UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

Department of Work, Employment and Organisation

Assessing Policy Influence: Trade Unions, Workplace Learning, and the Skills Agenda

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Declaration of Authenticity and Author's Rights

This thesis is the result of the author's original research. It has been composed by the author and has not been previously submitted for examination which has led to the award of a degree.

Signed:

Date:

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Abstract

This thesis evaluates the effectiveness of trade union influence in the policy process, with particular focus on policy debates on skills and learning. It a key objective of trade unions to influence government policy. Unions seek to exert influence in the industrial and political spheres, in order to effectively represent the interests of their members and those of wider society. As their power in the industrial sphere has declined in recent decades and their influence narrowed, unions have looked to broaden their activities, giving increasing attention to government and the public policy arena and the ways in which they can influence key decision-makers. Against this backdrop, this thesis seeks to assess trade union influence on the policy process and consider the extent to which unions' engagement in workplace learning and skills initiatives has increased their influence on the State.

This thesis draws on the tools for measuring policy influence found in the political science literature and the debates within the industrial relations literature that seek to examine trade unions' relationship with the State. A model has been developed to assess the STUC's influence on the policy process, and takes account of their policy priorities in learning and skills, the tactics they employ to exert influence, and which outcomes they have achieved. This research also considers whether influence on skills and learning has led to broader policy influence.

Data is drawn primarily from a single case study and 27 in-depth interviews. The research highlights the complexities of assessing policy influence, and uncovers the more nuanced forms largely overlooked in the existing literature. These less visible manifestations of influence uncover new insights into the ways in which unions try to achieve their policy priorities and moves beyond outcomes as a proxy for influence.

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Abbreviations

AAG	Apprenticeship Approvals Group
CfE	Curriculum for Excellence
CME	Coordinated Market Economy
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
EC	European Commission
ESF	European Social Fund
ESOL	English to Speakers of Other Languages
ESSB	Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board
EU	European Union
EUO	Employed Union Officer
FWC	Fair Work Convention
HIE	Highlands and Islands Enterprise
HRM	Human Resource Management
ILA	Individual Learning Account
IR	Industrial Relations
ITA	Individual Training Account
LLU	Lifelong Learning Unit
LME	Liberal Market Economy
MA	Modern Apprenticeship
MAG	Modern Apprenticeship Group
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MP	Member of Parliament
NPF	National Performance Framework
NPI	National Performance Indicators
PACE	Partnership Action for Continuing Employment
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SDS	Skills Development Scotland
SE	Scottish Enterprise
SFC	Scottish Funding Council

SNP	Scottish National Party
STUC	Scottish Trades Union Congress
SUL	Scottish Union Learning
SULF	Scottish Union Learning Fund
TUC	Trades Union Congress
TUWPLL	Trade Union Working Party on Lifelong Learning
UK	United Kingdom
UKCES	UK Commission for Employment and Skills
ULF	Union Learning Fund
ULR	Union Learning Representative
VoC	Varieties of Capitalism

1. Introduction

1.1 Focus and research objectives

This thesis presents an in-depth study of union influence in the policy process in Scotland. Its specific focus is the tactics employed by unions to achieve their policy priorities in skills and learning. The research considers the extent to which unions' role in workplace learning and skills has increased their influence on the State and what has driven union objectives and activities in this policy area. This study contributes to knowledge by using the tools found in the political science literature on policy influence to understand the nuances of unions' engagement in the learning and skills agenda. The research considers the extent to which unions have been able to exert influence on learning and skills policy and whether this has given them a platform to influence policy more broadly.

There is a growing academic literature that evaluates unions' role in workplace learning and skills. The central focus of this thesis is to assess whether unions have developed an influential role in government policy through their engagement in union learning activity. The rationale for this focus is the contemporary debate in the UK on whether the learning agenda has afforded trade unions substantial influence over public policy (McIlroy 2008; Findlay and Warhurst 2011; Rainbird and Stuart 2011; Clough, 2012). While McIlroy (2008) acknowledges the successful role that unions have established for themselves in workplace learning, he maintains that unions have failed to attain substantial influence over learning and skills policy and are instead being used to perform an administrative function on behalf of the State. McIlroy goes on to argue that while learning may generate membership and activism, there is a lack of evidence to show that the union learning agenda has delivered substantive gains to unions in terms of influencing the policy agenda. The argument presented is that unions have helped government implement its policy agenda, rather than to influence the direction of policy. This research seeks to challenge that position and explores unions' influence on learning and skills policy in the Scottish context.

A key focus of the research until now has been the impact of union learning on learners and employers (Wood and Moore 2005; Stuart *et al*. 2010; 2012). Its impact on the policy sphere, however, is less developed. The existing literature on policy influence tends to focus on outcomes at the latter stages of the policy process, whereas the earlier, more informal and agenda-setting stages are given much less attention (Leech 2010; 2011) Also, while there is some secondary data on the impact of unions on skills and learning policy (McIlroy 2008; Clough 2012), there is little primary research on whether and in what way unions influence policy around learning and skills.

The central thesis proposed is whether trade unions' engagement in workplace learning and skills initiatives has enabled them to exert influence in the policy process. Unions use a variety of tactics to try to achieve their learning and skills policy priorities. Influence is a key concept in this research and so it is important to outline how this is to be understood at this point in the thesis. A useful starting point is to consider dictionary definitions of influence. The Cambridge online dictionary defines influence as '*the power to have an effect on people or things, or a person or things that is able to do this*'.[1] The Collins online dictionary defines influence as '*the power to make other people agree with your opinions or do what you want*'.[2] Both these definitions highlight the role of power in how researchers conceptualise influence and the ability to make others do what you want them to do. In terms of this study, these can be understood as the capacity or power of trade unions to achieve their policy priorities in learning and skills. A key aspect of this is to examine the effectiveness of the actions or tactics that unions use to achieve their priorities in this area of policy.

1.2 An overview of the case

To assess unions' influence on learning and skills policy, this study adopts a single case study - the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) - as the representative body of the trade union movement in Scotland. This helps to address the gap in the

[1] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/influence
[2] https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/influence

existing research which is more focused on the UK/English-level, and where unions' influence in the policy sphere, particularly in regard to learning and skills, is less developed. Assessing unions' policy influence in the Scottish context also gives researchers the opportunity to contribute to the debates on multi-level governance and the State's ability both to constrain and enable trade union influence in the policy process. Scotland is a smaller and more connected policy community around learning and skills; this gives actors such as trade unions the opportunity to build their influencing capacity with key decision-makers in the policy process.

1.3 Research questions

Fundamentally, this study seeks to assess trade union influence in the policy process, with the domain of interest being skills and learning. The above introductory sections have given a brief overview of the various issues that the research engages with and that require further investigation. The research questions set out below have been developed to address such issues.

1. **What are the learning and skills policy priorities for trade unions in Scotland?**
2. **What tactics are used by unions in Scotland to exert influence over learning and skills policy and how effective have these been?**
3. **To what extent has the union learning agenda given unions in Scotland an influential voice on skills and learning policy?**
4. **Has unions' engagement in the learning and skills policy sphere generated broader policy influence?**

1.4 Mapping of thesis

The following section will map the chapters of this thesis.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on the functions and objectives of trade unions and their relationship with the State. It outlines the key functions of trade unions (see Ewing 2005) and the various ways trade unions try to exert influence in the economic and political sphere. Chapter 2 also reviews the relationship between

trade unions and the State, highlighting the complexities of studying the State before presenting some key State. This is followed by a discussion of the economic and political environment in which unions operated prior to Thatcher coming into power in 1979, and the subsequent impact of the Conservative Government's reform agenda on the trade union movement. The chapter concludes with a discussion on how the State can both constrain and support union influence, which is located within the wider Varieties of Capitalism (VoC) debates.

Chapter 3 reviews the literature on trade union revitalisation, outlining some of the causes and consequences of union decline. It acknowledges the vast literature on union decline, but highlights the lack of research looking specifically at how union tactics and strategies can help to overturn their fortunes. Observers note the need for unions to adopt a more strategic approach in their campaigning and activities (Bronfenbrenner and Jurvich 1998). Authors such as Gall (2009) argue that organising remains the best option for unions to reverse the decline, but that the union approach needs to be more strategic. This chapter also considers whether union learning can be a path to renewal, which in the context of this research can be understood as unions being able to increase their influence on government and achieve their policy priorities in learning and skills. Findlay and Warhurst (2011) attempt to solve the 'evidence-based problem' highlighted by McIlroy (2008) by examining the impact of union learning-funded projects on union activism and recruitment; with results suggesting union learning can make a positive contribution to revitalisation. This chapter also introduces the single case study in this research - the STUC - and discusses the political environment in which they operate, including an overview of the learning and skills landscape in Scotland. This serves to demonstrate the opportunities that devolution in Scotland has allowed actors like trade unions, to exert influence in the policy process.

Chapter 4 begins with a discussion on how researchers might conceptualise power and assess influence, highlighting the key work of Lukes (2005[1974]) and his three dimensions of power. The chapter also outlines some of the approaches in the

existing literatures to overcoming the problems of measuring influence. The case is made that researchers need to adopt a broader understanding of power and influence, and develop models that take account of manifestations of influence that are less visible and harder to access. The framework for policy influence is also introduced in this chapter, highlighting that influence can be exerted through different scenarios and not simply by achieving a specific policy position or outcome. Chapter 5 explores the complexities of the policy process and explores how actors, such trade unions, can try to exert influence. It also highlights the importance of a close examination of the tactics actors use to try to achieve their policy priorities, and the usefulness of the policy 'stages' approach in the study of policy influence. Chapter 5 concludes with reflections on the literature review and presents the researcher's model for assessing policy influence. Chapter 6 addresses the research methodology and research design. It sets out the researcher's interest in the subject area and then outlines the philosophical underpinnings of the research and its methodological implications.

Chapters 7 to 9 present the empirical data from this research. Chapter 7 outlines the STUC's policy priorities in learning and skills and attempts to gain an understanding of what informs these. Findings demonstrate first and foremost that STUC priorities in this area are driven by the needs of their members, both at the individual and collective level. This chapter also highlights the challenges that the STUC face in achieving their policy priorities. Chapter 8 discusses the variety of tactics used by the STUC and unions to achieve their policy priorities in skills and learning, and considers how effective these have been. These range from presenting credible evidence and addressing the training gaps of employers, to promoting union success stories and using the strategic leadership of the STUC's General Secretary. Chapter 9 brings together the previous two empirical chapters and considers the extent to which unions have been able to exert influence in the policy process. The material in this chapter is focused closely on the framework for policy influence. This chapter highlights examples of STUC influence, both in learning and skills, and in other policy areas where they have an interest. The STUC

use a variety of tactics to achieve outcomes in learning and skills policy and beyond, and in some areas have helped to support partners in achieving their policy objectives.

Chapter 10 presents the discussion and conclusions of this study. It summarises the empirical findings which demonstrate trade union influence on learning and skills policy, and in wider workplace issues. It also highlights the complexity of the relationship between trade unions and government in this area of public policy, as well as the nuances of policy influence. Crucially, it also demonstrates that the STUC's influencing capacity in this policy area has been accelerating since devolution. This study has demonstrated that outcomes are not the only proxy for influence, and that to understand the complexities of policy influence, the nature of the policy process and the tactics used by actors such as trade unions must also be considered. This chapter also outlines the conceptual, methodological and empirical contributions of this thesis. The strengths, limitations and implications for future research are then considered, before some final reflections on the STUC and unions' engagement with government, and influence on the policy process since this research was carried out.

The next chapter will assess trade unions' functions and objectives, and their relationship with the State.

2. Trade unions: functions, objectives and their relationship with the State

2.1 Introduction

This thesis seeks to understand the extent to which unions have been able to develop an influential role in learning and skills policy. To achieve this, there will be a close examination of unions' policy priorities in skills and learning, the tactics they employ, and the outcomes achieved. Before assessing the extent of their policy influence, it is important to understand the space in which unions operate, taking account of their functions and objectives both within and outside the workplace. This usefully highlights the ways in which unions navigate different policy spaces and adapt to changing circumstances; these are dependent on the actors they interact with and the objectives they are seeking to achieve. This chapter will begin by providing an overview of the functions and objectives of trade unions before moving on to consider why and by which means unions try to exert influence in the industrial and political sphere. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of unions' relationship with the State, exploring the ways in which the State can both constrain union influence and provide opportunities for unions to exert influence in the policy process.

2.2 The Function of Trade Unions

The primary function of trade unions is to represent the interests of their members. This encompasses activities aimed at representation in the workplace and in the industrial sphere, but also extends to activities outside the workplace in the wider political sphere. Engaging both in the industrial and political spheres is vital for unions, in order to deliver on their primary function and give voice to issues that affect their members (Flanders 1970; Hyman 1997; 2001; Wright 2011). Union influence in the industrial and political spheres is connected but does not always move in the same direction. In some circumstances, influence in one area can reinforce or compensate a lack of influence elsewhere. For example, trade unions could previously rely on their industrial strength to achieve their objectives in the

workplace and in the wider political and policy sphere. Much of this strength can be attributed to traditionally strong old manufacturing industries such as coal, steel, printing, and car manufacturing which were highly unionised. However, these industries were in decline by the 1970s, and were further impacted by recession in the 1980s when many manufacturing jobs were lost. This shift in the British economy, together with union legislation introduced under the Thatcher government, helped to restrict the power of trade unions. With this decline in industrial strength in recent decades, unions have looked more closely towards government and the public policy arena and the different ways in which they can influence key decision-makers (Taylor 2005; Findlay and Warhurst 2011; Clough 2012; Kelly 2015).

