallel on agreeing the material at sub-sector level.
 - 4 Skillset set up a Delphi group to scope the skills needs as part of an initial visioning exercise. This approach utilises the views and experience of a small group of influencing decision makers and thinkers to reach consensus on the key issues facing the sector.

- § **Large-scale employer surveys** (undertaken by Skillset and e-skills UK).
- § **Regional workshops and consultations with a wider range of employers.** This included regional/national ‘road shows’ or programmes of in-depth qualitative workshops largely to validate messages and attain buy-in/sign-up. Existing regional structures were also used to communicate and validate the high-level messages. In one case, a more ‘bottom up’ approach meant existing employer forums developed a series of regional strategies that fed directly in to the wider SSA.

Representing the sector

The challenge for the SSCs is in terms of what weighting each aspect of employer engagement is given. The strategic groups tend to have the clearest role in shaping the drivers of demand and the scenario planning. These groups tend to represent the major employers.

The strategic groups are not therefore **representative of the whole sector**, but given the ‘visioning’ role that they have, it may be sensible to have ‘market leaders’ as the key contributors. These groups may also have a wider membership, including academics or industry experts. ConstructionSkills has involved employer groups in order to ensure the supply chain is engaged. The supply chain has also been an issue for SEMTA, because some employers involved in its Sector Strategy Groups would define themselves in terms of their supply chain rather than as a sub-sector. The SEMTA groups also included trade union representatives.

Innovations in employer involvement

SEMTA’s main innovation in developing the SSA has been intensive employer engagement. This involved looking in-depth at skills survey findings (such as the proportion of employers that are satisfied with education and training provision). The qualitative work they did with employers enabled them to delve deeper into these issues. This sort of activity is very much about strengthening the credibility of the message within the SSA, rather than providing the actual employer commitment.

The Skillset Delphi Groups (one for each sub-sector) provided the upfront strategic input, which went on to shape subsequent research. Lessons from this approach were that it was focused around **a small group of influential decision makers and thinkers**. This included large employers, SMEs, leading academics and industry champions – 25 people in total. The focus was on industry influencers rather than being ‘representative’.

This is very challenging work, requiring a highly analytical and discursive approach. Translating the initial scoping of industry scenarios into key industry *skills* challenges is difficult. Part of the learning from this experience is about the skills required to facilitate these groups (e.g. arguably a role for sector-specialist, visioning, ‘think tank’ type organisations).

The e-skills UK approach was to build up multiple feeds of employer intelligence providing a reliable basis for setting priorities. There was direct input from a statistically valid sample of 3,200 employers of all sizes (including at least 270 employers from each of the nations and regions). This was augmented by employer focus groups in

each region (which had a particular focus on SMEs) and Board-level input from industry leaders (providing expertise on the impact of IT on business and people).

ConstructionSkills has learned from the employer consultation process how this process could be augmented in future. As a result of SSA development they have now developed a 1,000 strong employer panel to be automatically contacted every six months. The SSA process has helped them to really focus on reaching the sector in a wider sense, not just consulting with the ‘*same old faces*’.

5.1.2 The employer commitment

As noted earlier, the employer commitment may be on the level of individual firms signing up to contribute to an activity. Alternatively, industry groups or bodies (within or outside the SSC organisation) may provide the basis for the Agreement. Two distinct approaches to the employer commitment within the SSA are apparent:

- § Contributing funding – typically through industry-level deals (‘macro deals’)
- § Contributing time or action – the employer contribution being made up of a commitment to train or to work in partnership on given initiatives, either individually or through SSC forums (‘micro deals’).

The latter approach seems favoured by the pathfinder SSCs. The SSCs have been pragmatic in terms of the employer commitment they have been able to broker. Table 5.1 below outlines in more detail some examples of the employer commitments in the SSAs. The type of commitment in each case is somewhat dependent on the needs of the sector (e.g. the degree to which increased investment is a priority). While a contribution of funding may initially look like a more robust employer commitment, over time it is possible that other employer commitments will be shown to be equally – if not more – important.

In terms of the ‘macro deals’, it is not always clear where some of the employer funding originates. Even where explicit funding is identified, such as for the Skillset Academies, this funding is focused on an employer contribution to the set-up costs. This is an interesting approach because it is effectively a challenge to the supply side to match the employer commitment. It also raises further questions in terms of the sustainability of the commitment from the employer and the supply side.

The ‘micro deals’, are by their very nature more targeted. This does not mean they are less important, although it can be more difficult to see the sum total of the employer commitment when it is evident in a variety of interventions. Some of these commitments are about employers acting in the vanguard to change how the sector operates and how it delivers skills and learning. The key test will be whether a particular employer – or more likely a group of employers – can lever wider change by committing to a new way of working. One traditional barrier here, that the SSA has not fully addressed, is how to widen the employer involvement to ensure that it is not only the major employers making a commitment. The degree to which this is an issue depends on the make-up of the sector, but it is less problematic in sectors where large employers predominate.

The more considerable weakness is where the employer contribution is either ill-defined or unambitious. Examples such as a commitment to engage in further research

or to promote the use of training plans may contribute to achieving change – but are of a different order to the original ambitions of the SSA. Overall, to achieve any sort of employer commitment is a positive step for the SSCs. The difficulty is that a piecemeal approach to it, which may be as much as can be achieved in some sectors, leads to a risk of having an SSA which is not quite the sum of its many parts (i.e. a multitude of small actions perversely mitigates against achieving significant change).

Table 5.1 The Employer Contribution

SSC	Nature of main employer contribution
ConstructionSkills	The construction sector levy features in numerous places within the Agreement, but not within the overall strategy of skills for the sector. The continuation of £2 million per annum to support the Management and Leadership programme is outlined. A further £1 million match funded scholarship for undergraduates undertaking construction-related degrees.
e-skills UK	£22 million of matched funding for SSC programmes forecast from 2005-8. There is also a strategy to enable individual employers to sign up for individual contributions to eight SSA programmes.
SEMTA	Key employers and SMEs – through Sector Strategy Groups – provide time to promote SSA agreed activities and commit to the introduction of specific approaches internally.
Skillset	Funding attached to specific initiatives, typically to support the set-up costs for new institutions and initiatives, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - £5 million for the Screen Academies over two years - £2.5 million from the TV and film industry for film business academy - £6 million from TV sector support centres and courses.

5.2 Stage 5 – The Action Plans

It is critical that the SSA has been positioned within government strategy to give stakeholders a clear remit for engaging and, indeed, **an expectation that they will engage**. This is most clearly seen within the Skills White Papers in England. It also appears in the Skills and Employment Action Plan in Wales produced by the Welsh Assembly Government. The remit in Scotland is less clear, even though links can be made to its main strategies (e.g. *Life through Learning*, *Learning through Life*; *A Smart Successful Scotland*; *The Framework for Economic Development in Scotland*). SSAs are also mentioned as a key articulation of the demand side in DELNI's Skills Strategy draft published in November 2004.

The 'remit for engagement' therefore underpins the development of the Stage 5 action plans. It does not mean that the outcome of that engagement is necessarily fruitful, but it underpins the dialogue – especially with the key supply side funding bodies. One area where the remit is more complicated is in terms of the regional agenda, but this is largely because various organisations are in a process of defining roles and responsibilities (particularly with regard to the Regional Skills Partnerships).

A lack of clarity in terms of the remit is arguably more significant in terms of partners in Scotland. The SSA as it stands has less of a clear function in the Scottish context.

There is a difference between a policy commitment to support SSAs, which clearly exists in Scotland, and mobilising this into effective partnership working.

5.2.1 *Partner involvement*

Partner engagement can be summarised as being comprehensive in terms of the actors involved, yet variable in terms of the nature of the engagement. Not all partner organisations would be expected to have the same stake or require the same level of direct involvement, but the variation has perhaps been wider than would have been expected.

It is possible to distinguish between those stakeholders that have been heavily involved in the SSA process as active partners with a firm understanding that the end point would be a tangible commitment (e.g. the LSC and to some extent the QCA), and those that were less consistently involved and, as a consequence, more challenging to move to a position of being committed to act (e.g. the CBI, Scottish Enterprise and others). In Wales, ELWa were initially involved in leading SSA development before the SSDA introduced a national network manager and therefore it played an important role in bringing various stakeholders to the table.

A key lesson for SSCs is that all relevant stakeholders have to be engaged throughout the process. That this did not happen entirely for the pathfinders can partly be explained by a lack of initial definition about what stakeholder contributions would look like. Several stakeholders produced signed declarations of commitment to engage upfront, but it was not clear at that point what any specific commitment would look like. Therefore some key partners, such as the DTI and the CBI, were initially engaged through the Project Boards and other strategic infrastructure, and then typically at arms-length from the process until the end. This meant that partner perceptions and expectations could be less easily managed by the SSCs when the scoping of collaborative action began in earnest.