Flanders states that researchers can only define the purpose of trade unions if we observe their behaviour: we can 'infer what they are for from what they do' (1970: 41). Analysing where trade unions devote their time and resources gives focus to where their priorities lie and whose interests they represent. Flanders stresses that although trade unions have varying interests both within and outside the workplace, their priority is the interests of their members - not employers, industry or the State. It is important however to stress that for unions to best represent the interests of their members, whether through bargaining over wages and workplace conditions or signing 'partnership agreements' with employers that give assurances of job security in return for flexible working practices (Wright 2011), they must engage with stakeholders at various levels. These range from government representatives and policymakers to employers and across civil society. Engagement must extend beyond the workplace to allow unions to influence decisions in the industrial and political spheres; this in turn impacts on the workplace and trade union functions at that level.

2.3 Ewing's Five Principal Functions of Trade Unions

The previous section pointed to the fact that union engagement and interests extend beyond the workplace, and that they have had to adapt to their changing

circumstances to best represent the interests of their members and those of the wider union movement. The following section will attempt to uncover the ways in which trade unions attempt to exert influence in the industrial and political spheres in the UK context. Ewing's (2005) work on the functions of trade unions provides a useful overview of the ways in which unions can adopt different functions to maximise their influencing potential, even when faced with constraints imposed by the State. Ewing presents five principal trade union functions: a service function; a representation function; a regulatory function; a government function; and a public administration function (2005: 3-5). These functions are also illustrated in Figure 1 at the end of this section. Following legislative reform from the late 1970s, 'the State has sought both to repress certain core functions of trade unionism and to direct trade union purpose in a number of new directions' (ibid: 1). A key point to highlight here is that these union functions are not stable; they are open to change and are shaped by the existing economic and political environment, as well as by unions themselves.

The service function presented by Ewing can be understood as the provision of services and benefits to union members, for example, legal and financial advice. The representative function, or the representation of employee interests in the workplace, has both an individual and a collective dimension. At the individual level, unions provide assistance on grievance and disciplinary matters, for example, providing a companion in forums where disputes are heard. At the collective level, representation can take several forms, including bargaining and consulting on behalf of the wider workforce. Ewing references the regulatory impact of such collective representation which produces outcomes that usually apply to both union members and non-union members. Although individuals have a right to be accompanied by a union representative in grievance and disciplinary matters, there are limits in place. For example, employees do not have the right to be accompanied when the matter involves changes to the terms and conditions of their employment. Collective representation can also be limited to issues such as pay, hours of work and annual leave (2005: 8-9). The regulatory function can be

understood as the unions' role in rule-making, which can extend beyond the interests of their members. In this function, unions' role can be direct, in terms of multi-employer collective bargaining, or indirect where the union plays a role in securing legislation such as statutory time off for Union Learning Representatives (ULRs). Collective bargaining can also be used as a regulatory instrument, where the outcomes of an agreement apply to all relevant workers in a particular industry or sector. However, it is important to stress that employers do not have to accept terms and conditions that have been negotiated under a collective agreement. Ewing asserts that the regulatory function 'is perhaps the most important function of trade unions, this being the most visible manifestation of trade unions' role in promoting fairness and social justice not only at work but within the economy as a whole' (ibid: 13). Since the decline in collective bargaining coverage and collective agreements in recent times, unions have increasingly looked towards alternative means such as political action in order to influence government. This is a good example of the way in which unions adopt different courses of action and adapt to changing circumstances to try to exert influence.

With the retreat of their regulatory role associated with a decline in collective bargaining, trade union political action has taken on greater prominence in more recent times and has in turn placed greater strategic importance on their governmental influencing function. One example of trade unions' government function is their affiliation with the Labour Party. Over the years, the union movement has played a significant role in helping the party gain political power. A good illustration of this was in 1997 when the trade unions played a central role in helping the Labour Party win the general election. Ewing (2005: 16) also highlights the existence of informal channels of trade union influence that exist; this can be easy to overlook, where trade unionists have gone on to become Members of Parliament (MPs). Alan Johnson became the first former union leader in four decades to a gain cabinet position in 2004 when he was appointed Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Johnson used his trade union experience and negotiating skills to move through the backbenches of the Labour Party into more

senior and influential positions. As Secretary of State for Work and Pensions he championed the cause of disabled workers and started work on what would later become the Disability Living Allowance. Johnson used his previous experiences as a trade union official when negotiating with representatives of the disability lobby, many of whom had worked in heavy industry and were campaigning for support to help them back into work.[3] Trade union representation also extends to administrative roles within the State, where historically they have taken part in task forces and working groups. Trade unions have also been described as 'agents of the State' (2005: 18) with reference to their role in public administration, particularly where governments have needed additional expertise or information in a particular policy area.

Two important dimensions of the governmental and public administration functions of trade unions are highlighted by Ewing. First, the representation of working people and giving voice to their needs and concerns. This trade union function is described as an effective 'means of restraining the power of the State and a means of harnessing the power of the State' (2005: 5). This power is key and enables trade unions to carry out their other functions. Second, it is again important to highlight that unions can be a part of the process of government. Unions play a role in the development, implementation and delivery of government policy. Having introduced the core functions of trade unions and touched upon some of the ways in which trade unions try to exert influence in the economic and political sphere, these issues will now be explored in greater depth.

[3] https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect/person/alan-johnson/

Figure 1: Trade union functions

Trade Union Function	Example of Activity
Service function	Provision of services such as legal or financial advice 
Representative function	Individual level – representation for grievance and disciplinary matters  Collective level – bargaining on behalf of wider workforce 
Regulatory function (or rule making)	Securing time off for Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) 

Trade Union Function	Example of Activity
Governmental Function	Trade Union affiliation with the Labour Party 
Public Administrative Function	Taking part in government working groups and task forces 

2.4 The Two Faces of Trade Unionism

Allan Flanders has made a significant contribution to the debates around the functions and objectives of trade unions in *Management and Unions*. He states that unions have two distinct faces: the 'vested interest' and the 'sword of justice' (1970: 15). The vested interest is concerned with unions' impact or influence on the workplace and the wider economy in such areas as workplace productivity, levels of pay and terms of employment. The sword of justice face can be understood as the social purpose of trade unions, for example, campaigning on issues such as equality and fairness and, in more recent times, leadership roles in the workplace. Here, unions seek to defend and improve working standards and develop a 'consultative relationship with government on an equal footing with employers' (ibid: 17). Flanders argues that as a 'sword of justice', unions can rely on the loyalties of their members, a source of much of their strength as a movement. He describes the ways in which workers look to their unions to push through with their social purpose and to bargain on key issues such as increased wages, greater job security and better working conditions; not simply the pursuit of economic interests or the vested

interest. He also states that for unions to remain effective and relevant they must pursue a broad range of interests that extend beyond the economic sphere. Failure to do so, he warns, may give the impression that they are a vested interest rather than a sword of justice, a position that could well be detrimental to their fortunes as a movement, particularly in their primary role of representing the interests of their members.

Trade unions employ both industrial and political methods to exert influence in areas where they have an interest. Industrial methods include agreements under collective bargaining, grievance procedures, strikes, and arbitration. When engaging in the industrial sphere, unions are consciously trying to influence the decisions of employers and increasingly relying on their industrial strength to achieve this. Using political methods such as lobbying, involvement in party politics, media campaigns and sitting on advisory committees, unions attempt to influence political parties and government. Classifying union activities as industrial or political is useful in terms of identifying and understanding their functions and objectives; sometimes however these distinctions can become blurred or distorted. In practice, some union activities are hard to classify under one distinct category. Accepting this position, Flanders argues that when unions have the choice, they prefer to use industrial methods over political methods. Political action is viewed as serving an important role, albeit a supplementary role to the industrial action which remains the focus. However, this position has shifted in recent decades as the industrial strength of trade unions has declined, and unions have looked more towards government and the policy sphere and the ways in which they can influence key decision-makers. As a movement, it is perhaps more useful not to pit one method against another, or to argue which one is more relevant or important. Rather, each should be viewed as an effective tool that unions have at their disposal to help them achieve positive outcomes for members and the wider trade union movement. The tools that unions use vary according to the issue at hand, and which one is deemed to be the most effective. Here, unions will make a strategic choice to achieve the best outcome.

In his 2005 provocation paper, David Metcalf gives a contemporary perspective to these debates. Metcalf uses trade unions' 'vested interest' and 'sword of justice' faces to frame his discussion and assess the influence of trade unions in the economic and political sphere. He asserts that assessing trade union influence in these areas is important, as it has direct bearing on their future prosperity (2005: 10). Against a backdrop of membership decline, the erosion of jobs in traditional union industries, State policies that undermine union powers and increased employer opposition, he highlights that trade unions have found it increasingly difficult to achieve recognition and represent their interests within and outside the workplace. These issues, coupled with union structures and policies that Metcalf describes as 'male, pale and stale', are doing nothing to help union fortunes (ibid: 25). The argument is presented that despite the decline in trade union power and influence in recent decades, unions continue to serve an important social purpose in the workplace; they continue to 'wield the sword of justice' (ibid: 15). Although the industrial strength of unions has declined in more recent times, they have continually striven to protect those workers on the lowest wages and have supported workers in grievance matters and in campaigning for family-friendly working policies.

The future prosperity of unions, according to Metcalf, is reliant on two things: (1) what they do to organisational performance and fairness in the workplace, and (2) whether the cold industrial climate of the 1980s and 1990s continues. It is argued that unions must effectively represent the interests of their members and potential members without disadvantaging the employer in terms of productivity and performance. Metcalf suggests that unions need to make more of their social purpose; their sword of justice. He argues that unions have paid a heavy price in pursuing the vested interest in large parts of the public sector when they were powerful, and this was to the detriment of the lowest paid workers who suffered great inequalities in terms of employee voice and working conditions. It could be argued that potential members question whether union membership is worthwhile, especially when sword of justice activities, such as guidance and support on

grievance matters and improved parental leave, have been displaced by State initiatives. Having just outlined the industrial and political methods that unions employ to exert influence in policy area where they have an interest, the next section will consider trade unions relationship with the State, and how this can affect their influencing capacity.

2.5 Trade Unions and the State

Research that considers the influence of the trade union movement on public policy can be located in the longstanding theoretical debates surrounding the relationship between trade unions and the State. This relationship is significant and has played a central role in the development of industrial relations in Britain (Howell 1995a; 1995b; 2005; Heyes and Nolan 2010). As Howell (2005) argues, trade unions need access to the State in order to achieve their organisational objectives such as bargaining over pay and working conditions. Political power, and the influence that trade unions derive from their relationship with government, helps to shape relations with employers and thus is central to the understanding of labour movement fortunes. Before exploring the union-State interaction and discussing its significance to trade union influence, the challenges of defining and conceptualising the State will be discussed. This will be followed by an account of some alternative interpretations of the State, highlighting the complexities of studying this notoriously elusive concept which nevertheless has great potential in terms of understanding the ways in which the State can both constrain and enable trade union influence. This can also be understood as the impact the State can have on unions' ability to achieve their policy priorities.

2.5.1 Challenges in conceptualising the State

The complexity of the State makes it extremely difficult to define. The State is not a single entity or actor. Rather, the State can be understood as a broad system that contains many different actors and institutions, all of whom exist and interact with one another within ever-changing boundaries and contexts (Miliband, 1973[1969]: 46). Miliband highlights the important distinction between 'the government' and

'the State', which are often used interchangeably in the literature and can lead to confusion. An elected government, according to Miliband, is just one part of the State system. The others are the civil service, the military, the police, the judiciary, and local authorities (ibid, 53-54). Dundon and Rollinson give a more useful and explicit definition of the State in the field of employment relations, where 'the State' can be understood as '[t]he government of the day, taken together with all other agencies that carry out its will and implement its policies and legislation' (2011: 168). For the purposes of this research, the State will be conceived as a system where government, and various other bodies and institutions such as the legislature and actors such as trade unions, interact in ever-changing circumstances.

Dunleavy and O'Leary (1987: 1) describe the State as more of an abstraction than a material object or concept. However, Hay and Lister (2006: 10) argue that such an account fails to 'assess and defend the analytical purchase on political reality offered by such an abstraction'. Hay and Lister offer a more explicit account, and make the case that most theories of the State can be understood in structural and/or institutional terms. These different theories, they argue, provide an 'institutional landscape which political actors must negotiate' (ibid: 11). Jessop (1990: 9-10) describes this landscape as 'strategically selective' in that it contains a specific set of conditions that actors need to navigate. Here, different actors bargain, compete and negotiate with one another in order to achieve their political objectives. The conditions laid out in such a landscape highlight the opportunities and constraints that actors face, a common thread which runs throughout the various theories of the State and is a crucial aspect of this research. Hay and Lister go on to stress that theories of the State see the actor's ability to realise their intentions or preferences as dependent on the strategic choices they make in a crowded and complex space. It is the institutional contexts that shape the opportunities and constraints that they face (Hay and Lister 2006: 11). They also stress the importance of viewing the State in a historical context. Hay and Lister point out that each government, which is part of the State apparatus mentioned above, is shaped by intended and unintended actions and policies of previous

administrations. In this sense, there is never a clean slate. Here, the strategic context in which governments find themselves is shaped by what has gone on before and the decisions taken by others, which may in turn place constraints on the policy direction they wish to take, particularly in the short-term.

Hyman (2008) highlights the difficulties in defining the State (2008: 259) and asks us to consider what we mean when we refer to 'the State', acknowledging that answering this question is fraught with difficulties. The concept is highly contested in the field of political science and other disciplines such as sociology (see Abrams 1988). It is an abstract concept with varying definitions across subject areas. What makes the study of the State so difficult is the fact that on one hand it is presented as being a key component of debates in political science and industrial relations, while on the other hand remaining a highly elusive concept. As Abrams points out:

> 'We have come to take the State for granted as an object of political practice and political analysis while remaining quite spectacularly unclear as to what the State is.' (1988: 59)

This sentiment is echoed by Hay, who remarks that 'there is no more arduous task in the theory of the State than defining this notoriously illusive and rapidly moving target' (1996: 2).