Employers were typically more directly involved throughout, which gave a different character to Stage 4 for them than for many agencies. Some partner responses were ill-defined: *'The SSA documentation seems to have been viewed by stakeholders as a consultation document, rather than something that needs to be actioned'* (SSC lead). One RDA interviewee described the SSA as a *'memorandum of understanding'* for partners and *'more than just guidance (on key issues) but falls short of being a contract (to act)'*. One of the stakeholders in Scotland also reported that it had not been understood what they were signing up to at the start of the process. **Dialogue therefore needs to be more active at key stages (especially at the initial scoping stages and at the consultation phase), as opposed to consulting with stakeholders through the circulation of materials.**

Table 5.2 below gives an overview of the range of partners involved in the SSAs to date across the four pathfinders (in England only). All four pathfinders, unsurprisingly, have struck deals with the Skills for Business sponsoring departments in England (DfES and DTI), and the main FE funding agency (the LSC), which has been heavily involved throughout. The other area in which there is uniformity so far is in terms of trade union engagement. The nature of the final agreements is such that it is possible that further deals will be struck beyond SSA publication date.

The ConstructionSkills Agreement, which also covers Wales and Scotland mentions the LECs and all key stakeholders in Wales in its action plan. The other three pathfinders were working on their Agreements in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland separately at the time of writing.

5.2.2 Action with government departments

The DfES is the most prominent governmental partner within the pathfinder action plans. This reflects its status as sponsoring body for the Skills for Business network and a recognisable commitment to the SSA process. The pathfinders reported throughout the development process that there was a two-pronged engagement from DfES that helped turn the SSA into a reality:

- § Being able to access ministerial level contacts and capitalise on political support;
- § And, partly as a result, departments within DfES taking account of the SSA in policy development and pro actively entering into discussion with the SSCs.

The DfES has made considerable financial commitments to the pathfinders. For example, it is contributing £8.4 million to 2008 towards the national roll-out of Computer Club for Girls developed by e-skills UK. It is also providing funding and support for Skillset to design and develop kite marking criteria for courses and centres. These interventions are interesting for two reasons. The first example shows how the SSA process can help to transform a pilot project into a programme with the potential to achieve significant change. The second shows support for an SSC intervention that could shift – and help to cement – the SSC role within the learning infrastructure. DfES is also supporting SSC-led tools and qualifications – such as the employer-led IT diploma (as part of the first wave of specialist diplomas), and supporting the integration of the e-skills Passport and the IT user qualification and training package (ITQ).

DTI has been less actively involved in the SSA process than DfES. Partly this can be ascribed to internal reorganisation over the course of the SSA development phase. Certainly its commitments are of a different order to DfES, typically in relation to helping to promote specific solutions – such as the business case for sustainability (in the ConstructionSkills SSA). There are particular strands of work, such as business support and promoting diversity, in which DTI is actively involved.

5.2.3 Action with the FE sector

Within the FE sector, there is some joint working planned directly with colleges and learning providers. SEMTA's action plan, for example, includes plans to work with the ALP, while the AOC is supporting a number of e-skills UK's solutions, such as the development of the e-business Academy and the promotion of the e-skills Passport for teachers.

The focus on the FE funding councils is critical because the scale of the resources they channel (e.g. the LSC has a £9 billion annual budget). This is complicated because the LSC, ELWA and SFC have different funding arrangements. The LSC in England has been a particularly active partner, which has shown a significant degree of commitment to the process (e.g. setting up its own internal group to co-ordinate responses to and engagement with the pathfinders). The SSCs have not engaged with partners in Scotland to the same degree as yet.

Table 5.2 Partners identified in the pathfinder Action Plans (England only)

Partner Organisation	SEMTA	e-skills UK	Const'Skills	Skillset
Central govt				
DfES	X	X	X	X
DTI	X	X	X	X
ODPM			X	
DWP/JobcentrePlus	X	X	X	
Home Office		X		
Education				
HEFCE	X	X		X
LSC	X	X	X	X
NIACE	X	X		
QCA	X	X		X
Awarding Bodies	X		X	X
Ufi Learndirect	X	X	X	
Association of Colleges		X		
Association of Learning Providers	X	X		
Connexions		X	X	
FE Sector		X	X	
Universities		X	X	
Schools (pre-16)		X	X	X
The Regions				
RDAs (general)			X	
- AWM	X			X
- EEDA	X			X
- EMDA	X			X
- LDA	X			X
- NWDA	X			X
- ONE	X			X
- SEEDA	X			X
- SWERDA	X			X
- Yorkshire Forward	X			X
Social partners				
Trade unions	X	X	X	X
CBI		X		
Professional Bodies	X		X	
Other				
iiP	X	X	X	
OGC			X	
NEP				
Housing Corporation			X	
English Heritage			X	

There is a sense that the pathfinders got caught in heavily operational dialogue with the funding councils, at least early on in the process. The issues in terms of sourcing FE data were at the heart of this, and can therefore be ascribed largely to being a learning curve – for the SSCs and for partners. What has emerged in terms of the LSC output is the commitment to the development of a purchasing plan for each of the pathfinder sectors to reflect the SSA priorities. There are a series of common issues that appear in this context, such as the ‘sector offer’ within the new National Employer Training Programme (covering brokerage services). There is a further commitment to involve SSCs in CoVE recognition. More specifically, the LSC has shown support for some of the key items within specific SSAs, for example, by providing funding for the Skillset Screen Academies and support (and alignment of funding) for e-skills UK’s ITQ strategy. In Wales, commitments have also been made by ELWa and HEFCW in relation to both initiatives.

Given the importance of the LSC’s input, it is unfortunate that much of the activity revolves around the production of another set of plans. Yet this is largely a function of logistics and timing. It means that the scale of influence of the pathfinder SSAs over FE funding will only emerge fully over time. One of the key lessons from the pathfinder experience is that for the SSA to have influence over LSC provision it has to be aligned with the LSC’s planning cycle. In practice, this means that the intelligence phase has to be completed (i.e. SSCs need to have completed Stage 3) by October in any given year. **It was clear that the employer consultation process – be it in terms of national or regional research or events and the demands of the research – pushed the pathfinders beyond that date in terms of drawing up draft priorities.** This is an issue which needs to be addressed by the network and the LSC for future SSCs going through the SSA process.

5.2.4 Action with the HE Sector

The skills needs assessments undertaken helped to crystallise the view that for many employers, the HE sector is critical to delivering the high-level skills required to improve productivity. HE involvement in the SSA processes is therefore critical. The HE sector was, however, largely on the periphery of the pathfinder process initially, reflecting the infancy of relations between the Skills for Business network more widely and the universities. The SSA process has provided the platform new dialogue with Universities UK (which sits on the England Project Board) and the Russell Group. HEFCE also sits on the Project Board. While much of the work has been preliminary and exploratory there have been some substantial advances. HEFCE, for example, is another contributor of funding to the Skillset Screen Academies. In Wales, HEFCW has an identified role as broker between the SSCs and the Universities in Wales to support discussion on issues such as industry accreditation and the use of occupational standards in course development. There is also agreement to support the roll-out of the Information Technology Management for Business BSc in the e-skills UK action plan in England and Wales.

5.2.5 Action with the Social Partners

There is a clear role for the CBI and the trade unions / TUC in the development of the SSAs, although work needs to be done to ensure that all actors fully understand the role they can play and how they can add value to the process. Both the CBI and the TUC were involved in the strategic direction of the SSA project and have therefore had

a high-level understanding of the process. This has not yet necessarily translated into SSA commitments.

There are different issues at play here. For the CBI, there is clear synergy in being an employer representative body, but this is one that does not quite dovetail with the SSC role. It is questionable how much of a priority the SSA process is for the CBI – which has offered broad support but from a distance.

For the trade unions on the other hand, there should be clear relevance in supporting initiatives that promote skills and employability across the workforce. The Union Learning Reps provide a potentially powerful mechanism for joint working within the context of the SSA, something that is evident in the pathfinder action plans.

The level and nature of engagement with the unions has varied across the four pathfinders, reflecting the degree of initial links, and predicated on the degree of SSC Board representation. In the case of SEMTA, for example, there was significant on-going trade union involvement – through the Sector Strategy Groups. At the other end of the scale, one SSC has less of a tradition of trade union representation among its major employers, which led to questions about the relevance of their involvement. Although this type of sectoral, cultural perception is a significant brake on engagement, the SSA process has seen some progress here – largely the result of challenging both the employers and the trade unions. The employment of a ‘broker’ to help facilitate trade union involvement and clarification of respective roles and potential contribution to the SSA process has been significant here.

As there are sometimes multiple trade unions of relevance within any sector, the TUC has played a role in brokering / nominating who sits on the SSC Boards. A wider point noted by various stakeholders was that it is critical that each trade union representative understands what the SSA is and, crucially, does not view the focus on productivity in negative terms. This is a prerequisite for partnership working. It is a dialogue the TUC can support, but the nature of the relationship between each trade union and the TUC is such that SSCs are likely to have to work out a common understanding with specific unions.

There is also a possibility that trade unions may be able to play a more active role in the intelligence phase of the SSA. This is not to replicate the work done by the SSCs but to provide a more active dialogue – with specific trade unions canvassing the perspective of members (and Union Learning Representatives). As one stakeholder reported, *‘the trade unions know what the skills issues are and what their main employers are looking for, where the gaps are and why they are there!’*. This should help to shift the trade union position – like that of other partners – from being passive recipients of the research to active shapers of the dialogue and contributors to the skills agenda.

Some of the key questions raised through the SSA process in relation to the trade unions, which may fruitfully be areas of future focus include:

- § Do members of the Skills for Business network understand the potential contribution of the trade unions, the culture and tensions within the trade union movement and what can be reasonably expected?
- § Do partners fully understand the difference between the TUC and trade unions?

- § Do trade unions engaging with the process fully understand the map of agencies and their respective roles?
- § What level of prior SSC-union engagement is required as the basis for joint working under the SSA?
- § To what degree is there practical added value for trade unions as partners (e.g. the work of the ULRs) relevant across all sectors as a means of improving productivity?
- § How well-embedded are ULRs as influencers within each trade union as the embodiment of learning and training as part of negotiations with employers?

5.2.6 Action with the qualifications and accreditation authorities

QCA and ACCAC involvement with each SSC is likely to be advanced where the SSA process dovetails in terms of timing with the development of Sector Qualifications Strategies (SQS) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Where this happened among the pathfinders, at Skillset for example, it meant that more comprehensive discussion could take place. It also means that the SSA can be a mechanism to ensure a coherent approach to developing qualifications frameworks across the UK. For example, through an explicit commitment to joint working and exchange with ACCAC, Skillset has set the basis for ensuring that the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales is taken forward as well as ensuring that issues such as media literacy are considered as part of ACCAC's curriculum review consultations.

One stakeholder suggested that the SQS could provide a useful appendix to any SSA as it provides a mechanism for delivering the solutions outlined in the SSA. As the SQS are works-in-progress, they are likely to feed into/benefit from the SSA process more substantively in time, and for future tranches of SSCs. **This is, however, an area in which the SSA could fulfil its potential to achieve real change.**

However, the question of conflict of interest was raised again between the role of SSCs in defining employer demand and working collaboratively with accreditation bodies whilst also developing and accrediting qualifications in their own right.

5.2.7 Action with the English regions

The degree to which the pathfinders took a 'top down' approach to building the evidence base (i.e. building up the national picture before investigating regional differences), or a 'bottom-up' approach varied. The latter was sometimes used (e.g. the Skillset regional plans) to provide richer regional intelligence to feed into the sector picture. It is important that the approach taken is flexible enough to fit the needs of the sector. The SSA has to primarily focus on the national picture, but for a whole series of stakeholders¹¹ (the RDA, the local LSCs) **the stronger the regional dimension within the SSA, the more likely that joint working will be possible.**

It will be difficult for the SSA to have a substantial regional dimension until the wider sector-regional skills interface is resolved. Answering the question of how SSCs should relate to RSPs and how these organisations can best dovetail is a precondition for

¹¹ Here we are specifically talking about stakeholders in England, as the approach in Scotland and Wales has been to have entirely separate agreements.

effective joint working. Where the sector priorities cut across regional priorities it could make effective implementation difficult because regional stakeholders will want to preserve their autonomy and influence. In this context, the degree of employer credibility invested within each SSA will be critical for building leverage.

The SSCs have received a mixed response from RDAs in terms of engagement through the SSA. Typically, those SSCs that have strong existing links with specific RDAs have been able to use these to further develop existing work within the framework of the SSA. Regional stakeholders have welcomed the involvement of knowledgeable SSC regional staff playing an active part, not only in developing a regional component to the SSA but in keeping them informed on the national picture.

Some barriers identified by regional stakeholders included:

- § **Staff turnover** in different organisations can hinder partnership development – SSCs develop partnerships with individuals at organisations and, if those individuals leave, the SSCs have to build up relationships again.
- § **Funding** influence requires adequate notice, in particular, through LSC planning cycles and the RES process. Another aspect is the competition for funding once all 25 SSAs have been completed. This is likely to require national level discussions between SSCs/SSDA and the LSC, DfES etc., as to how funding agreements can be made.

5.2.8 Action within the devolved administrations

Although the SSA process as it relates to England should not be seen as separate to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, there are distinct action plans for each of the nations. As noted in the introduction to this report, the timing of the pathfinder SSAs in practice means that this evaluation did not cover the final action plans in the devolved administrations (i.e. the outcomes). However, there were significant process issues that emerged in relation to Scotland, which are important to draw out in order to understand the pathfinder process more fully.

Joint working in Scotland

Partners in Scotland signed up to supporting the programme, although there were fundamental issues at play which made the likelihood of substantial, joint working more difficult to conceive:

- § Different interpretations of what being demand-led means (i.e. the balance between demand from employers and from individuals, the productivity versus the employment agenda).
- § Mis-match in terms of expectations. Some stakeholders reported that too much of an operational focus meant that the larger questions they wanted to ask were missed - *'we received material that had a whole series of assumptions in it that we were expected to go along with, but we were still asking – why SSCs? Why Sector Skills Agreements?'*
- § A lack of senior engagement early enough in the process from the SSDA and the SSCs - *'by the time that happened it was too late'* – Scotland stakeholder.
- § A perceived lack of understanding amongst the SSCs about the learning and skills infrastructure in Scotland. With one exception, little reference was made in

draft SSA material to the Lifelong Learning Strategy in Scotland, what the role of agencies such as the SFC and the SQA are, the funding model in Scotland and the way in which new qualifications are developed.

The SSA process started later in Scotland (e.g. setting up the Project Board) than in England. There was a lack of clarity about how the SSA process would operate in Scotland at the critical early planning stage for SSCs, which had major consequences further down the line in terms of the content produced and the policy links formed. The SSCs held discussions with stakeholders in Scotland, although this was too late in the process, and meant that stakeholders were largely presented with a series of solutions that had not emerged from a specific dialogue about skills requirements in Scotland.

One of the main barriers to progress with the SSA in Scotland has been a failure among most of the pathfinders to effectively contextualise the skills needs assessment, the assessment of provision and, most critically, the proposed priorities for action to Scotland's policy landscape. The degree to which this requires a separate research and consultation exercise only emerged over time. This was not properly fed into the planning process as such. There was a 'post hoc' attempt from some SSCs to shape the existing research and, most problematically, the proposed actions to Scotland. This was unhelpful as it damaged the credibility of the process in Scotland.

SSCs do need to effectively contextualise their work within Scotland in order to enter a dialogue about solutions – and get beyond the research being dismissed out of hand. There is no reason why this cannot happen, indeed the consensus is that Skillset managed it to an acceptable level. The second tranche of SSCs should have a far clearer message upfront about how the research and consultation process needs to be structured.

These issues in terms of engagement in Scotland in particular beg a more fundamental question about what SSCs can realistically be expected to achieve within an established policy environment where their mandate is not as strong. That is not to say that SSCs do not have a role – there does not seem to be an equivalent sectoral, employer voice – but that the additional cost of providing UK-wide coverage through the SSA process is not likely to lead to the same benefits in all countries. The underlying question, which remains unresolved, is where do the Skills for Business network and the SSAs fit in Scotland's policy and institutional landscape?

Joint working in Wales

There was a similar timing issue as described above in relation to SSA development in Wales too. Much of the pathfinder research stages had already been undertaken before substantive discussions began at Project Board level. There was a consequent difficulty in terms of ensuring that the national context was effectively reflected in the early SSA material – in terms of the specifics of the curriculum in Wales and the context of the Skills and Employment Action Plan. Initial drafts of the research therefore referred to policy developments that were not relevant to Wales.

While this process caused challenges in terms of retaining stakeholder buy-in, the evidence suggests that it was possible to finally move a position from which agreement could be made. The key policy developments that have underpinned some areas of potential SSA innovation generally (such as the sector qualifications strategies) apply

in Wales as well as in England, therefore the nature of much of the dialogue has been of a different order to that in Scotland.

5.3 Review of the final Sector Skills Agreements

The SSA – in common with much of the work of the Skills for Business network – is about achieving long-term influence and impact on productivity and shaping the skills agenda. The Agreements themselves are a critical component to this wider project. It is worth reiterating that the process began with a fairly open consideration about what the ‘final product’ would look like. An initial template was produced, but this was only to provide broad guidance – not to give a sense of the substantive detail of the SSA output (i.e. what the ‘deals’ would look like).

However, while there was understandably no clear upfront image in terms of the finished product, there were components that SSCs and stakeholders raised in expectation of the final SSAs. Various, the anticipated ambition for the Agreements was reported to include:

- § The identification of ‘3 or 4 big ideas’
- § A focus on the levers for change (the key strategic points for leverage that will make a difference to skills supply)
- § An opportunity be ‘visionary’ and present innovative solutions
- § A wide remit – an ‘open invitation’ to challenge government. As one policy stakeholder reported at the time, ‘nothing is off the agenda’.