Having just highlighted the varying definitions of the State in the existing literature, the next section will move on to outline some theories of the State to further illustrate its complexities and bring to the fore the importance of the union-State relationship in understanding the influence of trade unions in the policy process. There are various State theories that could have been discussed here, but Pluralism and Marxism were chosen because they are two of the most widely recognised in the literature and usefully illustrate two quite different perspectives. The aim is not to provide an in-depth commentary on Pluralist and Marxist theories of the State. Rather, it is to demonstrate that these different interpretations of the State provide a useful framework to understand the ways in which the State can both provide

opportunities for actors to exert influence in the policy process, and can also constrain such efforts.

2.5.2 Theories of the State

2.5.2.1 Pluralist theories of the State

Despite its influential position in political science since the late 19th century, there is no consensus among Pluralist thinkers over the concept of the State (Dunleavy and O'Leary 1987; Smith 1995, 2006). Smith (2006) acknowledges that one of main reasons why there is disagreement over what constitutes a Pluralist theory of the State is that the term, 'the State', is used across a number of sub-fields in political science - from political theory to international relations - all of whom have their own unique understanding. Smith also highlights that Pluralist thinkers have rarely engaged with other fields in terms of understanding its usage across disciplines. In fact, he describes Pluralism as 'curiously non-theoretical' in that is tends not to engage in questions relating to the nature and theories of the State (2006: 21).

Smith (1995; 2006) presents a Pluralist view of the State as one in which no group, individual or class can dominate society. He points out that although the State is central to Pluralist thinking, theories of the State are less advanced. It can perhaps be argued that the concept of the State is too broad to develop a definition that would be useful to Pluralists. The definition offered by Dunleavy and O'Leary again highlights the broad nature of the Pluralist State with 'the belief that there are, or ought to be, many things…with a defence of multiplicity in beliefs, institutions and societies…' (1987: 13). Dunleavy and O'Leary go on to suggest that Pluralists do not have a well-developed theory of the State because they are more concerned with who has power in society (ibid: 42). This arguably provides a useful platform from which to study State power and interactions, and how influence may be assessed in the policy process.

Many Pluralist thinkers in fact prefer to think of government, rather than the State, where actors and institutions like the core executive and the civil service can be isolated, explored and the relationships examined - all of which are distinct from

civil society. Here, the power of government is constrained from both forces within and on the outside of government. It is through elections and lobbying activities that civil society has the opportunity to influence government decisions. Although no one group or individual dominates, Pluralists acknowledge that some groups are afforded access to government and to the various agencies of government, while others are kept on the margins (see Dahl, 2005[1961]). From a Pluralist perspective, the key point here is that State power is controlled, and different groups accommodated which, according to Dunleavy and O'Leary, is necessary for the survival of democracy (1987: 13).

The accommodation of a range of groups and interests, however, is not always a harmonious situation. Smith acknowledges that for Pluralists, 'the State is often seen as a site of conflict between departments that represent a range of interest groups' where no single interest can dominate (1995: 211). Citing Easton 1967, he argues that the State is rarely neutral as it faces pressures from various individuals or groups, all of whom strive to further their interests. Smith asserts that '[t]he process of policy-making within the State is an attempt to bargain between a range of conflicting interests' (ibid). If we consider the policy process, many groups and individuals compete for their voices to be heard and engage in bargaining activity with others to achieve their objectives. This bargaining process, or process of negotiation, can be strengthened by different resources - finance, access to key contacts, specialist knowledge, and so on - all of which may give groups and individuals a greater opportunity to access and influence key decision-makers. So, despite conflicting interests, this process of bargaining and negotiation between actors in the policy process means that any conflict can be resolved (Dahl 1972[1967]). Here, the role of the State, according to Smith, is to 'regulate conflicts in society rather than dominate society in pursuit of particular interests' (1995: 211). In this account there is dispersal of power which allows for a variety of interests to be successful in the policy process (ibid).

The Pluralist approach is useful in this study because it views government as the key actor within the State system. Government is a central point for actors to focus upon, in their attempts to influence policy and the decision-making process. For researchers, this makes things more manageable in the sense that specific relationships and interactions can be broken down and examined, and in the case of this research, union-State engagement in the policy process. The Pluralist perspective also accommodates multiple actors and perspectives, which is particularly relevant in this study because it gives actors like unions the opportunity to develop an influential role with government and achieve their policy priorities around skills and learning. The next section will consider an alternative to the Pluralist approach to the State.

2.5.2.2 Marxist theories of the State

Hay (2006) argues that any account of the State in capitalist society must take into account the various Marxist interpretations:

> 'Marxist theories of the State offer a series of powerful and probing insights into the complex and dynamic relationship between State, economy and society in capitalist democracies…' (Hay 2006: 59).

The substantial literature on Marxism and the State highlights the different theoretical and analytical framing of these debates. There is fierce debate in the literature over what constitutes a Marxist theory of the State. According to Hay, although 'Marxists may well rely implicitly upon certain conceptions and understandings of the State, they are notoriously bad at consigning these to the page.' (1999: 153) Although this presents significant challenges to theorists and researchers, it does also provide a variety of world views on how researchers might go about studying State interactions and how actors attempt to harness State power. There is no 'one-size-fits- all' interpretation of the State amongst Marxists. There are, however, common assumptions that inform the various Marxist interpretations that exist. Hay (1999; 2006) focuses on four formulations (for a fuller discussion, see Hay, 1997).

The first Marxist representation outlined by Hay views the State as a reflection of the repression of the ruling class in society - as the 'repressive arm of the bourgeoisie' (2006: 60). The second Marxist account of the State takes a more instrumentalist position, where the State is viewed as reinforcing class structures in society. Here, power in society is exercised by 'societal elites', i.e., those who find themselves in economically powerful positions. This power can be exercised directly through the manipulation of State policies, or indirectly by placing pressure on the State. The third account views the State as an ideal capitalist. Here, the modern State is viewed as a 'capitalist machine' and is associated with the work of Engels (ibid: 61-62). A key aspect of this interpretation is that intervention is necessary in order to create the conditions where capital can be reproduced. The fourth formulation outlined by Hay (2006) is one where the State is viewed as a means of social cohesion in capitalist society. This view is associated with the work of Nicos Poulantzas and argues that, where competing economic interests exist, there must be a means to moderate such conflict. Here, a power which sits above society is necessary - the State - in order to regulate such competing and conflicting economic interests.

These four formulations are useful in this study as they highlight the ways in which the State can both restrict power and act as an enabler. In these accounts, most power in society comes from the bourgeoisie, with the State set up to serve their interests. These interpretations also deal with bigger questions around the role of the State in society, especially in relation to class and class struggle. This emphasis on class struggle, according to Jessop (1990), provides a useful starting point to study the State and State power. As the above discussion has highlighted, the State means many different things to Marxists. It sheds light on why Marxists are interested in the State: it is a key 'nodal point in the network of power relations that characterise contemporary capitalist societies' (Hay 1999: 156). Although Jessop (1990: 25) describes Marx's work on the State as comprising 'a fragmented and unsystematic series of philosophical reflections, contemporary history, journalism and incidental remarks', these perspectives provide a useful basis to study the State

and State power, which is a key consideration of this research. Modern Marxists such as Jessop also brought to the fore the importance of political strategy and 'the role that the strategies adopted by calculating subjects have on both the shape of institutions and on the outcomes of political struggle' (ibid: 271).

2.5.2.3 Contribution of Pluralist theories of the State when assessing union influence in the policy process

The above discussion on Pluralist and Marxist theories of the State has drawn out some key issues that are relevant to this particular research. Key to both accounts is the nature of State power and making statements about whose interests dominate. Failure to do so, according to Hill (2005: 13) assumes that there are no dominant elements within the State, a viewpoint challenged in the literature. Conceptualising the nature of State power is an important step for any researcher concerned with policy influence as this can help them understand why some individuals and groups have greater influencing potential than others, and which tactics these actors employ. The nature of State power is also important when considering the capacity of the State to be influenced; that is, the space and opportunities available for actors such as interest groups to influence public policy.

Although both theories of the State have potential in terms of assessing trade union influence in the policy process, the researcher considers this study to be operating in the Pluralist space. The Pluralist account outlined above has highlighted the State as the focal point when trying to influence the decision-making process. It has shown that, despite having different and often competing interests and operating in a congested and contested policy space, non-governmental actors such as unions can bargain and negotiate in order to achieve their objectives. Here, actors use the various resources they have at their disposal in order to exert influence in the policy process. Pluralist thinkers prefer to think of government, rather than the State, which arguably makes things more manageable from a research perspective in terms of analysing interactions and relationships; and crucially, it highlights that State power can be controlled through such means as elections and lobbying. The Pluralist perspective also highlights the importance of strategic choices when

engaging in the policy process, as these can impact on an actor's ability to achieve their policy priorities. Pluralist theories of the State also allow for a variety of interests to be considered, although some groups are afforded access to government and are given a greater opportunity to exert influence, whereas others are kept on the margins. All of these aspects that fall within the Pluralist perspective are of particular interest to this research and assessing the influence of trade unions in the policy process.

The following two sections will explore trade union influence in the economic sphere, before moving on to consider unions' influence in the political sphere, which has both direct and indirect aspects. This is an important discussion as it highlights the various ways in which unions can try and exert influence in the policy process.

2.6 Trade Union Influence in the Economic Sphere

Trade unions can exert economic influence by reducing wage inequality, increasing democracy in the workplace and raising productivity (Freeman and Medoff 1984; Blyton *et al*. 2008). Through collective bargaining, trade unions can influence labour market outcomes and macroeconomic performance, especially in negotiations over wage levels and workplace conditions (Hyman 2008). However, Millward *et al*. stress that in bargaining for higher wages, 'unions may depress employment levels by making labour costly relative to capital…' (2001: 13). Whether unions achieve positive or negative outcomes is not the main issue here; the key point is that collective bargaining is one of the main ways in which trade unions exert influence in the economic sphere.

This bargaining activity brings direct and indirect consequences. In terms of direct impact, employers may be less likely to take on extra staff, which in turn could impact on sales and push up price levels. Bargaining over higher wage levels can also have indirect consequences in terms of the employers' capacity to invest in the organisation. Although Millward *et al*. argue that bargaining over wages may lead to a decline in employment levels, the case can also be made that higher wages may

encourage workers to remain with the company, and would help attract new workers. These factors are important as they can have a direct impact on the efficiency and productivity levels of the organisation and therefore the economy. Another way in which unions can aid the productivity of the economy is by helping employers and government improve skill levels and encouraging workers to undertake training. The union learning agenda is a good example of such an activity, where unions work in partnership with employers, government and learning organisations to support the delivery of workplace learning, at a time and place that suits workers.

The collective nature of this bargaining activity (as opposed to taking an individual approach) is vital because it binds workers together in their quest to affect change in the workplace, for example, in response to changing patterns of working, or to changing workloads. Taking a collective approach arguably makes it easier for workers to voice their opinions and express their views without the fear of disciplinary action from their employer. The collective voice of trade unionism is key in terms of influence in the economic sphere as it 'fundamentally alters the operation of the labor market, and, hence, the nature of the labor contract' (Freeman and Medoff 1984: 5).

2.7 Trade Union Influence in the Political Sphere

2.7.1 Direct influence - the unions' relationship with the Labour Party

As well as exerting influence in the economic sphere, trade unions also seek to influence in the political sphere in a variety of ways. Unions are 'unavoidably political actors with a core and enduring interest in influencing the political process' (Heery 2005: 10). Heery identifies two primary means by which unions try to influence policy outcomes, and stresses that these opportunities have been greater under Labour governments, particularly under New Labour. The first channel of influence identified by Heery is the increased involvement of union leaders in government-run task forces and working groups, for example, union representation

on Sector Skills Councils.[4] Unions have also participated in other bodies, such as the Low Pay Commission, which was set up to advise the government on the National Minimum Wage, and in more recent times the National Living Wage. It is important to stress that although forums of union influence have been put in place, these do not necessarily always translate into actual influence. They do however give unions the opportunity to access key decision-makers and potentially influence policy outcomes.

Another opportunity, or channel of trade union influence, is represented by the 2004 Warwick Agreement between trade unions and the Labour Party. This document secured union support for the 2005 General Election campaign in return for a government commitment in a number of policy areas, including working conditions, pensions and public services. This party-union link gave union representatives a greater opportunity to influence policymakers and other key decision-makers in government. Crucially, it is the existing structures within the Labour Party that have helped trade unions achieve their objectives.

Ludlam and Taylor (2003) analysed the Labour Party-Trade Union relationship in the period after the 2001 General Election. In this research they questioned whether the Labour party should strengthen existing links, or redefine its relationship with the trade union movement – an issue which is never too far away from the political agenda. It resurfaced again in 2013 with the Falkirk selection scandal, and more recently under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. In the Falkirk scandal, an internal party investigation was launched after the Unite union was accused of fixing the result to ensure a particular candidate was elected to the Falkirk seat following the 2015 General Election. In response to questions over whether trade unions should cut ties with the trade union movement after this event, the former Labour leader, Ed Miliband, replied that the Labour Party "should mend the relationship, not end it" (Miliband 2013). This was an attempt by the party leadership to maintain a good

[4] Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) were set up as independent, employer-led organisations which sought to build a skills system that was driven by employer demand.

working relationship with the unions whilst trying to redefine the terms of engagement. Arguably, efforts by some in the party to move away from their affiliated relationship with the unions was an attempt to have broader appeal with the electorate. These debates continue to be a key feature of Labour Party politics, and will likely remain so for some time to come.

This change in engagement with the trade union movement is further complicated by the fact that the Labour Party traditionally relies on unions for a significant amount of funding and support. The 1999 Party Accounts under Tony Blair's leadership showed that 30% of Labour's income came from the unions (Ludlam and Taylor 2003: 728). During this period, the party also relied heavily on union affiliates to help them mobilise the vote. The strength of union support for the Labour Party was also evident in the 2019 General Election where the party received £5,039,754 in donations from the trade unions, accounting for 93% of the overall total.[5] Other union support comes in the form of campaigning activities, which includes gaining general support for the party and targeting specific voters.