These expectations themselves were not uncontested. One SSC, for example, described the SSA more in terms of a workforce development plan, but with additional ‘clout’ or leverage. A review of the SSAs as documents suggests that this is largely what the pathfinder Agreements ultimately became. In some respects, it is questionable whether the documents do adequate justice to the process undertaken. **The large volume of activities and actors within the Agreements detracts from the clarity of the messages contained within.** As a result, major points are liable to be unclear. Some ambitious and important points are underplayed or are lost within a large body of text. The Agreement is not a single document (e.g. a treaty document). Rather, it is best characterised as a *development process* that at intervals produces a series of documents. At a minimum:

- § a skill needs assessment (the overview of sector demand);
- § supply side analysis;
- § an overarching document (often itself called the Sector Skills Agreement);
- § an action plan with partners that is up-dated as ‘deals’ are clarified and commitments made;
- § with variously:
 - 4 the above for each region/nation;
 - 4 sub-UK spatial research documents;
 - 4 sub-sector research documents (for example, employer surveys, learner surveys etc).

Given this breadth of material, retaining overall coherence and depth of analysis, while still presenting the strategic message for change has proven challenging.

Arguably the strongest example of how the material has been drawn together to build a coherent picture is the Skillset SSA. Skillset has three detailed strategies, one for each industry and nine regional strategies. These are then summarised into a single, clear document with an easy-to-follow structure. Yet what is most distinctive about the Skillset approach is that **the ‘vision’ underpinning it is based on an industry commitment that has largely already been achieved (a key aim of the SSA process). The tenor of the SSA itself is therefore more like a challenge to the public sector – or, indeed, a prospectus for the public sector to respond to.** It makes for a more powerful agreement overall, and shows the importance of achieving that difficult employer commitment.

Looking across the pathfinders documents, though, there is a level of detail that detracts from the main messages in the Agreements. Partly this seems to be the result of them being a conflation of several separate documents. The detailed and technical nature of the documentation raises questions in terms of what the realistic audience is for the Agreement (i.e. who will actually read them?) **To some degree their final format seems to have been driven by the requirements of various stakeholders to provide and present a comprehensive evidence base and detailed programme rather than a vision and focus on the key strategic levers for change that will make a material difference to skills supply.**

The tone of the Agreement gives an indication of its ultimate role and value. The Skillset SSA, for example, describes itself as a strategy that could deliver a vision. However, some of the other Agreements are more straightforward workforce development plans, or as one states an exercise in ‘*manpower planning*’ – which seems to be a significant shift in terms of approach from what the SSAs were initially anticipated as being. It is not clear to what degree this has been a function of the demands from stakeholders, for detailed justifications, or a function of the SSCs attempting to cover everything undertaken in the process. At face value, however, the documents make most of the SSAs seem less innovative and less far-reaching.

Most of the pathfinders present ‘the deals’ by way of a clear outline of which stakeholders are involved in each ‘challenge area’ and the year-on-year targets. In practice, this is a rational approach to drawing the agreement together and was, importantly, an area in which a fair degree of commonality was sought and agreed across the pathfinders – by way of the Project Board. When well used, it simply and concisely, outlines what is the vision/objective, *what* is being addressed, *why* it is being addressed, *by whom and how*, *at what cost* and *to what end* (i.e. the overall targets). It is a logical model, although, perhaps significantly, the detail of cost / contribution component is missing. This reflects some of the learning in terms of how the deals are struck.

5.3.1 ***The nature of ‘the deals’***

The pathfinder SSAs do not in themselves represent significant innovation in terms of new ideas. **Where they are most effective, they are the articulation of a series of issues that the SSCs, and in some cases predecessor organisations, have been lobbying for some time.**

In terms of some of the **most interesting areas of agreement** across the pathfinder SSAs, the following stand out:

- § The Skillset Screen Academies have been delivered with significant funding from employers and the supply side.
- § The e-skills UK Computer Clubs for Girls programme aims to change the attitudes of a generation of girls towards technology related careers. The target to involve nearly 150,000 students by 2008 transforms a training programme into a strategic tool for social change
- § IAG and CPD are common themes for all of the pathfinders, but there are particularly interesting ideas such as professional to professional career planning in the Skillset agreement. Brokerage services are another common theme and there is a recognition of the sectoral dimension among partners for the National Employer Training Programme.
- § The accreditation of HE courses is a potential area of added value for an SSC such as Skillset.
- § There are explicit links within some of the pathfinder SSAs, such as SEMTA's, to the Sector Qualifications Strategies.
- § Recognition of the need for capacity building within the supply side: the e-skills UK SSA for example includes investment in the skills of training staff.
- § There is consistent trade union involvement across the four SSAs that could support significant change: for example building the role, capacity and tools for the ULR development and support function. Roles have been identified for ULRs in supporting IAG (e.g. within the freelancer component of the Skillset SSA), championing the e-Business Academy (in the e-skills UK SSA), and supporting the broadening and increased effectiveness of the Approved Training Scheme in Construction (the ConstructionSkills SSA).

There was a shift away from referring to the final output in the Agreement as a *costed* action plan as the process evolved. In Scotland this was a deliberate position decided upon by the SSSA, and partly reflects the fact that for numerous partners talking about joint actions is more appropriate than committing funds.

The shift away from embedding costed actions in the SSA process is both understandable and pragmatic. There is a danger, though, that it could help to undermine the process by shifting the emphasis away from a bottom line focus on funding shifts and 'hard' employer / partner commitment.

The financial elements of the SSA do not appear strongly in the Agreements themselves. It is not considered systematically in the presentation of the deals. There are, however, places within each SSA where significant sums of money are mentioned. Funding is only one component of the SSA, and the process equally revolves around developing new approaches and new ways of working. However, the financial contributions underpinning the process – as a reflection of its substance and centrality to addressing skills issues – is important.

The lack of consistency around the financial component partly reflects the difficulties in translating the research base produced in Stages 1 to 3 into

workable deals. Many of the key public sector partners have funding that is tied-up in the short-term, so it is not necessarily realistic to expect the SSA development process itself to translate into immediate, significant funding shifts. **This poses a considerable challenge given that the opportunity to challenge the current situation is a key selling point for the SSA.** SEMTA positioned its Agreement sensibly in terms of its dialogue with employers, saying that the SSA was not about leveraging in significant additional funding from the public purse, rather it was about providing a mechanism for better allocating those funds to meet the needs of the sector. Even so, such shifts have proven difficult to achieve in the short-term.

In assessing the particular ‘deals’ struck through the SSA process, there remains an ambiguity within some of the final Agreements about what are ‘signed’ deals, and what are not. In some cases, the Agreement process is explicitly open-ended. For example, e-skills UK has produced an ‘Agreement Status’ document to show which areas of work have been agreed and where negotiation is on-going.

In all cases, where the deals have not been ‘signed’ it is likely that further work will be required before effective action can take place. A lack of detail also signals that a particular activity may not be a substantial piece of work. For example, the solution of the HE sector working jointly with industry on the design of courses in one of the SSAs is a potential innovation, yet the lack of detail marks it out as an aspiration rather than a fully-formed plan. There are numerous ‘deals’ that revolve around further research being undertaken. Given the scale of the SSA as an intelligence-based process, such outcomes, although relevant in some cases, should not predominate.

The concept of an SSA deal also implies some kind of *quid pro quo*. For example, within the e-skills UK SSA, the DfES has signed up to deliver 18 different contributions so far. Much of this is in relation to support, promotion, alignment and further development. The SEMTA/LSC arrangement is more explicit in terms of the SSC/LSC mutual promise and expectations and shows quite effectively the mutual dependencies of ‘the deal’.

Examples of ‘quid pro quo deals’ in the SSA

e-skills UK e-Business Academy collaborative programme:

- DfES will work with e-skills UK and the LSC to agree the sector content of the Integrated Skills And Business Support Brokerage Service and the potential SSC role in that within the broader policy framework of the National Employer Training Programme
- e-skills UK will contribute to the development of the DfES policy for piloting level 3 support to employers through the National Employer Training Programme
- DfES has agreed to support a feasibility study for a project to increase the contribution of HE to IT professional CPD
- DfES will support the development of e-skills UK’s proposal for the e-Business Academy, operational from 2007.

SEMTA sustainable demand side-provision solution:

- *The LSC is committed to developing with SEMTA a fit for purpose Apprenticeship framework that:* 1) upskills the existing adult workforce; 2) maintains the focus on young people; 3) aligns to the emerging National Employer Training Programme model; 4) links to progression routes including foundation degrees; 5) aligns with the objectives of the NEP report for Welfare to Work; 6) sits within the agreed purchasing plan

- *SSC actions required by the LSCs:* 1) to deliver the support from awarding bodies and other key partner for the apprenticeship model within the Sector Qualifications Strategy; 2) to deliver change in employer purchasing and engagement, specifically work placements required by the purchasing plan; 3) to work with employers and providers to improve achievement rates across the apprenticeship network; 4) to ensure that all apprenticeship frameworks include appropriate arrangements to encourage participation by learners from differing ethnic backgrounds, learners with disabilities and provide equality of opportunity for both men and women wishing to enter the sector.

5.3.2 *Delivering the Agreement*

From some stakeholders there was a recognition that the Agreements were not an end point: *'Its strategic nature means that the SSA also creates more questions, and does not answer everything'* (supply-side stakeholder). The action plans will be reviewed on an annual basis, although the way in which the process has evolved means that the SSA seems very much to be a *working document*. In the case of e-skills UK in particular, the Agreement itself is very much a tool for further negotiation. In essence, the SSA priorities have now formed the business plan priorities.

Part of what is new within the SSA approach is that all contributors are held accountable for delivery. In the pathfinder SSAs this has not always translated in practice **as the fluidity of the commitments themselves makes it difficult to pin down exactly what each partner will be accountable for delivering**. In some cases, partners are simply listed without real development of their contribution at this stage. **There are, however, a multitude of measures of success included by the four pathfinders. This is to such a degree that it is likely to be difficult to monitor the extent to which the agreements have been effective.** The SEMTA agreement, for example, includes an average of around 10 measures of success per partner (with 25 partners included). Defining success on these terms will be difficult.

Overall, it is not clear what the balance will be in the roles of those delivering the SSAs. **Crucially, the role of the SSC may need to be clarified, particularly as there is further work to be done to translate the SSA into achievable outcomes. It is not clear within the scope of the Agreements themselves exactly what the SSCs will do for each solution: are they managers, the delivery agent, promoters, co-ordinators or evaluators monitoring progress?**

In some of the Skillset solutions, for example, the SSC takes on a more powerful role, which could be characterised as marking a shift from SSCs being influencers to being an arbiter (especially in terms of being a potential gatekeeper of quality provision). Other than Skillset, **the SSCs do not directly raise the issue of adequacy of the SSC funding to deliver the solutions and the over-arching agreement in the SSA versions analysed for this research, although discussions with the pathfinders**

throughout the development process highlight that this was a key concern across the board. Partly this is mitigated by the apparent function of the SSA as a main mechanism for shaping and delivering the SSC programme (i.e. the Agreement defines where the SSC should be focusing its attention). Certainly, what is contained within the SSAs builds on much of the work already being undertaken by the SSCs. **Therefore, SSA delivery is entwined with wider questions relating to the sustainability of SSC funding over time. The issues here are, of course, different for particular SSCs.**

5.4 Summary of Key Findings

The SSA provides the basis for a new and richer dialogue with employers. Yet even with employers so heavily involved, it is difficult to translate this involvement into substantive commitment to action (partly because those involved in shaping the SSA represent a small number of employers).

The employer deals are therefore struck either with specific employers (where the credibility of the deal lies largely in the employer 'name'), through an SSC forum, or through a wider industry body. The last is more immediately effective because these bodies are more likely to be able to provide substantive funding (if there is a statutory basis, for example).

Partner engagement in the final action plans has been comprehensive yet variable. The main government departments are widely included, although the nature of the deals varies from 'helping to promote' to providing significant funding. The trade union presence is widespread. The areas where the remit of the SSA seems less clear is in the regions and some of the nations (Scotland in particular).

The most impressive 'on paper' aspects of the final SSAs are deals struck around activities the SSCs had already been planning or piloting (e.g. screen academies; Computer Club for Girls). Yet the large number of activities and deals in some of the SSAs makes it difficult to see the broader strategic picture. The status of some of the 'deals' remains unclear.

6 KEY LESSONS IN PRODUCING THE SSA

There are a series of key lessons that have emerged from the pathfinder experience. The four pathfinder SSCs to some extent followed different paths in putting together their SSAs, but it is possible to identify **common messages** from across the piece relating to:

- § Planning and managing the process
- § Timetabling the five-stage process
- § Using external support
- § Using the evidence to drive negotiation
- § Involving employers and other stakeholders
- § Ensuring UK-wide coverage
- § Tactics for negotiating the deal
- § Presenting the Agreement.

6.1 Planning and Managing the Process

One of the main lessons to be taken from the pathfinder experience relates to the **scale and intensity of the process for the SSCs themselves**. Developing an SSA is not a task that can be devolved to a single individual or even a project team within the organisation (even though an effective division of responsibility is a prerequisite for managing the process). As one pathfinder described, the SSA process effectively *'consumes the organisation'* for the period of development and beyond.

Putting together an SSA requires an SSC to have communication structures to enable all its various departments to work jointly, including across the whole of the UK. More importantly, it requires significant contributions from senior SSC staff throughout the process in order to deliver the most effective deals.

6.2 Timetabling and Resourcing the Five-Stage Process

As explained earlier, part of the reason the original timetable slipped was related to the learning involved in the pathfinder phase. Although it may be possible for some of the SSCs to undertake the SSA process in 12 months (provided preparatory work has been undertaken, and there is adequate staff capacity in place), 18 months would seem to be a more reasonable time period. Overall, a realistic timescale to complete the five-stage process within a year would be as follows:

- § Stage 1 – Pre-planning is important, but the skills needs assessment should be *the main focus from months 1 to 5*, with continued revision and amendment on the basis of consultation over months 6 to 8. The main factor likely to impinge of this timescale is whether external organisations have to be found and contracted to undertake parts of the research.
- § Stage 2 – Early groundwork in terms of mapping the available data is important, but the assessment of current provision should be *the main focus from months 5*

to 8. This needs to be a targeted piece of work addressing the ‘skills blockages’ identified in Stage 1 rather than a detailed mapping exercise.

- § Stage 3 – Runs as a thread throughout the development process, but should be *the main focus in months 9-10*, after the Stage 1 and 2 research has been completed. Initial scenario planning will have taken place during Stage 1 (typically, with a subset of key employers), the Stage 3 ‘process’ such that it exists is likely to take the form of more widespread employer consultation.
- § Stage 4 – On-going dialogue and engagement with employers will take place throughout the process. The precise focus of Stage 4 is likely to vary considerably depending on the nature of the likely commitment, *but will be a significant focus from months 9 to 13*.
- § Stage 5 – Initial preparation early on, with dialogue continuing with partners throughout – but the *main focus of activity (involving senior SSC staff) from months 9 to 15*.

Table 6.1 below provides an overview of how the timetable operates. It shows the degree to which the stages overlap even though each component is the primary focus at a specific point.

There will be variation between SSCs depending on capacity, the approach taken, the degree of information already available and the nature of existing SSC links. However, the main factor likely to put the above timetable at risk is the effective requirement to undertake a parallel process in each of the UK nations. As long as the approaches to Stages 1 and 2 are flexible enough to incorporate an analytical focus on each nation, that is not too problematic. The challenge for SSCs – logistically and in resource terms – is having to undertake initial preparation and on-going dialogue for Stage 5 with what are in effect four times the number of public agencies. And **critically, this is not work that can be completely devolved to an ‘SSC manager’ within each nation.**

Table 6.1 Outline SSA Timetable

	MONTHS															
STAGES	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16-18
1	■	■	■	■	■	▨	▨	▨								
2					■	■	■	■								
3	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■						
4	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		
5	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	▨

KEY:

■ **Primary Focus** ■ **Secondary Focus** ▨ **Review and Revision**

It is also difficult to be overly-prescriptive in terms of how each SSC will divide its resources across each of the five stages, as this is somewhat dependent on the existing information base and the internal capacity available. However, in crude terms, it is possible to suggest that resources should be evenly split in terms of the four main tasks underpinning the five-stage process:

- § developing a robust evidence base on demand;
- § developing a robust evidence base on supply;
- § employer consultation and negotiation;
- § and dialogue with partners.

This therefore provides broadly a fifty-fifty split in terms of resources between making the case (the evidence base) and building the deals. Within this, it may be possible that greater resources are required for supply side analysis than demand side analysis, and for dialogue with partners compared with employer consultation.

Of these activities, only the first two may require bringing in significant external expertise. The resources required for dialogue with partners comes in the form of senior SSC staff time and should be spread throughout the development period. The resources required for employer consultation and negotiation (e.g. seminars etc) will vary depending on the way in which employer views have been canvassed initially.