2.7.2 Indirect influence - influence on government, politics and the policy process

The political role of trade unions is not only expressed through their alliance with the Labour Party. They also play a vital role in questioning dominant political and economic ideas and holding those in power to account, thus 'broadening the spectrum of political discourse' (Behrens *et al*. 2004: 16). Another means of exerting influence in the political sphere is giving a voice to issues both within and outside the workplace through such means as voting, engaging ministers and other key decision-makers, and through bargaining activities (Freeman and Medoff 1984: 4). Dialogue, whether with the employer or with politicians, is key to trade union influence as it allows direct access to decision-makers as well as opportunities to exert influence. Unions seek to give a voice to issues that affect not only their members, but wider society in general:

[5] https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/insights/general-election-2019-which-party-received-the-most-donations/

> ‘Within the political sphere, unions are viewed as representing the general working population, devoting much political muscle to promoting legislation that would be of no more material gain to unionized workers than to other workers’ (ibid: 10).

This again illustrates unions’ individual and collective role.

2.7.3 Relationship between influence in the economic and political spheres

The State plays a central role in devising economic, social and industrial relations (IR) policies in response to increasing global pressures and changing political circumstances, both nationally and internationally. Unions therefore try to exert influence in these areas to try to gain some political power (Hamann and Kelly 2004: 93). The economic and political spheres represent different channels of influence for trade unions. On the issue of economic influence, unions try to extend their influence through collective bargaining. In the political sphere, we have discussed the union - Labour Party association, but unions also seek to exert influence at the Labour Party conference, their national executive and through the parliamentary party.

The above discussion has highlighted the ways in which trade unions try and exert influence in the economic and political spheres, which crucially includes influence on government that extends beyond the established union-Labour Party link. The next section will consider the impact of the institutional environment in which unions operate, and how the State can both restrict and enable the power and influence of unions and their ability to pursue their interests in the political and economic spheres.

2.8 Regulation of the Industrial Relations Systems

In order to assess trade union influence in the policy sphere, it is crucial to have a better understanding of the institutional setting in which they operate, as this has a direct impact on the priorities they pursue, the tactics they use and the outcomes they may or may not achieve. The late 1970s in the UK was a period when union opportunity to exert influence in the economic and political sphere was severely

constrained because of increased State intervention and the 'regulation' of industrial relations. This was a period when economic issues began to dominate the political discourse, and industrial relations took on a greater role, 'creating a challenge to the autonomy of collective bargaining and thus the philosophy of voluntarism' (Thomson 1979: 38). The next section will give an overview of the economic and political environment in which unions operated in the period leading up to the time of Thatcher coming into power. Following this, the reform agenda of the Conservative Governments post-1979 will be explored and its impact on trade unions and the industrial relations system discussed. This will serve to highlight some of the restrictions trade unions faced and the ways they had to adapt to their changing engagement with government.

2.8.1 Economic and political environment before the election of the Thatcher Government

The Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, chaired by Lord Donovan (1965-1968), was established following pressure to reform the industrial relations system in Britain. The remit of the Donovan Commission was to investigate 'industrial relations with particular attention to be paid to their impact on industrial conflict and labor productivity', although much of the focus was on how to resolve the issue of unofficial strike action (Howell 2005: 101). The Donovan Report, published in 1968, was seen as a driver for change, recommending that the voluntarist tradition should be strengthened but with reform of workplace industrial relations. In response to Donovan Report, the White Paper, 'In Place of Strife: A Policy for Industrial Relations' (1969) was published by Harold Wilson's Labour Government. This paper was proposed by Barbara Castle, Labour's former Employment Secretary, who wanted to reform Britain's trade unions and wider industrial relations. As Tyler (2006: 461) describes, this was intended 'as a statement of trade union rights and responsibilities designed to protect and enhance the standing of the trade union movement.' Within this document, the case was made to replace voluntary collective bargaining with state intervention and reform of the system of industrial relations. However, many of the proposals

put forward were viewed with hostility by the trade union movement and as a threat to voluntarism. Many within the union movement saw this as an attack on workers and as negatively impacting on unions' ability to bargain freely with employers (Dorey 2005, Tyler 2006). With divisions within Cabinet and the parliamentary party, these proposals were eventually dropped.

In 1971, Ted Heath's Conservative Government introduced the Industrial Relations Act which was viewed as a break from the voluntarist tradition of industrial relations in the UK. Developed over a number of years when the Conservatives were in opposition, and with the aim of providing more stability to British industry, the Bill was met by much opposition within the trade union movement. The proposals for industrial relations reform, rather than being anti-union, were described by the Conservatives as 'rational, sensible and essentially modest' (Taylor, 1993: 184). Much like the government's intentions in 'In Place of Strife', the Industrial Relations Act of 1971 aimed to target grass-roots union militancy, 'but went much further in changing the balance of power between workers and their employers' (Tarling and Wilkinson 1977: 409). Following widespread opposition from unions, the Act was repealed as part of the Social Contract, which was introduced when the Labour Government came into power in 1974 under the leadership of Harold Wilson. This can be described as an understanding and agreement between the trade union movement and Labour Government around the economy and other matters. Here, the government agreed to adopt specific economic and social policies supported by trade unions in exchange for voluntary wage control. The Social Contract was not successful however in managing the economy and ultimately failed. The failure of the Social Contract, together with the series of industrial disputes across the country in what became known as the Winter of Discontent, brought down the Labour Government in 1979. This had a significant impact on the Labour Party and the trade union movement, which will be explored further in the next section.

2.8.2 Institutional reform under the Conservative governments

Why did the British labor movement so quickly succumb to the radical reforming efforts of the Conservative governments elected after 1979?

This is the central question posed by Howell in his 2005 work as he explores the development of the industrial relations system in Britain in the last century. This question is useful in framing the following discussion and helps to unpick the union-State relationship, particularly the ways in which the State can both constrain union power and help support their interests. In terms of this particular study, the reform agenda of the Conservative governments post-1979 is also key to understanding the changing focus of unions and the ways in which they diversified in order to adapt to their changing circumstances and try to regain some political power. Institutional reform was a hallmark of Conservative governments post-1979 and helped to shape employment relations in the UK. In this period, a new system of industrial relations was constructed which saw the government use a number of tools, including legislation, to limit the capacity of trade unions. In order to understand how this system was built and the impact this had on trade union power and influence, Howell (2005) looks back and explores the construction of three distinct IR systems over the course of the 20th century.

Howell's work can be described as an attempt to understand the modern system of industrial relations, which he breaks down into three distinct periods. The first system emerged in response to the decline of old staple industries in the 19th century and was organised around bargaining between trade unions and employer associations, covering the period from the end of the 19th century to World War II. One of the advantages of this system of industrial relations for trade unions was that the '…industry bargaining helped them gain recognition from employers and recruit new members where they might otherwise have found it difficult to force recognition' (Howell 2005: 16). The second system, which occurred from the early 1950s and lasted for over two decades, was centred on the employer and decentralised collective bargaining in the economy. The third system, in place since

the early 1980s, was again centred on the employer, but 'replaced collective regulation with individualized institutions that maximized the flexibility of employers in organizing work and managing their workforces' (ibid). A key aspect in all of these systems is the central role the State played in their construction. Turning back to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, there are various reasons why unions succumbed so quickly to the reform agenda of the Thatcher Government in the late 1970s. In his analysis, Howell focuses on the specific policies which served to undermine the power of trade unions, which ties into the discussion earlier in this chapter in terms of the ability of the State to constrain unions' ability to exert influence. These policies will now be explored in greater detail in the next section.

2.8.3 Thatcher and the doctrine of individualism: the catalyst for change

There was a period of significant change following the election of the Thatcher Government in 1979, culminating in the creation of a new system of industrial relations and a State that actively challenged the strength of the labour movement. During this time, a raft of new IR legislation was introduced which severely curtailed the power of unions in the economic sphere and increased the strength of employers by giving them control over how they structured industrial relations in their own workplaces (McIlroy 1988; Smith and Morton 1993). High levels of unemployment led to the restructuring of the workplace and previous State support for collective bargaining was withdrawn, with union engagement in public policy all but non-existent. The State during this time became more dominant; in fact, it 'no longer acted as if, or pretended that, it was a neutral force' (Heyes and Nolan 2010: 109).

Prior to the Thatcher Government coming into power, '[t]he State was considered to be largely abstentionist in industrial relations…' (Howell 1995b: 13). This approach changed significantly when the Conservatives formed a government, and after a prolonged programme of 'neo-liberal restructuring' and hostility from the State and employers, trade unions found themselves in a much weaker position in

the workplace (ibid). By the mid-1990s, the State had turned its back on the abstentionist approach in industrial relations and increasingly interfered in trade union activity, 'even down to the wording of strike ballots' (ibid: 14). Embracing a doctrine of individualism, the Thatcher Government abandoned collective forms of industrial relations. Changes in the labour market also had a profound impact on unions during this period. The deregulation of the labour market meant that it was easier to hire and fire workers, and the industries where unions had traditionally been strongest, such as steel and coal manufacturing, declined. In response to this, trade unions changed their earlier preference of influencing the State through corporatist means and turned their attention to new labour law and individual and collective rights at work.

Although it is often highlighted that trade unions once derived much of their strength from their presence in the workplace and the commitment from groups of workers and shopfloor representatives, the key role of the State must not be overlooked in these debates (Howell 1995b). Howell argues that unions are heavily dependent on the State 'to provide macro-economic environment of full employment, to overcome the resistance of employers to collective bargaining and union recognition, to intervene in industrial disputes, and to encourage trade unionism in the public sector…' (ibid: 22). This dependence, he argues, makes unions particularly vulnerable. Taking this into account, and faced with the electoral dominance of the Conservatives, unions considered what change was needed.

By the mid-1990s, the trade union movement embraced changes in their engagement with government. Rather than relying solely on links with the Labour Party, the TUC General Secretary, John Monks, gave assurances that the movement would embrace a campaigning role and attempt to influence those in power, regardless of party persuasion (ibid: 26). There was a belief that by redefining its relationship with the Labour Party, the union movement could more effectively influence public policy and better represent its interests in the broader political sphere. Increased influence in the political sphere would probably give unions the

platform to contribute to the debates around employment and industry, key areas where they had been frozen out. This change in union strategy and engagement is an example of how a change in influence in one sphere has the potential to impact on another. It is important to note here that it is not just the political colour of the government that matters but the nature of the broader institutional framework. This is a key consideration for trade unions as they seek to find the most effective means to exert influence in the policy process and best represent the interests of their members and those in wider society.

2.8.4 Institutional Context: The 'Varieties of Capitalism' Approach

Trade unions and political parties in Government and in Opposition are shaped by economic and political institutions both directly and indirectly. For trade unions, these institutions can increase or decrease the opportunities they have to access key decision-makers in the policy process. The 'varieties of capitalism debate', or VoC as it will now be referred to, is important in any study of influence in the policy sphere as it highlights issues of State capacity and capability. The VoC approach to the political economy is described as being 'actor-centred' in which various actors seek to advance their own best interests through strategic interactions (Hall and Soskice 2001: 6). VoC sits within the broader literature on *path dependent* divergence, which 'highlights the importance of actors' strategies within the different political economies' (Kelly and Frege 2004: 183). The VoC approach is useful in this research because it allows for an examination of the actions and strategies of different actors in the pursuit of their best interests, or in this case, policy priorities. It helps to explain how institutions help to shape actor's behaviour. In relation to this study, it also provides a useful framework to help understand how actors try to advance their interests through strategic interactions in an often congested and contested policy space.

The VoC approach, or 'production regime theory' as it is also known, is most commonly associated with the work of Hall and Soskice (2001). In *Varieties of Capitalism*, the authors seek to develop a framework for understanding the

institutional differences and similarities amongst developed economies such as the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as explaining how political economies change (2001: 65). Here, the focus is on institutional characteristics such as labour relations in an attempt to explore the impact of institutions on productivity and the impact of globalisation on the political economy, to name just two. Hall and Soskice explore whether different varieties of capitalism produce variations in economic performance. The authors move away from previous perspectives on comparative capitalism which sought to explain how behaviour is affected by the various institutions of the political economy, and present three frameworks for understanding these relationships. The first framework views institutions as 'socializing agents' which contain specific norms and attitudes - a particular way of doing things. The second considers the effects of institutions, which are viewed as being the result of their power over other actors. The third framework views institutions as a group of interconnected sanctions and incentives to which actors then respond. This was described as a new way to study comparative capitalism and to look at 'how behaviour is affected by the institutions of the political economy' (ibid: 4).

The two main capitalist models or systems outlined by Hall and Soskice are Liberal Market Economies (LMEs) and Coordinated Economies (CMEs). Underlying each of these is a set of institutional arrangements involving the State, employers and organised labour. LMEs, such as the UK and the US, are characterised by competitive market arrangements and weaker trade unions. CMEs such as Germany, on the other hand, have non-market relations, and tend to rely on the strategic interactions of firms, (stronger) trade unions and other actors. Whereas LMEs primarily rely on some form of market exchange to resolve coordination problems, CMEs tend to resolve problems through strategic interactions (2001: 57-60). It is these different capitalist models that are said to account for the differences across societies.

Other scholars in the VoC tradition such as Gallie (2007a, 2007b; 2009) build on Hall and Soskice's theoretical framework and use the 'power resources' approach, highlighting the broader role of unions in LMEs and CMEs. Gallie's extensive work on job quality examines the position of unions in CMEs as distinct from LMEs. In his 2007 work, Gallie compares the quality of working life across European countries - Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden and the UK - all of whom have different institutional systems in place. He challenges the viewpoint that there are major differences in the quality of work between coordinated and liberal market economies - a key proposition in the production regime approach - where CMEs are presented as having 'higher skill levels, greater individual job autonomy, a greater extension of teamwork, better workplace representation leading to consensual decision-making, and higher job security' (2007b: 99). Gallie seeks to test these arguments by using improved data sets to compare the employment conditions and employee experiences of work within these European countries.