6.3 Using External Support

The following lessons emerge for using external support or consultancy to augment the SSA process:

- § **The SSA process should act as a lever for SSCs to strengthen their research and intelligence capacities.** This will be particularly pertinent for SSCs with relatively small staff numbers or 'newer' organisations. However, for this to become a reality it requires forward planning in terms of staffing. This is an area that SSCs may look to develop strategically in terms of their own internal capacities.
- § **Primary research is the main task likely to be undertaken externally in areas where specialist expertise is required.** Where the SSC has capacity and the necessary skills, it is beneficial to retain internally the actual reporting and compilation of research. The SSC is ultimately best placed to present the messages in a way suited to the target audiences.
- § **Assessment of secondary sources is also best undertaken in-house** - as a key SSC function is to be the *'intelligence holder'* on labour market and skills information. However, it is important that a variety of secondary sources are used to ensure credibility, including academic literature and national data in addition to research conducted by the SSC itself.
- § **Outsourcing the project management function is problematic**, because of the degree of control it cedes in terms of shaping the output. Project management should, therefore, be undertaken in-house.
- § The SSSA Stage 1 guidance was felt to be a useful starting point for drawing up Terms of Reference for external consultancy work.
- § There are benefits from being able to **draw on internationally recognised expertise within the sector** (e.g. in the form of Delphi Groups) to support the research and scenario building processes. The efficacy of this will vary from sector to sector, but the approach can add weight to the findings for the target audience.

- § For some SSCs, particularly global technology-led sectors, it is recommended that **separate sector experts are used specifically at the strategic level**. The approach can be expensive, but it adds serious credibility.
- § It is important that SSCs **engage fully with the consultants for learning purposes during the process**. SSA work is not a task that should be *'farmed out'* in a traditional sense. Pathfinders emphasised the importance of having regular meetings with their consultants during the process.
- § In practice, the pathfinders found that employing consultants able to deliver high-quality material quickly is expensive. It is also not possible to undertake *new* in-depth research on all of the regions and nations, **so existing data sources need to be used effectively, and priority regions/nations for new research identified**.
- § Given the wealth of information likely to feed into the Stage 1 and 2 components of the SSA, **it is important that SSCs resource a separate exercise specifically to draw the material together into a coherent overview** (an 'intelligent pen'). The experience from the pathfinders is that this is a task that **has to be undertaken by an individual from within the SSC**. This process also will need to include the production of tailored research outputs aimed at different audiences.

6.4 Using the Evidence to Drive Negotiation

It was clear fairly early on in the pathfinder process that the research would have to be presented in different ways to different audiences. Consultation materials for employers presenting the case for action had to condense the research into a style and terminology that was meaningful to the sector. There was a far narrower – but no less important – audience for the full, technical research analysis.

Initial drafts of the research drove the consultation with employers. This meant that the documentation evolved over time as would be expected. **However, there was a danger that the degree of focus on the detail, among partners in particular, created potential inefficiencies for both the SSCs and stakeholders. It was time-consuming for partners to read multiple drafts of research material and resource-intensive for some of the pathfinders to expend significant effort on the revision of documentation and incorporation of comments.** Time spent finessing the detail of the evidence and the way it was presented could have been spent talking about joint collaborative action.

Having said that, there were fundamental issues in terms of the technical presentation of materials that the pathfinders rightly had to address on the basis of feedback from the SSDA and stakeholders. The main point, relating to at least one SSC, was having to ensure the adequate referencing of sources. Another issue related to the comprehensiveness of the analysis required to achieve credibility – mitigating somewhat the initial approach from some of the SSCs to limit the documentation to the 'main findings'.

6.5 Involving Employers and Other Stakeholders

A number of lessons have emerged in terms of how high-level employer groups should be used in the SSA and what is required to maximise their effectiveness:

- § The **focus should be on industry influencers rather than being representative** in terms of the number of people involved. The high-level groups are not necessarily representative of the whole sector, but given the ‘visioning’ role that they have, it is sensible to have ‘market leaders’ as the key contributors. In practice, this means that participants tend to be hand-picked.
- § SSCs should, however, **look for a range of actors to be involved**. Leading academics and other industry experts have something to contribute in terms of adding perspective to the direct employer voice. Ensuring employer organisations or trade federations are engaged can help to ensure that the supply chain is involved (a key issue for some employers in terms of how they define their sector). Involving trade unions is also a positive and more SSCs should be encouraged to do this – although its success is dependent on the sector having as strong culture of partnership working.
- § Translating the initial scoping of industry scenarios into key industry *skills* challenges is difficult. It requires understanding how the drivers of change interact and how the sub-sectors need to prepare for potentially myriad outcomes, which requires a highly analytical and discursive approach. Part of the learning from this experience is about **the skills required to facilitate these groups** (e.g. arguably a role for sector-specialist, visioning, ‘think tank’ type organisations).
- § Part of the SSA engagement exercise should be the development of **new forms of interaction with employers**. SEMTA highlighted the benefits of workshops with employers to discuss the skills picture from national data sources. This qualitative work helped to unpick the complexities around some measures, such as employer satisfaction with provision.

6.6 Ensuring UK-Wide Coverage

The requirement for the SSA to be UK-wide in scope creates management and logistical challenges that the SSCs need to be acutely aware of. The five-stage process has to be mirrored for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Of the main resource inputs, employer consultation can be managed as a single UK-wide process, but both the analysis of LMI and the crucial deal-making stages have to be resourced as separate activities in each of the nations.

It is vital that each SSC has a substantive presence in each of the nations within which it is hoping to develop tangible actions. As noted above, the lesson from the pathfinder experience has been that the variety of skills required means that the process in each of the nations cannot realistically be devolved to a single individual. In particular, the SSC needs to draw on its LMI expertise in managing the Stage 1 and 2 inputs and on its senior staff to negotiate the Stage 5 actions. A sensitivity to, and a full awareness of, the different infrastructures and strategic context in each of the nations is a key success factor for this process.

6.7 Tactics for Negotiating ‘The Deal’

It is critical that SSCs have a full understanding of what it is that each of their proposed partners does and how they operate – ‘It is important that SSCs understand what are our core tasks and what are activities over-and-above that, which may well require additional funding for us and them’. (IAG Provider).

SSCs also have to be sensitive in relation to how they present and articulate perceived weaknesses – for example in terms of the provision of FE learning or IAG. An unsubstantiated claim in a consultation document or draft Agreement that ‘x *needs to be improved*’ is likely to antagonise the agency responsible for ‘x’, which is already likely itself to be focused on its own improvement. The claim may be right but in order to work jointly on improvements a constructive approach is required. This may be as simple in practice as ensuring that an initial dialogue has taken place about the sector’s perception of structural weaknesses and the supply-side view of that perception.

The SSC also has to be clear about what they can bring to the table in terms of employer commitment. It is clear that many supply-side partners are looking for guarantees that any new approach is going have employer support – and effectively become a ‘win-win’ for all stakeholders.

6.8 Presenting the Agreement

In presenting the agreement, SSCs may look primarily to present a series of key priorities to which various partners contribute, or a series of deals with partners. This can be characterised as a distinction between a thematic (top down) or organisational (bottom-up) approach to presenting the Agreement (the action plan). The distinction is partly presentational.

The approach adopted by SEMTA shows the scope of joint working with each of the main partner agencies, and separately with employers against four key priorities. This has the advantage of offering a clear picture of what each partner organisation is accountable for. The approaches adopted by ConstructionSkills and Skillset provide a more succinct summary of joint working. The e-skills UK Agreement includes *both* a summary by partner and a narrative summarising each of the deals within its overriding priority areas (e.g. the IT diploma; careers advice; undergraduate development etc). That narrative is important because it gives a feel for the strategic direction and priorities of the sector, and is an example of good practice in presenting the overall sectoral picture within the Agreement itself.

7 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents the main conclusions and recommendations from the SSA pathfinder evaluation. The long-term nature of some of the anticipated SSA actions means that it is too early to judge what the precise impact of the process will be. It is possible to judge, however, the potential of the SSA in terms of the pathfinder phase. Whatever the pathfinders have been able to achieve in terms of outcomes, the process has shown how critical the SSA is for providing a mechanism for employers to influence the supply side.¹²

7.1 The SSA Process

The SSA process is itself largely robust. It provides the best basis for trying to achieve the difficult outcomes required. Eighteen months is a realistic timescale to allocate for SSA development, although it is possible that some SSCs may be able to undertake the process within a 12 month period. In order to ensure the process is completed as efficiently as possible, there are several preparatory tasks that should usefully be completed by SSCs in advance, such as: initial scoping in terms of information availability; identification of the external resources that need to be brought in; initial dialogue with key employers (through SSC forums and the SSC Board) and identification of key partners.

That the timescale for the pathfinder phase was elongated is not in itself problematic. Some of the slippage can be ascribed to the pathfinder phase being a learning process. However, for a number of pathfinders, the research elements remained the prime focus far deeper into the process than may have been anticipated. The process itself seems flexible enough to contain slight over-runs in Stages 1 to 3, but this is something which may also affect future SSCs going through the process.

The main challenge in terms of timing is the apparent long tail in the process. Firming up partner and employer commitments 'on paper' requires a significant lead time. In fact, the initial milestones for SSA development, which suggested that initial solutions with partners would be agreed several months before completing the final Agreement, was probably the most effective approach. The 'draft SSAs' that appeared in December 2004 tended to include a wish list of partner actions, but there was not enough sense of incipient partner commitment for these to appear meaningful. This was partly because a rich dialogue with partners did not take place early enough (in the way that the SSCs seemed focused on the employer commitment from day one).

For the pathfinders, the main partner responses came on the basis of the draft SSAs. **The SSDA and partners therefore need to look to find whether more informal routes can be used earlier in the process to set the ground for agreement. This would have to be over and above the formal planning cycles that some partners are working within.**

¹² It should be noted that the time lag between the completion of the fieldwork and the publication of this report means that the SSCs and the SSDA have already started to address some of the recommendations highlighted here.

Do partner organisations have the capacity to respond in this way? For some it is very difficult. Yet the LSC example shows that even where there are strict funding and planning cycles which the SSAs have to feed into, an **active dialogue** outside of this process means that the SSA is likely to have a more significant impact. Positively, many partner organisations are putting in place systems to respond to the larger-scale SSA process and seem open to early dialogue. The fact that key partners are involved ‘corporately’ through the Project Boards and other infrastructure provides a useful starting point for SSCs looking for early engagement. However, caution needs to be exercised over the amount of written drafts of research material that are passed on to partner organisations.

In terms of managing and structuring the process, **it seems unlikely that partial footprint coverage is a sustainable approach to the SSA (given that SSCs, in their entirety, are meant to represent strategic sectors)**. However, for many SSCs it is likely that the process will take place sub-sectorally. If this happens in parallel, then it is important that effort is made to draw the various strands into a single action plan (although in some cases this will not be possible). If not all sub-sectors are addressed in parallel, typically because there are a large number, it is important there is a strategy for rolling out the SSA more widely across the footprint. There is a wider question here in terms of resources. The economies of scale from undertaking multiple SSAs are outweighed by the needs of separate strands of research and, in particular, employer consultation. Yet it seems right that the funding for each sector to develop an SSA is broadly similar. What may in fact be required, is a more selective approach to the intensive agreement phase (i.e. not trying to strike deals ‘with everyone, on everything’).

However it was spent, for the pathfinders much of the resource input was front-loaded into the intelligence phase. What may have been lacking among the pathfinders was significant enough allocation of resources (time) of senior staff to putting Stages 4 and 5 together.

The following recommendations emerge in terms of managing the SSA process:

- § ***SSCs and the SSDA need to ensure that SSCs have sufficient research capacity to undertake the process.***
- § ***SSCs also need to ensure that there is enough senior capacity within the organisation to set the basis for the action plan. The earlier this process starts, with informal dialogue on the ‘first cuts’ of the research, the easier it will be to move to more ambitious and detailed solutions in the action plan.***
- § ***SSCs should ensure that they involve the whole organisation in the SSA process, from planning through to delivery.***

The pathfinder phase also raises some key points in terms of managing the process to ensure UK-wide coverage:

- § ***The SSDA and project board members (particularly in the devolved administrations) working towards separate action plans for each of the nations limits the effectiveness of the output. It also further balkanises the process and is not an effective way of providing UK-wide coverage. Building actions are that are tailored to each national labour market and***

system is critical. Yet if the full range of stakeholders is engaged throughout the process, the emergent priorities are likely to be more palatable and at least some solutions could have a UK-dimension (perhaps with discrete actions in each nation).

- § *SSCs/SSDA – SSCs need to contribute more senior-level resources to the process in the nations, although there may be questions in terms of how viable this is given the scale/complexity of the wider SSA process. Over time this should form part of a selective approach to policy influence relevant to each sector. The SSDA therefore has a continuing role in brokering these relationships by supporting ‘on the ground’ liaison with key partners in the nations (and regions).*

7.2 The Intelligence Phase

The skills needs assessment produced by the pathfinders provided increased breadth, depth and foresight of knowledge rather than ‘new’ insights as such. The evidence from the pathfinders is that while the messages are not in themselves profoundly new in comparison with the previous market assessments, **the new skills assessments have provided a wholly new approach to LMI and research as a process for the SSCs.** One of the main ways in which the process has added value has been in providing a quantifiably new form of engagement with employers, in which they are far more directly involved in shaping the analysis.

The analysis tended to give greater prominence to SSC-own sources than national data sources, which weakens the overall credibility of the case being put forward – even though the new research undertaken as part of the skills needs assessment was a very solid basis for analysis. Not all SSCs will have to undertake large-scale primary research, although doing so adds real weight to the case being made. What is more important is that the SSA process is used by SSCs to ensure that they have an on-going programme of timely, robust LMI feeds.

While the sector trends and current needs will largely draw on quantitative data, the Skills for Business network should avoid an overly mechanistic approach. The strength and richness of the message is likely to emerge from qualitative research and employer consultations. Where these are used, it is important that the SSCs make reference to how representative this view is of the employer base.

Critically, it is possible to see the link between the ‘drivers of change’ and the ‘what lies ahead’ components of the Stage 1 analysis and the actions outlined in the final Agreements. Whether the solutions outlined in the action plans will be sufficient to meet the often significant needs outlined in the Stage 1 assessments is more debatable. Yet the key strand of the SSA process that worked well in ensuring that ‘actions-meet-need’ has been the iterative way in which SSCs and their employers have had to channel the wealth of Stage 1 information into key priority areas.

One of the most obvious impacts on the pathfinder SSCs themselves has been how the SSA has started to transform the role of research within the SSCs. One SSC described the process as ‘moving research into the centre of what we do’. Research now has a more specific purpose, rather than just being ‘something that is nice to know’.

The assessment of current provision was the weakest component of the SSA process. In time though, this is an area in which the SSA could add real value. There are issues relating to the mapping and rationalisation of qualifications – as well as a more robust understanding of quality of provision – that link in with wider SSC work around the development of Sector Qualifications Strategies.

The weakness in the Stage 2 assessment reflected a lack of an analytical framework (to understand the nature of supply) with which to undertake a targeted analysis. It is not necessarily practical to attempt to map all skills and qualifications relating to the sector. Instead the focus should be on the key occupational areas and skills that are the most important within the sector both now and in the future. It is therefore critical that the assessment of provision builds on the Stage 1 findings.

The gap analysis was the least distinct of all of the SSA stages, partly because the process is dynamic. The pathfinders were continually refining and testing priorities for action on the basis of future scenarios. These tended to be embedded in a relatively thorough analysis of the drivers of change, although much less so in a rigorous analysis of the underpinning supply of skills (reflecting weakness in the Stage 2 analysis).

The SSA has also forced both the SSCs and key partners such as the LSC to focus on making a concrete assessment of current provision. Analysis of supply has been an area of weakness in the SSC market assessments. While there is still much work to do in terms of looking at questions such as the quality of provision, the SSA process has started a debate towards achieving more robust data on provision. It provides a concrete context for SSCs to develop more sophisticated estimations of private and informal provision, as well as helping to fuel debates around what employers need and what employers buy.

The scenario building component has been a key driver for the SSA process. The futures work ‘excited employers’ – and was a key driver for intensive engagement. What is clear from the final Agreements is that this is not in itself enough to translate into substantive joint action. The more substantial parts of the employer commitment tend to have had their roots in place before the SSA process was undertaken.

Recommendations in terms of the intelligence phase are as follows:

- § ***In preparation for the intelligence phase, SSCs should undertake a comprehensive assessment of currently available material to ensure this can be fully incorporated into the analysis. It is also important to reflect material or at least acknowledge material where there is perceived disparity (for example, in sector definitions).***
- § ***It is recommended that SSCs place emphasis on developing new primary research (qualitative and quantitative as appropriate) to fill key information gaps, and use the research process to engage and involve employers.***
- § ***Where an SSC has a particularly strong grasp of the key drivers underpinning the sector, it is sensible to begin testing and refining possible messages while additional primary and secondary research is on-going. This helps to give employers ownership over the messages.***

- § ***It is recommended that SSCs manage the stages iteratively, yet ensure that new and challenging findings from the Stage 1 and 2 research can be effectively fed in to the process – i.e. they do not firm-up the priorities for action too early.***
- § ***In terms of adding further value to the skills needs assessment component of the SSA, key areas for SSCs to focus on include the international dimension and the government agenda. Prioritising the key drivers identified can also provide a useful basis for ‘actioning’ the Stage 1 research.***
- § ***Trade unions may be able to play a more active role in the intelligence phase of the SSA. This is not to replicate the work done by the SSCs but to provide a more active dialogue – with specific trade unions canvassing the perspective of members (and ULRs).***

7.3 The Agreement Phase

A considerable difficulty when looking at the substance of the SSA documents is to get a consistent sense of what, in the eyes of partners, employers, SSCs and the SSDA constitutes success for the process. In particular, there has been a process of managing employer expectations around a process that had large ambitions, but an undefined core in terms of how those expectations would be met (i.e. how the process would work in practice).