Gallie concludes that while there are broad skills differences across CMEs and LMEs, which is what we would expect from a production regime perspective, findings also show that there is a clear distinction between CMEs (Scandinavian countries and Germany) in respect to work and employment conditions. Workplace employee representation in the Scandinavian countries, for example, where there are high levels of union density, was found to be greater than in Germany. German workers also reported having less say over decision-making in the workplace (a key indicator of influence) than their UK counterparts. Scandinavian workers were also found to have high levels of job security, whereas workers in Germany reported feeling less secure in their jobs than workers in the UK, which can arguably be attributed to differences in welfare provision. The Scandinavian countries were also found to have very high levels of work discretion and job variety (2007b: 99-100). Gallie's research on the quality of work is extremely useful to this study as it considers the balance of power between unions and employers, and how this is mediated by policies of the State. In assessing the major determinants of work quality, and understanding what makes a good job, Gallie sought to broaden our understanding

and move beyond simply looking at job tasks and working patterns. He shifted focus to employee influence, job autonomy, the variety of work, and the extent to which workers can use their skills.

Gallie's 'power resources' perspective is also useful in a study of policy influence as it shifts the focus from the employer and includes other actors such as trade unions. Some have argued that the VoC approach is too narrow in its focus and pays too much attention to the role of economic actors (Kelly and Frege, 2004; Streeck and Thelen, 2005). Although Hall and Soskice usefully use five countries to help illustrate different varieties of capitalism, trade unions are not considered as agents. The institutional theory Hall and Soskice use does not allow for the investigation of such agency. An examination of union strategy and influence in the policy process can arguably help to fill some of this gap, exploring unions' capacity to achieve their policy priorities around learning and skills and develop an influential relationship with government. Although Kelly and Frege accept that the 'firm' plays a central role in the political economy, they question where unions fit in, and argue that it is 'perfectly legitimate to concentrate on unions and union movements as key actors in shaping their own destinies' (2004: 183). Kelly and Frege state that although the VoC approach highlights the cross-national difference in union strategy, the 'firm centred' approach 'offers an incomplete account of union revitalisation' (ibid: 188-190). They argue that more attention needs to be focused on union strategies and their interactions with others, including the State. These strategies, they argue, can also make a difference to economic and industrial relations outcomes. They point to evidence of the continuing divergence among national union movements located in different varieties of capitalism and highlight the importance of employer strategy and institutional environment as important determinants in union revitalisation. These strategies are influenced by various factors: union identities, values, and beliefs about union priorities and methods. These themes will be explored further in the next chapter.

2.9 Summary

This research seeks to understand the extent to which unions have been able to exert influence over public policy. Before assessing this influence, it was important to understand the functions, objectives, and the environment in which unions operate - all of which have a direct impact on the ways they navigate different policy spaces. This chapter began by outlining the various functions and objectives of trade unions, both within and outside of the workplace. It was highlighted that unions' strength in the industrial sphere has declined in recent times and they have had to adapt to their changing circumstances. The five union functions outlined by Ewing (2005) usefully illustrated that trade union functions are not stable; they evolve depending on the political and economic environment within which unions operate. This is turn gives them the opportunity to maximise their influencing potential at any given time. Next, there was a discussion of union influence in the economic and political sphere - from collective bargaining and influencing labour market outcomes, to the union relationship with the Labour Party and their engagement in the policy process.

The final sections of the chapter focused on the relationships between unions and the State – a key aspect of this research. It began with a brief discussion of some of the challenges of conceptualising the State, before outlining two of the most prominent State theories: Pluralism and Marxism. Examining each of these theories highlighted a number of key aspects which are crucial in any study of policy influence: the importance of the State when trying to exert influence in the policy process; understanding why some interests are privileged over others; how different actors bargain over competing interests; and whether those not considered 'societal elites' can use strategies in order to exert influence. The discussion of State theories also helped to justify the researcher's view that the Pluralist perspective of the State is most compelling in terms of this study of trade union influence.

Following this, the work of Howell (1995a; 1995b; 2005) was outlined; this highlights the importance of the union-State relationship. Here, Howell argues that unions need access to the State to achieve their organisational objectives and exert influence. In recent times, unions have found this more challenging, and this can be traced back to the reform agenda introduced by the Conservative governments post-1979. During this period, the State helped to construct a new system of industrial relations. Within this system, the State used various tools, including legislation, which placed significant constraints on union power. By the mid-1990s, unions recognised the need to adapt to their changing circumstances and looked towards their relationship with government and the policy agenda to try to regain some political power and influence.

It is important to highlight that many studies of the State so far have been concerned about the trade union role in attempting to influence the State as an economic manager, and how the State's position in the postwar era was one of gradual interference in the voluntarist tradition of UK industrial relations. The above discussion has highlighted the gradual construction of the Social Contract of the 1970s and the dismantling of that from Thatcher onwards. Although there have been investigations in areas such as the National Minimum Wage, campaigning for decent working time and ensuring there are limits on the number of hours workers can be made to work each week, there remains a limited number of studies on union influence on particular policies, particularly those that are not necessarily tied to specific regulation/legislation. This research seeks to address this gap, examining union influence in the policy process, where the domain of interest is skills and learning. Here, the researcher is adopting a Pluralist position in an area that is not amenable to legislation.

The chapter concluded with a discussion of VoC, an approach that highlights the importance of State capacity and capability, and the key role of strategic interactions where actors, such as trade unions, try to advance their interests in the policy process. Kelly and Frege (2004) argue that VoC would benefit from a greater

examination of union strategies and their interaction with the State, specifically in the context of union revitalisation debates. Arguably, this study on trade union influence in the policy process will help to address some of the gap. The next chapter will engage with the union revitalisation debates and will explore the potential of the union learning agenda in helping unions develop an influential relationship with government and exert influence in the policy process. It will then introduce the single case study of this research and the political environment in which they operate, and will give an overview of the learning and skills landscape in Scotland.

3. Trade union learning and revitalisation debates

3.1 Introduction

It is widely accepted that unions across many advanced economies face crises in membership, effectiveness, power and political influence (Wallerstein and Western 2000; Frege and Kelly 2003, 2004; Hyman 2007; Bryson and Forth 2010; Findlay and Warhurst 2011). Faced with these challenges, unions and academics have sought to explain the causes and consequences of union decline, and to examine the various revitalisation strategies that unions have at their disposal. In a global economy where a range of diverse actors seek to influence policies, trade unions recognise that they need to adopt broader strategies and work in partnerships in order to develop the political power that will enable them to exert influence on policy-making. There is a need for both a broadened outlook and a comprehensive strategy in order to reverse trade union decline and give unions a more influential voice in the political sphere.

This chapter will begin by briefly outlining some of the causes and consequences of trade union decline. Unions' engagement in the learning and skills policy sphere will then be discussed, which includes reflections on the development of the union learning agenda across the UK. Union revitalisation debates will then be discussed, which sit within the wider union learning literature. It is important to note that when the researcher refers to the 'revitalisation' of unions, they are primarily concerned with this term in the context of the union movement engaging with the State/government and influencing policy, rather than union organising and mobilising. These debates will highlight the importance of union strategies and their political role in their efforts to regain political power and influence the decision-making process. This will be followed by a discussion on the effectiveness of union organising strategies, before considering the potential of union-led learning as a pathway to union renewal. The chapter will conclude with an overview of the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC), the political environment in which they operate, and the learning and skills landscape in Scotland with which they engage.

This discussion will cover the period from devolution until the researcher moved on from data collection and began their initial analysis. This will help to give context to the decisions made by the researcher as set out in the methodology chapter, and the findings presented thereafter.

3.2 Union decline and renewed focus on political role

Trade union membership in the UK peaked at 13.2 million in 1979, but since then there has been a steady decline which has coincided with changes in the industrial relations system (Howell 1995a; 1995b; 2005). The most recent statistical bulletin on trade union membership published by the UK Government showed that in 2020 there were 6.56 million workers in the UK who were trade union members. Although this figure is significantly below the highs of the late 1970s, it represents an increase in trade union membership levels among employees for the fourth consecutive year since the record low figure of 6.23 million in 2016.[6] This pattern of decline is also evident in collective bargaining coverage. In 2020, the percentage of employees covered by collective agreements on pay and conditions between their employers and unions was 25.6%. This is lower than the 2019 figure of 26.9% and is a significant drop from the high of 37% recorded in 1997. Against this backdrop of decline in the industrial sphere, it is important to consider the current position and power of trade unions in society, in terms of their capacity to pursue their interests as well as those of the people they represent.

The earlier discussion on the functions and objectives of trade unions highlighted the importance of power and influence in enabling unions to effectively pursue their interests and of those of their members. This has primarily been achieved through collective bargaining and the formal processes in place to allow negotiation between trade unions and employers (Simms and Charlwood 2010: 125). Although collective bargaining coverage has declined since the late 1970s, it has nonetheless proved to be the main strategy through which collective interests are expressed (ibid). Changes in social, political and economic circumstances have affected the

[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/trade-union-statistics-2020
https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/trade-union-statistics-2019

power and capacity of the union movement, making it even more difficult to identify, construct and promote a collective set of worker interests. These shifting circumstances have meant that trade unions have needed to adapt and consider other strategies to respond to this decline. Ewing's five functions of trade unions (see Figure 1), which were discussed in chapter 2, are worth highlighting again here. These functions highlight the ways in which trade unions can adopt different functions and use different tools to maximise their influencing potential. These different functions give unions options, depending on the circumstances they face. In recent decades when their industrial strength has declined, unions have placed greater strategic importance on their governmental-influencing function and political action. The union movement have identified skills and learning as a policy area which gives them the opportunity to increase their influencing capacity in the policy process. This policy domain will now be explored in greater detail.

3.3 Union engagement in the learning and skills policy space

Over the last two decades, huge policy weight has been placed on the shoulders of skills in the UK and across Europe. Learning and skills formation are identified as key levers in economic and social well-being in both the EU Lisbon Strategy (2000) and the Europe 2020 Vision (2010), and there is widespread political consensus in the UK that skills are the 'magic bullet' aimed at improving the quality of life and life chances of individuals and families, as well as enhancing economic competitiveness and civic society (Keep *et al*. 2006; Keep and Mayhew 2010). The importance of learning and skills has also been highlighted more recently in the European Commission's European Skills Agenda (2020) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience. Here, the European Commission has set out a five-year plan to help individuals and businesses develop more and better skills and then put them to use. This includes ambitious targets for upskilling and reskilling, and aims to 'ensure that the right to training and lifelong learning, enshrined in the European Pillar of Social rights, becomes a reality all across Europe' (EC 2020). The Scottish Government's commitment to skills and learning is also reflected in a number of key plans and strategies: Economic Recovery Plan (2010), Economic Strategy (2015a),

the Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board (ESSB) Strategic Plan (2018) and more recently, the Economic Recovery Implementation Plan (2020a).

Over a similar time period, trade unions have become increasingly active in lifelong learning in order to support skills enhancement. Unions understand that skills and learning are crucial to economic development and to the individual interests, experiences and life chances of workers, and to their own institutional interests through representing higher-skilled and better-paid members. Skills and education policy, including lifelong learning, is devolved to Scotland. The establishment of union learning funds across the UK has provided the springboard from which unions have funded, designed and delivered a broad range of learning activities in and around workplaces. Case studies of union-led learning have consistently pointed to a range of beneficial outcomes for learners that are personal, job related and employability-related (Findlay *et al*. 2007; Stuart *et al*. 2010). Unions have been particularly successful in engaging non-traditional or hard-to-reach learners (Findlay *et al*. 2007; 2012). However, the evidence base on learners' outcomes is relatively limited and much of the data collection has taken place immediately after learning, which limits the opportunity to capture longer-term outcomes and impacts.

Scotland has been the driving force in the UK in recent decades in its approach to skills policy (Warhurst and Findlay 2012). Initially the policy focus was on supply-side initiatives and the acquisition of skills through education and training. This approach was endorsed in the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) but has been challenged by the likes of Payne (2009) and Keep and Mayhew (2010) who have questioned whether boosting the supply of skills and skilled labour was sufficient on its own to secure economic prosperity and social justice. Skills policy in Scotland in more recent times has been driven by a different agenda, with policymakers taking a broader approach and developing a skills strategy which is committed not only to the supply of skills but also improving the demand and utilisation of skills (Scottish Government 2007; CFE 2008; Payne 2010; Warhurst and Findlay 2012). Similarly, and arising from concerns over the extent to which union-led learners are able to

make use of the skills they have attained, unions have intensified their efforts to link skills acquisition to skills deployment in order to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for learners who have invested in acquiring skills. Innovative projects in skills utilisation, conducted in partnership with employers, link skills investment to skills outcomes more closely, as well as signalling the expansion of union capacity to engage more strategically with the skills and learning agenda. (Findlay *et al.* 2011).

3.3.1 The development of the union learning agenda across the UK

Since the late 1990s, unions' capacity to engage more strategically at a policy level has been enhanced by dedicated funding from both the UK and Scottish governments to support union learning projects. Unions' role in brokering learning and skills initiatives in workplaces throughout England was supported by the Union Learning Fund (ULF)[7]. This fund was established in 1998 under the New Labour Government and coordinated by the TUC, with the aim of creating a 'learning society'. The Labour government at this time wanted to enhance unions' capacity to delivery workplace learning initiatives in order to support their national education and training targets, and 'encourage demand for learning from the bottom up'. (Clough 2012: 9). ULF ran for more than 20 years until its closure in March 2021, and supported unions in helping widen access to learning opportunities to thousands of workers. This fund supported over 40,000 dedicated ULRs and more than 50 unions in 700 workplaces in England. An independent review of the Union Learning Fund from 2018 reported that over two-thirds (68 per cent) of the 2,459 learners surveyed with no previous qualifications gained a qualification, and four in five (80 per cent) of learners said they had developed skills that they could transfer to a new job (Crews *et al*. 2018). Positive outcomes for employers were also reported in this evaluation: 53 per cent saw an increase in the number of employees gaining qualifications, and nearly half of employers (47 per cent) said their staff were more committed as a result of their engagement in union learning. A more recent review from 2020 highlighted union learning's value for money,

[7] https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/union-learning-fund

estimating the return to the Exchequer to be £3.57 for each £1 spent on the Union Learning Fund (Dean *et al.* 2020).

Amongst the key objectives of ULF was to develop unions' capacity in the learning and skills agenda and develop a network of Union Learning Reps (ULRs). ULRs are specialised union reps who help to identify the learning and skills needs of workers to help them improve their lives inside and outside of work, particularly those workers with lower skills levels and little or no qualifications. They work closely with employers, the unions and unionlearn – the learning and skills organisation of the TUC – to help workers gain access to learning opportunities at a time and place best suited to their needs. The Employment Act of 2002 gave ULRs the same statutory rights as other union reps, including 'reasonable' time off to train as a ULR and reasonable time off to perform ULR duties in a union recognised workplace, such as identifying training gaps. Clough highlights that although these statutory rights for ULRs are related to their work with union members, in many cases, most of them also provide a service to non-union members in the workplace (2012: 10).

Unionlearn was established in 2006 by the TUC as their learning and skills arm, and provided a framework to support union learning activity in England. As part of the ULF initiative, and with core funding from government, unionlearn was set up by the TUC to support unions to become more effective learning organisations and to understand, engage with and influence learning and skills policy.[8] Although there was cross-party support for the Union Learning Fund for over 20 years, the levels of funding started to change under the different Conservative governments from 2010 onwards. In the financial year 2009-10, support for the Union Learning Fund was £13.4 million. By ULF Round 20 in 2019-20, the level of funding had decreased to £12 million, although higher than the £11.2 million investment in the 2014-15.[9]

[8] https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/sites/default/files/publication/ULF%20Prospectus%20Round%2020%20for%20Website.pdf

[9] PQ 115574, 28 November 2017, & PQ 116267, 1 December 2017

The pattern of development for union learning in Scotland followed a similar pattern to that at the English/UK level. In 1999, the Lifelong Learning Unit (LLU) was established, and worked with unions, employers and governments, and other bodies to help unions access training and development opportunities and create a more strategic approach to lifelong learning. Following this in 2000, the Scottish Union Learning Fund (SULF) was established with funding from the then Scottish Executive 'to help promote activity by trade unions in support of its lifelong learning programme', with projects focusing on a range of activity including adult literacy and numeracy skills.[10] SULF operated until 2011, and during this period Scottish Union Learning (SUL) was established as a dedicated learning arm of the STUC. SUL brought together the STUC Skills and Lifelong Learning Team and TUC Education in Scotland with the aim of giving strategic direction to union-led learning in Scotland. The development of the union learning agenda in Scotland will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter. This will include a discussion of the STUC's and union's engagement in the learning and skills policy landscape since devolution. This is important for setting up the appropriate policy context that this research engages with and also helps to establish the baseline for the Scotland/UK/English comparison. Having outlined the development of union-led learning across the UK, the next section will explore some of the debates within the union learning literature, including union revitalisation. This will serve to highlight the potential of union learning as a path to union renewal.

3.4 Debates within the union learning literature

There has been a significant growth in the volume and breadth of literature on union-led learning in recent decades. There are a number of distinct literatures in this space. These include evaluations of government funding to support union learning activity across the UK, research on the impact of ULRs on union learning and organising, employer engagement in union-led learning, and union revitalisation debates. This breadth of literature illustrates the variety of ways in which unions have engaged in the learning agenda, but it is the revitalisation

[10] https://www.scottishunionlearning.com/about-history/

debates, and specifically an examination of whether learning can act as a path for union renewal that is the key consideration for this study on union influence. These debates are useful in helping researchers assess whether various activities and strategies, in this case unions' engagement in the union learning agenda, can aid union renewal and help unions gain some political power and influence in the policy sphere.

3.4.1 Union revitalisation debates

The union revitalisation literature has gained prominence in recent years as academics and unions seek to assess the impact of different strategies in responding to union decline in membership, power and status. Hyman (2007) argues that we need a broader understanding of union strategy and considers how unions can enhance their strategic capabilities. One of the key issues to consider is the capacity of unions to respond effectively to union decline and what factors determine union responses to the challenges that they face. Hyman cites organisational capacity - the ways in which unions respond to internal and external challenges - as a key component in union revitalisation. He argues that it is important for unions to move away from reactive approaches and instead develop a capacity to assess the best available options for revitalisation and implement these effectively.

Unions also understand that they need to diversify in order to best respond to these challenges:

> Unions are everywhere re-launching themselves as "political subjects", as actors engaged not just in collective bargaining and workplace regulation, but also in the broader aggregation of political and social interests' (Baccaro *et al*. 2003: 119).

The strengthening of the political role for unions is one where they have become more proactive in their attempts to gain support and exert influence. Unions have looked towards the institutional resources they have at their disposal, including

access to key decision-makers in the policy process. These resources determine what strategies they then choose to pursue (ibid: 120).

The political role of trade unions is also highlighted in the work of Behrens *et al*. (2004) who identify four dimensions along which union revitalisation can occur. The first 'membership dimension' includes three measurable factors: an increase in membership numbers and density and a change in the composition of members. Next, there is the 'economic dimension' which includes greater bargaining power and improvements in wages and the distribution of wealth. The third 'political dimension', which is arguably much harder to measure, involves greater political effectiveness, and specifically, the ability to influence the policy-making process through interactions with different actors such as policymakers and government. The fourth 'institutional dimension' focuses on unions' organisational structures and governance as well as their internal dynamics (2004: 20-22). Behrens *et al*. identify revitalisation along the institutional dimension as one that is most 'difficult to measure' in that it involves unions' willingness to embrace new strategies. They state that '[r]evitalization can be conceptualized in terms of either an ongoing, and incomplete, process, or as an outcome along four dimensions' (ibid: 24). These authors make the case that 'as union activity is multi-faceted, and unions also derive power resources from the various spheres they engage in, union revitalization can be conceptualized as (re)gaining power along the various dimensions that capture the main orientations or spheres of union activity' (ibid: 20). It should also be noted, however, that any consideration of the position and strength of unions should take into account the environment in which they engage and that the dimensions that unions pursue are context-dependent.

3.4.2 Assessing the impact of union revitalisation approaches in other countries

A body of academic research has emerged in recent years looking to learn from the experiences of union revitalisation in other countries (Frege and Kelly 2003, 2004). Frege and Kelly highlight the well-known problems facing unions in the industrialised world: loss of membership; problems of interest definition and

aggregation; erosion of structures of interest representation; declining capacity for mobilisation; institutional change; and diminished power resources. Like the authors above, they argue that unions can tackle these problems by adopting revitalisation or renewal strategies, which vary from country to country. Frege and Kelly consider which types of action make up union revitalisation strategies, and how these might assist unions in the problems that they face.

The authors use a five-country case study to examine the differences in approach to union revitalisation. The five countries (US, UK, Germany, Italy and Spain) differ in terms of institutional setting, union structure and identity, and union responses to social and economic problems. The authors present six strategies to overcome the problems faced by trade unions (Frege and Kelly 2003: 9). The first, organising strategy focuses on acquiring new members, thus strengthening workplace representation. Next, there is the strategy of organisational restructuring, which can take the form of union mergers. Mergers give unions the opportunity to combine limited resources and potentially increase their power, which in turn may encourage new members. The third strategy is coalition-building, where unions work in partnership with other social movements such as anti-austerity groups. These partnerships have the potential to help unions acquire new power resources such as access to key individuals and networks. This approach also has the potential to broaden unions' appeal. The fourth revitalisation strategy is partnership with employers at the national, sectoral and workplace level. This approach allows unions to pursue new avenues of interest, for example, union-led learning. These partnerships also have the potential to improve workplace conditions, i.e., terms and conditions of employment, and could be used as a selling point to non-union members. Next, there is political action, which gives unions the opportunity to access power resources to help them achieve their objectives. Finally, international links could enable unions to lobby international union bodies in order to enhance their power in key areas of union activity.

Frege and Kelly also consider what factors determine union approaches to revitalisation (2003: 12). Across countries there are institutional differences, differences in identity, and differences in employer, political party or State strategies. The authors use these differences in order to develop a framework for analysis. Findings showed that there were variations across countries in the use of political action. In Britain, for example, they identified fewer channels of political influence open to the labour movement compared to those in Spain and Italy. State and employer strategies were also shown to have an impact on forms of political action. Variations in State strategies, particularly the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies in the US and UK, led to resistance of union influence. In terms of employer strategies, findings showed that German employers were more receptive to collective bargaining with unions, which in turn led to sustained efforts towards collective bargaining reform and expansion. Bargaining reform was less prominent in UK, US and Spanish unions because of employer strategies resisting union efforts in the workplace.

Membership loss was shown to vary in significance across each country; union membership was viewed as a key indicator of union weakness and decline in the US and UK. However, fluctuations and decline in membership were less of a concern in Germany because of the 'institutional protections enjoyed by unions, which to some degree insulate union power from membership fluctuations' (ibid: 19). For union leaders in Spain and Italy, mobilisation potential was shown to be more important than membership levels, for example, through political demonstrations and campaigning. Political engagement was identified as vital in all revitalisation efforts in Frege and Kelly's five-country study, with various forms of political action taking place across countries. It has been highlighted several times in this chapter that unions are increasingly looking towards the potential of their political role, where traditionally efforts have focused on their organising and mobilising strategies. These revitalisation debates are crucial in that they bring this political role to the fore and highlight its potential as an effective strategy to help unions regain some power and influence.

3.4.3 Union organising: an effective strategy for union renewal?

Although there is a significant body of literature on trade union decline, less has been written about the organising process and the importance of union tactics and strategies. There is recognition within the union revitalisation literature that unions have reached a decisive moment where they need to address their declining power and reach out to a new generation of members. Although union membership has stabilised and more agreements have been signed with employers, density is still falling. Gall discusses the unions' strategy of organising, which gained prominence in the late 1990s (see also Bronfenbrenner and Jurvich 1998). Gall presents a strong case for organising within the wider trade union literature:

> 'No matter its limitations and contradictions, union organising represents the most serious and sustained (organic) move by unions and union movements to become masters of their own destinies… with regard to reversing the decline in their fortunes.' (2009:2)

The author goes on to say that outcomes from this strategy have been disappointing and considers what changes should be made to make organising more effective i.e., a tool that can aid union renewal. Gall also raises questions over the long-term future of organising as a core union strategy and asks whether this is the only credible strategy for union revitalisation.

Gall develops these ideas further and identifies some areas where unions need to improve in order to increase their effectiveness. Not only do unions need to broaden their organising function, but the practice of organising also needs to be corrected. Furthermore, union organising needs a wider, more political approach (Gall 2009: 4). Evidence in the literature has highlighted that there is no one best approach to organising. The TUC, for example, have attempted to promote the merits of integrating bargaining with organising strategies and there have also been attempts to integrate other agendas such the environment and workplace issues, 'only to find that these attempts have been viewed as not strengthening, but rather diluting measures by some union activists and EUOs' (Gall 2009: 5). This point

indicates some of the tension that exists within the trade union movement over the best way to address union decline and is part of wider debates over the role and purpose of trade unions more generally. On one side of the debate there are those who advocate changes to existing union organising approaches, whereas others favour a more radical approach; one that includes extensive change from the outside and that embraces newer agendas such as the environment and learning.

Gall goes on to argue that organising needs to be part of a wider social vision, a vision that includes social justice, collective approaches and democratic participation. This vision of a social movement implies a shared identity; one where the union movement is moving in a specific direction in order to achieve its goals. It can be argued that in order for unions to best represent and advance the interests of their members, they must operate in areas that exist beyond the workplace. Working with other actors where there are shared interests has the potential to stimulate organising activity, which in turn could form the basis for union renewal.

Heery *et al.* (2003) also contribute to the revitalisation literature and examine union revitalisation in Britain in terms of organising, partnership proposals, relations between unions and the Labour Party, international activities, and union restructuring. As discussed earlier, there has been a sustained effort since the mid-1990s to improve union organising efforts. In 1998, the TUC established the Organising Academy to train new activists. At this time, unions were faced with a strategic challenge in terms of their organising efforts: working in partnership with employers and building a strong and reliable membership in order to secure recognition from employers (2003: 79). A second issue faced by unions is the choice between organising and servicing. Organising is not only concerned with recruitment, but also with stimulating a new generation of activists in order to build collective organisation. Servicing, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with recruitment, and the 'offer of representation, consumer or labour market services' (ibid: 81). The organising approach has been more successful in the UK, where unions seek to identify and mobilise new activists; what the authors refer to as a

'union-building' approach. A third issue identified by Heery *et al*. is how the process of organising is formally and strategically managed. Similarly to Hyman (2007), the authors question whether unions' approach to organising is reactive rather than proactive and consider whether they have any real strategy for organising. It can be argued that without such a strategy, unions will fail in their revitalisation efforts.

There is also a body of literature that examines whether the organising strategy has been effective and if alternatives should be sought (Heery *et al*. 2003; Frege and Kelly 2003, 2004; Gall 2009). It was discussed earlier that the election of the Thatcher Government in 1979 signalled the start of a significant amount of union reform and curbing of trade union power. The union movement, therefore, had to look at other ways in which they could restore some of their political influence. Some industries, like print and media, 'were forced to develop new organizing policies to replace the closed shop…' (Heery *et al*. 2003: 82). Others, such as the privatised utilities, looked to organising in order to counter a lack of employer support. Faced with such challenges, unions looked not only to recruitment, but also to collective organisation in order to regain power.

Heery *et al*. 2003 also highlight the various constraints on union organising. There is some opposition to organising from members and activists because of the reallocation of scarce resources which some within the trade union movement feel could be better used elsewhere. There is also opposition from some union officers who have resisted organising strategies because of their existing workload, and in many cases, simply because they do not have the relevant skills to carry out this function effectively. Unions also face external constraints in terms of accessing unorganised workplaces, as well as the issue of some employers playing one union off another in an attempt to limit their power and effectiveness. This again highlights some of the existing tensions within the union movement over renewal strategies, and over debates on whether unions should focus on internal changes to organising and supporting the existing membership, or should instead adopt more radical external changes and reach out to new members and diversify their offer.