The SSCs were in the challenging position of needing to sell the ‘SSA vision’ to get employers on board before what could be delivered was able to be defined. This was unavoidable to a large degree, but carries a risk in terms of maintaining wider SSC credibility among employers. It is too soon to judge the degree to which the SSA will bolster or damage that credibility, although the tranche two SSCs will at least be able to offer some tangible examples to their employers

One of the main areas of added value from the SSA process is the way in which it provides a new basis for dialogue between SSCs and the employers in their sector. Given the nature of the Skills for Business network it is likely that most SSCs will deliver the employer commitment through individual employers signing up or jointly committing to act. The difficulty is that a piecemeal approach, which may be as much as can be achieved in some sectors, leads to a risk of having an SSA which is not quite the sum of its many parts (i.e. a multitude of small actions perversely mitigates against achieving significant change).

The main way in which influence is increased is through concerted employer action. The pathfinder SSAs hint at what this can achieve, but also show the difficulty in stimulating this. Nevertheless, the SSA process has supported internal dialogue with key employers. It has provided a process by which employer views can be challenged on the basis of the research being developed and compiled (*‘we’ve been able to make employers look at what they spend their money on’ – pathfinder lead*).

There is also an assumption that each industry is ready to collectively engage with and create something meaningful out of the SSA. Looking across the Skills for Business network, that assumption may not hold for all SSCs. It is important not to underestimate the achievement in producing any sort of *across-the-sector*

commitment, even where the actions themselves are not particularly ambitious. Looking at the four pathfinder sectors, there are clearly different cultures, traditions and approaches that dictate the likely model for the employer commitment. There is a regulatory dimension to both the ConstructionSkills and Skillset sectors that makes collective action easier, but these sectors are the exception rather than the rule.

The fact that the mechanics of the SSA process were firmed up as the process itself evolved also carried a risk in terms of SSC relations with stakeholders. The main point remains that the SSA process is largely positive in terms of providing a more focused tool for undertaking dialogue with partners. In some cases this is new engagement, while in other cases just more structured engagement. Yet because the SSA process could not be clearly defined up-front it was left to each potential stakeholder to determine what the process would be, how it would look and what they would be expected to do to get involved. This became damaging where either the SSCs could not meet stakeholder expectations – realistic or unrealistic (e.g. in terms of the content of the skill needs assessment or the action plan) – or where there was a mismatch in expectations.

Partner engagement can be summarised as being comprehensive in terms of the actors involved, yet variable in terms of the nature of the engagement. Not all partner organisations would be expected to have the same stake or require the same level of direct involvement, but the variation has perhaps been wider than would have been expected. A key lesson for SSCs is that all relevant stakeholders have to be engaged throughout the process across the whole of the UK.

There is a more fundamental question in terms of what role the SSAs could and should play in Scotland. The Agreements have a UK-wide remit but their role and centrality is underpinned by the DfES Skills Strategies (2003 and 2005), which are primarily for England. This puts the process in a fairly exceptional position, as its overall legitimacy does not stem from the internal strategies and policies driving action in Scotland.

That there are different strategies at play in England and Scotland is more than a matter of 'window dressing'. There are arguably distinct positions on the nature of the link between skills and productivity and the character of a shift to a demand-based system (and by that meaning employer demand not individual demand). This is the basic precondition for the Skills for Business network, so it causes a potential challenge in terms of engagement and positioning the SSA in Scotland.

The pathfinder SSCs embarked on a process with certain assumptions about what could be crudely called the 'supply side commitment' across the whole of the UK. It is this commitment that underpins the process as a basis for action (to be able to 'directly shape the nature of supply', as the SSA specification states), but it was not a commitment that stakeholders in Scotland had signed up to in the same way as in England. This does not in itself undermine the SSA process in Scotland, but it gives it a distinctiveness that was not fully accounted for in the pathfinder approach.

There was clearly a need to move forward with the SSA policy within a given timeframe, but this meant that it happened before enough high-level dialogue had taken place between the SSSA and key partners in Scotland to resolve some of the fundamental questions. What, for example, does an SSA mean without a costed commitment? Given the existing enterprise and lifelong learning strategies in Scotland,

is there room for manoeuvre for the SSCs? Is it an effective use of resources to undertake an in-depth analytical exercise at the level of any of the nations if supply cannot be shaped directly?

On reflection, it seems that the Agreement is neither a single document (e.g. a treaty document) nor a single event. Rather, it is best characterised as a development process that at intervals produces a series of documents. Producing such breadth of material and retaining overall coherence and depth of analysis is has proven to be challenging. Further, the large volume of activities and actors within the Agreements detracts from the clarity of the messages contained within.

The financial element of the SSA does not appear strongly in the Agreements themselves, and is not considered systematically in the presentation of the deals. There are, however, places within each SSA where significant sums of money are mentioned.

In assessing the particular 'deals' struck through the SSA process, there remains an ambiguity about what within the final Agreement is a 'signed' deal and which solutions require further work. Overall, it is not clear what the balance will be in delivering the SSA between the SSC role and the roles of others. Crucially, the role of the SSC will be critical, particularly as there is further work to be done to translate the SSA into achievable outcomes.

At the end of the process, it would seem that the SSAs offer comprehensive workforce development plans that differ from their predecessor documents in that there is: a solid foundation of analysis; a widely conducted referencing or validation process with key partners, including industry, that gives some weight to the arguments presented; and agendas for action that will shape the programme of work for the pathfinder SSCs (and partners) for some years.

If the SSA can be said to posit a new dialogue on skills issues, the pathfinder phase had the function of showing how this translates into practice. The pathfinder process has not created SSAs that are the short, pithy, challenging and exciting documents that may originally have been envisaged by some. Rather, the SSAs are robust, 'workman-like' strategies that reflect not only the complexity of the challenge but also the complexity of the solutions and partnerships required.

In the short-term, therefore, the value of the learning from attempting a quantifiably new 'process' outweighs any lack of ambition in terms of outcome. The pathfinder phase will have been successful if the network more widely can learn the lessons in terms of identifying priorities and successfully engaging partners, as well as streamlining what at times seems to be a document-driven process. Success for the pathfinders will be evident if they can show that bringing partners together as part of a 'new dialogue' can lead to the achievement of substantial skills improvements in the medium- and long-term.

The following recommendations emerge in relation to the Agreement phase of the SSA:

- § ***A key recommendation is for SSCs and the SSSA to ensure that dialogue with the full range of key stakeholders takes place early and actively.***

There may have been some early pathfinder engagement with stakeholders that, because of its passive nature, made joint action more difficult.

- § *The SSCs should focus on a small number of key areas in which they anticipate achieving significant change.*
- § *The 'deals' should reflect what all the parties have to contribute – what the partner, the employer and the SSC will deliver.*
- § *As far as possible, the outcomes within the SSA should be actions rather than further SSA development work.*
- § *If the SSA is to fulfil its role of being a tool by which partners can be held to account, it is important the activities contained within are 'new' or stretch significantly work that is currently underway.*
- § *SSCs should not underestimate the degree to which the SSA research can usefully go on to shape future SSC actions and business planning corporately. However, be careful of diluting the potency of the final Agreement by trying to incorporate all activity being undertaken by the SSC.*

List of previous SSDA Publications

Please note all publications can be downloaded from our website www.ssd.org.uk

Research Report 1

Skills for Business 1000

Research Report 2

Evaluation of the Trailblazer Phase of the Sector Skills Council Network

Research Report 3

Skills for Business Network – Phase I Evaluation

Research Report 4

Skills for Business 2003 – Survey of Employers

Research Report 5

Skills Pay: The Contribution of Skills to Business Success

Research Report 6

The UK Skills and Productivity Agenda: The Evidence Base for the SSSA's Strategic Plan 2005-2008

Research Report 7

The UK Workforce: Realising our Potential

Research Report 8

Sectoral Management Priorities: Management Skills and Capacities

Research Report 9

Raising Sector Skills Levels – How Responsive is Local Training Supply?

Research Report 10

Skills for Business Network: Phase 2 Evaluation Main Report

Research Report 11

Skills for Business 2004: Survey of Employers

Research Report 12

Skills for Business Network: Phase 2 Evaluation Case Studies

Research Report 13

Sectoral Productivity Differences Across the UK

Research Report 14

Sectors Matter: An International Study of Sector Skills and Productivity

Working Futures: National Report 2003-04

Working Futures: Regional Report 2003-04

Working Futures: Sectoral Report 2003-04



This leaflet is a summary of a research project carried out by GHK in association with SQW on behalf of the Sector Skills Development Agency.

To obtain copies of this document, contact
Sector Skills Development Agency
Callflex Business Park
Golden Smithies Lane
Wath-upon-Deerne
South Yorkshire
S63 7ER

Tel 01709 765 444
Email: info@ssda.org.uk
Web: www.skillsforbusiness.org.uk

ISBN: 0-9549163-7-9