There are also some who question whether unions are going far enough in their revitalisation efforts.

3.4.4 The role of power in union revitalisation strategies

Whatever route unions choose in their revitalisation efforts, it can be argued that they need to adopt a more focused and strategic approach. Hyman (2001) argues that unions need to present themselves as more than narrow interest groups and need to clearly define their purpose in broad and ambitious terms if they want to increase their power and effectiveness. In terms of this research, this is crucial for trade unions in their attempts to engage with government and exert influence in the policy process. Power is key feature of all union revitalisation strategies. Lévesque and Murray (2010) consider how unions can build their capacity and what power resources they have at their disposal. They suggest that unions' failure to adapt to changing circumstances is one explanation of union decline and their subsequent efforts to renew. The authors go on to argue that explanations of power are key to understanding union revitalisation strategies. Dahl (1957: 203) understands power in the sense that 'A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.' Rather than having 'power over' something, Lukes (2005[1974]) conceives power as an actor's ability to set the agenda and shape the beliefs of others. This notion of power is set within the parameters of what is possible and can be understood as the 'capacity of social agents' to influence policy or other decisions, to further their own interests, and to prevent competing interests from being articulated. Lukes' notion of power considers the capacity of actors to affect the interests of others, whether positively or negatively (2005: 65). Lévesque and Murray argue that the 'power to' or 'capacity to' should be the 'starting point to understand union power' (2010: 335). There will be a fuller discussion of Lukes' concept of power in the next chapter.

In an attempt to give a full account of union power, Lévesque and Murray develop an analytical framework which focuses on union capacity and consists of resources and capabilities. It is important to understand the resources unions have at their

disposal and how this affects their capacity to renew. The authors suggest that where unions are involved in networks that include other actors such as community groups, and where ties are strong and intense, the greater the opportunity to exert power. Narrative resources are also identified as a source of power and are described as 'a body of interpretive and action frames that can be mobilized to explain new situations and new contexts and point to consecrated repertoires of action' (ibid: 339). Such resources have the capacity to help unions frame and promote a particular course of action that they wish to pursue.

Lévesque and Murray also suggest that resources are not enough on their own to respond to union decline. They argue that 'it is essential to focus not just on the development of union resources but also on the capability of union leaders and activists to develop, use and transform those resources as required by the circumstances they face' (ibid: 341). The ability of trade unionists to devise strategies that increase their voice on issues within and outside the workplace presents new possibilities for union revitalisation. Learning lessons is also identified as being key to unions' strategic capabilities. Learning from past successes and failures, and transferring this knowledge throughout the movement, is vital in terms of unions responding to new challenges and developing new initiatives. This issue is also addressed by Frege and Kelly (2003: 14-15) who discuss the ways in which unions have continued to follow old patterns of behaviour and have not adapted to new challenges, especially in collective representation. The Lévesque and Murray discussion has highlighted the importance of understanding the interactions between union resources and capacities in order to map out the possible ways in which unions can renew their power and strengthen their ability to influence.

Power is central to unions' ability to represent and advance the interests of their members. Simms and Charlwood explore two types of power for unions and employers: coercive power and legitimacy power (2010: 128). As previously discussed, power can be conceived and expressed in different ways. 'Power over', or the ability to force someone to do something that they would not otherwise do,

is one way to understand power. Another way to conceive power is that where employers accept the legitimacy of trade unions in terms of their representative and bargaining functions. Union membership density is one of the most commonly used indicators of union power (ibid: 129). However, unions can also influence through bargaining in a workplace where there is low union density and can affect policies that impact on the entire workforce. One measure of union power is to evaluate the impact of unions on the labour market. Another measure of union power is to consider their impact on public policy, which this study seeks to do in the area of skills and learning. This has great potential in that it allows unions to tap into a broader range of issues and represent a more diverse range of interests. It must be stressed, however, that industrial powers may influence political power, but they are not the same thing.

3.4.5 Union learning: a path to renewal?

3.4.5.1 Impact of ULRs and the integration of learning into union organising strategies

There is a growing body of literature examining the relationship between union-led learning, organising and union revitalisation (Munro and Rainbird 2004; Wallis *et al*. 2005; McIlroy 2008; Moore 2009; Findlay and Warhurst 2011; Rainbird and Stuart 2011; Mustchin 2012). The role and impact of the union learning representative (ULR), in particular, has received a great deal of academic attention, with evidence to suggest that the recruitment and training of union learning representatives has had a positive impact on unions and their members in terms of recruitment, activism and assessing the learning and training needs of their members. This has led many unions to focus on learning and skills as their revitalisation strategy.

Saundry *et al*. (2010) seek to identify the main determinants of ULR activity and their impact on the workplace. Overall, findings showed that ULRs and their managers are positive about their impact on workplace learning; however, this study also revealed that some trained ULRs still found it difficult to become active. This evaluation also found that there is a positive relationship between supportive managers and unions and ULR impact. Findings also revealed that negotiation over

learning and training has a powerful influence over ULR activity and impact, and the presence of positive workplace relations and a collective bargaining framework that recognises the importance of learning and training are central to effective ULR activity. There are also studies that examine the impact of ULRs on employer- and non-employer-funded training (Bacon and Hoque 2009). Evidence suggests that ULR activity has had an impact on training activity, specifically in the case of employer-funded or non-employer-funded training. However, this study also highlighted that over one-quarter of ULRs reported that their learning activities had no positive impact on employer- or non-employer-funded training. Furthermore, findings revealed that ULRs are more likely to have a positive influence on training where the employers are willing to negotiate with union representatives.

Other research has explored the relationship between union learning and organising strategies (Wood and Moore 2007; Moore and Ross 2008; Moore 2009). Evidence suggests that organising departments are working more closely with the learning arms of their union at national and regional levels (Wood and Moore 2007). However, some argue that more work needs to be done. One Learning Officer commented:

> "What I would like to see happen is for our regional organisers to see negotiating and organising around learning as part of their day-to-day activity, as they would about… any other workplace issue… The challenge for us is to well and truly mainstream this agenda so that people see it as part of their day-to-day work just like any other organising or negotiating issue." (2007: 10)

The creation of Learning Organiser posts at both regional and national levels suggests that there is a level of commitment from unions to integrate learning into their organising strategies.

Wood and Moore also examine the role of the ULR in recruitment and organising strategies and highlight some of the concerns of Union Officers over their function within the union. Although some unions have recognised that recruitment and

organising should be part of the ULR role, others have expressed concerns over this, particularly in terms of the development and workload of new members. One Organising Officer commented:

> "They are a different sort of animal [ULRs] from the people we have as reps in the broader sense of the word…If we added things on then I think we may cut off that supply. We need to address the issue of development as ULRs first… and then at the appropriate point start to develop them in areas such as recruitment." (ibid: 11)

Another Organising Officer called for a more 'joined-up' approach where learning and education is integrated into the wider branch organising strategy; one that promotes the benefits of union membership. This research successfully highlights the steps that unions are taking to integrate union-led learning into wider recruitment and organising strategies.

3.4.5.2 Contemporary UK debate: Union learning and policy influence

Union engagement in learning policy and practice represents a new area of sustained union activity. One major focus of the contemporary UK debate is whether the learning agenda has afforded trade union substantial influence over public policy and therefore a path to revitalisation (McIlroy 2008; Findlay and Warhurst 2011; Rainbird and Stuart 2011; Clough 2012). McIlroy (2008) analyses the part played by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in public policy since 1997 and reviews the literature that suggests that union involvement in learning has stimulated union revitalisation. While McIlroy does acknowledge the successful role that the TUC has established in workplace learning, he maintains that unions have failed to attain substantial influence over learning and skills policy and are simply being used as an administrative arm of the State. He summarises the union role as 'that of an agent providing services, not that of a partner in policy-making…' (2008: 296). He goes on to argue that while learning may generate membership and activism, there is a lack of evidence to show that the union learning agenda has delivered substantive gains to union themselves or contributed to union

revitalisation. McIlroy further argues that unions' reliance on State funding for learning has allowed government to push them into a public administrative role, where they help to implement State policies where they have little influence, which in turn weakens some of their other core functions.

There is another body of literature that challenges McIlroy's view that unions have failed develop real social partnership with government in the learning and skills agenda (Findlay and Warhurst 2011; Rainbird and Stuart 2011; Clough 2012). In fact, Clough argues that a partnership approach has developed with employers and government as a result of the union learning agenda and has created a space and opportunity for unions to influence workplace learning and skills policy (2012: 4). Here, the role of the ULR is 'framed' by such a partnership approach and is supported by dedicated State funding and statutory recognition of their role (ibid: 20). Rainbird and Stuart address some of the issues raised by McIlroy, specifically unions' reliance on State funding for learning, and argue that 'State support for union-led learning need not be inevitably constraining, as the agenda affords space for unions to develop their representative and regulatory capacity' (2011: 203). In fact, they argue that through a process of critical engagement, unions can effectively shape public policy 'through an iterative process whereby the TUC decided policy (via affiliates) and then lobbies the State' (ibid: 206). This critical engagement thesis sees the potential of union learning to contribute to positive outcomes for unions. Stuart *et al*. (2010) also highlight evidence from a Union Project Officer survey that suggested that union learning activities are having a positive impact on employers' attitudes towards union learning and were starting to influence employer policy around learning and skills.

Findlay and Warhurst (2011) examine the potential of union-led learning through union learning funds as a path to union revitalisation. Unlike many other studies that examine the various revitalisation strategies and their effectiveness (Bronfenbrenner and Jurvich 1998; Baccaro *et al*. 2003; Frege and Kelly 2003; 2004), Findlay and Warhurst focus on the potential of the Scottish Union Learning Fund

(SULF) to contribute to union revitalisation. They seek to address the 'evidence-base problem', identified by McIlroy (2008) that dismisses the potential of unions' involvement in workplace learning as a path to revitalisation (2011: 2). Analysis of findings is framed using Behrens' *et al*. (2004) four dimensions: membership, economic, political and institutional. The data reveal that SULF-funded projects have improved relations between members and potential members, thereby aiding union recruitment and activism. These learning funds were also found to have helped create new layers of representation and to have fostered better working relationships with employers. SULF projects also effectively illustrated the relevance of unions in debates around learning and skills policy. Although these results suggest that union learning can make a positive contribution to union revitalisation, the issue of sustainability still needs to be addressed. In a period where union resources are increasingly scarce, it can be argued that more work needs to be done for learning to be viewed as a key priority for unions. This requires not only a cultural change within unions but also structural changes where union learning is embedded within unions and workplace structures (Findlay and Warhurst 2011: 16-17). Having outlined the potential of union learning as a path to union revitalisation, the next section will explore the policy-making environment in Scotland and the opportunities available to unions to exert influence.

3.5 Changing nature of state power and impact of multi-level governance

The Scottish Parliament opened in 1999, following a referendum in 1997 in which Scotland voted for devolution. The Scotland Act of 1998, which established the Scottish Parliament, transferred some of the powers previously reserved to Westminster, to Holyrood. Devolution in the UK means that powers are dispersed from the political centre at Westminster, allowing more decisions to be made at a local level. In Scotland, this essentially means that there are two governments - UK and Scottish, each having responsibility for different policy areas. Under devolution, the Scottish Parliament has the powers to make decisions in certain policy areas without requiring the permission of the UK Parliament. Although the UK Parliament has the power to make laws on any matter, it is not common practice for the UK

Parliament to make laws on devolved matters without seeking the approval of the Scottish Parliament.[11] Policy areas reserved to Westminster include constitutional affairs, defence, central economic policy, and foreign affairs, whilst policy areas devolved to the Scottish Parliament include health, law, education (including learning and skills) and local government.

Devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is an example of the changing nature of State power in the UK. According to Bache and Flinders (2004), This dispersal of power and questions over the UK constitution have given rise to conflict and debate. The authors discuss multi-level governance, making the argument that devolution is not an event, but a process, and as a result the British State is open to constant uncertainty. Debates around governance and multi-level governance raise key questions around the role, power and capabilities of the State, and the ways in which actors at various levels attempt to influence the policy process. According to Bevir (2011: 1), governance 'refers to various new theories and practices of governing and the dilemmas to which they give rise.' Typically, theories of governance give focus to the various interests and actors that come together to develop policies and practices, and the ways in which patterns of governance are affected.

Multi-level governance 'refers to negotiated, non-hierarchical exchanges between institutions at the transnational, national, regional and local levels' (Peters and Pierre 2001: 131). It is also concerned with the relationships between these governance processes at different levels. Trade unions interact with and attempt to influence more than one State. At the Westminster/ UK-level, trade unions engage with, and attempt to influence government in, areas such as economic policy and workplace relations. At Holyrood, trade unions interact with the Scottish Government on learning and skills policy, and work in partnership to deliver union-led workplace learning. More recently through their representation on the Fair Work Convention, they have also advised Scottish Ministers on issues related to the

[11] https://www.parliament.scot/about/how-parliament-works/powers-of-the-scottish-parliament

fair work agenda in Scottish workplaces. At EU level, there is engagement in areas such as social partnership working and engaging civil society in the policy agenda - for example, the Europe 2020 Vision (2010) and the Lisbon Strategy (2000). A more recent example is the STUC's campaigning work towards ensuring that employment protections enshrined in the Working Time Directive are not downgraded.[12] This was a key concern for the trade union movement following the UK's official exit from the European Union on the 1st of January 2021.

It can be argued that Scottish devolution represents a new era in Scottish politics presenting more opportunities for actors to engage in the policy process. The literature on multi-level governance highlights the ways in which trade unions engage with different states and at different levels. This gives them various opportunities to attempt to influence key decision-makers in the policy process. Devolution in Scotland has seen a wider range of actors, including pressure groups, voluntary organisations and trade unions, being consulted on policy formation in devolved areas such as health, employment and education. The opportunities for actors to engage in and influence the policy process are amplified by the relatively small size of Scotland as compared to the UK. As Cairney (2013: 10) points out:

> 'The scale of policymaking produces the potential for relatively close personal relationships to develop between senior policymakers in central government and leaders of public bodies and key stakeholders. It also prompts civil servants to rely more on external experts and the organisations with experience of policy implementation.'

Although having a closer and arguably better-connected policy community has the advantage of allowing government to more easily assemble all the key stakeholders when developing and implementing policy, it also presents a challenge for government in terms of managing expectations, particularly where stakeholders' consultation with government does not lead to policy influence. However, from a stakeholder perspective, having access to government and being part of the

[12] https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=706&langId=en&intPageId=205

consultation process may still be viewed as a positive outcome, and even viewed as policy influence. These ideas will be explored in greater detail in the findings chapters that follow. It could also be argued that a smaller policy community in Scotland gives unions and other actors in the policy process a greater opportunity to maximise their influencing potential, as they are able to access well-established networks more easily.

These debates around multi-level governance also highlight that political power is increasingly being derived from a variety of resources that sit outside State boundaries, for example, from private actors such as business groups and social actors such as trade unions. This is aligned with the Pluralist concepts of the State that were discussed in chapter 2. Here, power is dispersed and can sit outside the political centre, where non-government actors like unions are involved in the decision-making process. It is therefore of interest to consider whether this devolution of power makes a difference to public policy, and specifically, whether this has opened a distinctive space and opportunity for trade unions to exert influence in the policy process. Although much has been written about Scottish devolution and the new brand of consensus politics (Jeffrey 2009; Keating 2010; Cairney 2011, 2015), others question whether this is a reality, especially if we consider the role of party politics in the long-running debates over Scottish independence (Bradbury and Mitchell 2001; Mitchell *et al*. 2012).

The State is key to this study because trade unions need access to the State to achieve their policy priorities. An examination of the union-State relationship is also important as the State can both constrain and enable trade union influence in the policy process. As discussed in chapter 2, multi-level governance has highlighted the different levels and powers across the UK and the impact of devolution, which has given actors such as trade unions the space and opportunity to try to influence key decision-makers in the policy process. It is also important to reference the dimensions of Varieties of Capitalism (VoC) discussed earlier in this thesis. The VoC approach highlights the importance of State capacity and capability, and the key

role of strategic interactions when actors such as trade unions try to pursue their interests and exert influence on the policy process. In the VoC approach outlined by Hall and Soskice (2001), the UK is categorised as a liberal market economy, with competitive market arrangements and weaker trade unions. However, in terms of this study, this categorisation can be challenged through an examination of unions' role in the learning and skills agenda and an assessment of their influence in this area of policy.

There is a strong orientation towards social partnership in Scotland but the constraints of being a devolved nation within the UK - a liberal market economy - shape what can be achieved. The Scottish Government have put mechanisms in place that would typically be associated with a coordinated market economy, including strategic interactions with other actors, adopting a collaborative approach to policy-making, and the sharing of information and expertise. These voluntary mechanisms put in place by government are important for trade unions where no statutory or other formal routes exist, and give unions and other actors the opportunity to exert influence in the policy process. This research attempts to demonstrate that analysing institutions like the STUC from the outside is not sufficient *per se* to assess influence in the policy process. It is only by having an in-depth analysis of a case, which in this study is the STUC, that researchers can highlight the existence of these informal mechanisms. It is also important to point out that devolution makes these mechanisms more workable in the sense that there is a smaller policy community in Scotland in comparison with the UK-level, and actors such as trade unions are able to access key decision-makers more easily. The Scottish Government's approach to policy-making since devolution has also supported the building of networks and relationships over time and the sharing of information and expertise, giving actors such as trade unions the opportunity to exert influence in the policy process.

3.6 STUC and union engagement in the changing learning and skills policy landscape since devolution

This research uses the STUC as the single case study to carry out an in-depth investigation of unions' engagement in learning and skills policy, and assess the extent to which they have been able to develop an influential role with government and exert influence in the policy process. The STUC was established in March 1897 as the result of a political dispute with the Trades Union Congress (TUC) regarding political representation for the labour movement.[13] It is an entirely independent and autonomous trade union centre for Scotland, and not a regional organisation of the TUC. The STUC represents over 540,000 trade unionists, comprising the members of 39 affiliated trade unions and 20 Trades Union Councils. Their purpose is to co-ordinate, develop and articulate the views and policies of the trade union movement in Scotland and to promote: trade unionism; equality and social justice; the creation and maintenance of high-quality jobs; and the public sector delivery of services.[14] STUC policy is set at their Annual Congress in April each year, which elects a General Council to oversee their policy and campaigning work. A significant example of this campaigning role was their support of proposals set out in 'A Claim of Right for Scotland'.[15] Here, the trade union movement, along with MPs, MEPs, churches, local councils and minor political parties played an active and leading role in the campaign that culminated in the establishment of the Scottish Parliament.[16]

3.6.1 Labour-Liberal coalition (1999-2007)

The skills landscape in Scotland has experienced many changes since devolution, where different priorities have emerged in response to the changing political landscape. Learning and skills have been one of the key priority areas for the STUC and unions in this time, working closely with government in this policy area, even when Scottish Labour has not been the party of government. 1999 saw the Labour-Liberal coalition, and a skills strategy that reflected the nature of the new Scottish

[13] https://www.scottishunionlearning.com/about-history-stuc/
[14] https://www.stuc.org.uk/about-the-stuc
[15] https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2018-0171/
[16] https://www.scottishleftreview.scot/the-campaign-for-a-scottish-parliament/

Parliament: open and consultative, where organisations and individuals were given the opportunity to inform the decision-making process (Scottish Executive 1999). Some of the key priorities outlined by the Labour-Liberal coalition included: meeting the market need for training with programmes such as Modern Apprenticeships and developing core skills; developing employability, with a focus on improving the employment and education prospects of 16-18 year olds and making adult learning more effective; and adapting to economic change - for example, in helping the unemployed with their skills needs and introducing Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) to help widen participation in learning and support those facing financial barriers.[17]

By 2003, lifelong learning had emerged as a key theme, which the then Scottish Executive described as 'personal fulfilment and enterprise; employability and adaptability; active citizenship and social inclusion' (Scottish Executive 2003). The adult learner was the focus, with acknowledgement that investment in lifelong learning benefits not only the individual, but also the economy and wider society. In this strategy, lifelong learning is understood in broad terms, and includes formal and informal learning, workplace learning and the other skills, knowledge, and experience that individuals acquire in their everyday lives. The period from 1999 to 2003 was a significant time for trade unions and the STUC and their engagement in the learning and skills agenda. The STUC's Lifelong Learning Unit (LLU) was established in 1999 with funding from Scottish Enterprise. This can be defined as the first formalised iteration of union learning activity in Scotland, and paved the way for future work in this policy area. This unit worked with unions, employers, government, and a range of other bodies to help unions access training and development opportunities for members across Scotland and create a more strategic approach to their lifelong learning activity. In 2000, the STUC obtained funding from the Scottish Executive to help promote and develop trade union learning. This was achieved through the Scottish Union Learning Fund (SULF), which developed projects focusing on a range of activity, including adult literacy and

[17] Individual Learning Accounts were replaced by Individual Training Accounts in October 2017.

numeracy skills, technical skills, and personal and professional development. Following this, the Trade Union Working Party on Lifelong Learning (TUWPLL) was established as a forum to enable the STUC General Council, which oversees union policy development and implementation throughout the year, to interact with Ministers and senior Scottish Government officials on issues related to learning in the workplace.

As outlined above, supporting individuals to access core skills and lifelong learning opportunities was also a priority for the Scottish Executive. Adult literacy and numeracy are examples of core skills provision that unions helped to support at this time. In 2001 the Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland (ALNIS) strategy was launched. This focused on improving the quality and quantity of literacies provision in response to the needs of individual learners. Following on from this, the STUC gained Pathfinder status in 2002 whereby they obtained funding for an Adult Literacy Coordinator. This allowed them to target workers with low levels of literacy and numeracy through the provision of workplace literacy supported by trade unions. This project ran until 2005 and was then replaced by an Everyday Skills project to continue this work, funded by the Scottish Executive.

During the Labour-led coalition in 2002, the first Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Scottish Executive and the STUC was signed. This formalised the engagement between Ministers and the STUC across a wide range of public policy issues. Based on a social partnership model, this framework set out an approach where government and STUC work together to create genuine partnership in areas of shared priorities; a theme which has previously been discussed and is very much a part of the Scottish Government's (formally Scottish Executive's) approach to policy-making. The shared priorities outlined at this time were economic development in Scotland, modernisation of public services, and social partnership. These priorities would be negotiated at the formal twice-yearly meeting between Ministers and the STUC, and through informal meetings at the request of either party.

These early years of devolution, led by the Labour-Liberal coalition, highlight the government's priorities of boosting the skills of the workforce, improving employability of workers, supporting the transition of young workers into the labour market, and promoting lifelong learning. When the Scottish National Party (SNP) came to power in 2007 and formed a minority government, there was a shift in focus. Although the government acknowledged that boosting skills remained an important feature of their approach to skills, they stated that skills must be used more effectively to address the country's persistent productivity gap and improve economic performance. This proved a challenge, however, as it required policy interventions that sit outside of skills policy and reach into the workplace in terms of how jobs are designed and workers managed (Payne 2012).

3.6.2 SNP Government (2007-present)

The Scottish Government's Lifelong Skills Strategy of 2007, the first for the new SNP government, focused on early years through to adulthood. Here, there is more of an explicit link between the skills of the population and economic success on one hand, and on the other the importance of different agencies coming together - continuing the process of consultation outlined previously - to make the strategy a success. Three key themes emerged from this: the demand-side debates around skills; employability and the effective use of skills; and skills utilisation. The strategy stated:

> 'We need both a skilled population and an economy and society that makes full and productive use of these skills. This will be one of our central planks to building a wealthier Scotland and should be seen in the context of our developing new economic approach. We need a Scotland that is truly demanding of our education and training systems. We need employers that demand, value and make best use of their workforce's skills. We need to improve employability skills for those without jobs.' (Scottish Government 2007)

From 2007 onwards, there was also significant investment in union learning in Scotland. Following successful applications to the European Social Fund (ESF), the STUC secured funding to support their learning work. 2007 also saw the establishment of the Modern Apprenticeship Group (MAG)[18], which included STUC membership. This was, and remains, a key priority for the government:

> 'We recognise that the Modern Apprenticeship (MA) programme achieves two separate, but interlinked objectives: to build skills thus growing the economy and supporting a wider social inclusion agenda.' (Scottish Executive 2007)

The progression of the unions' role in this agenda resulted in the Modern Apprenticeship Project in 2010, which was funded by Skills Development Scotland (SDS). This project was aimed at supporting trade unions to promote the Modern Apprenticeship Programme in workplaces and to provide examples of good practice in relation to employing workers from a diverse range of backgrounds. In 2007, the STUC also signed a new MoU with the Scottish Government.

In 2008, a new structure for trade union learning was established. Union learning was launched to bring together the work of the STUC Skills & Lifelong Learning Team and TUC Education in Scotland. What is now known as Scottish Union Learning (SUL) can be described as the dedicated learning arm of the STUC and aims to bring strategic direction to union-led learning in Scotland. It is supported by funding from the Scottish Government. Building on the government's commitment to the skills utilisation agenda. 2008 also saw the establishment of the Skills Utilisation Leadership Group where one of the key tasks was to raise awareness of how the better utilisation of skills in the workplace can benefit workers, employers and the wider economy. This was reflected in the Scottish Government's Refreshed Skills Strategy (2010) where there was a renewed focus on the skills required to aid economic recovery and develop sustainable economic growth. For this to be

[18] The Modern Apprenticeship Group (MAG) was dissolved and replaced by the Apprenticeship Approvals Group on 1 April 2020 - https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/what-we-do/apprenticeships/apprenticeship-approvals-group/

achieved, the government set out a skills strategy that not only supported skills development, but also the effective utilisation of skills. The STUC and SUL were at the forefront of this agenda, which saw them commissioning research examining the role of unions in effective skills utilisation in the workplace (Findlay *et al*. 2011). In 2011, the SNP became the first party to win an overall majority in the Scottish Parliament. A refreshed MoU between the Scottish Government and the STUC was signed in September 2011.

Following the 2008 recession, each of the Scottish Government's skills and economic strategies focused on accelerating the recovery and on increasing sustainable economic growth.[19] The government identified young people as being one of the most marginalised groups and particularly affected by the downturn. A key focus for government during this period was to reduce youth unemployment and help young people into the labour market. This work was progressed through the Scottish Government's Commission on the Development of Scotland's Young Workforce. This commission had representation from the STUC and was tasked with developing recommendations that would improve young people's transition into employment. The Commission's report was published in 2014 and referred to the crucial role that trade unions can play in the creation of training opportunities for young people, particularly through union learning representatives and through increased employer engagement. In their response, the Scottish Government outlined a multi-agency partnership approach at both the local and national level, which included the expansion of the Modern Apprenticeship programme. This committed to giving every 16-19-year-old the offer of a place in learning and training for those not already in education, employment or training, and college regionalisation was initiated to support more young people into work.

In 2014, the Scottish Government also set up the Working Together Review, chaired by Jim Mather. Representatives from trade unions, employers and academics were brought together to investigate progressive workplace policies in the public and

[19] Scottish Government (2010) Skills for Scotland: Accelerating the Recovery and Increasing Sustainable Economic Growth; Scottish Government (2011) The Government Economic Strategy

private sectors in Scotland. The focus of the review was to produce recommendations that would help to develop a positive dialogue between trade unions, employers and government towards the creation of more inclusive and productive workplaces. Trade unions played a key role in this review and made the case for developing capacity and capability in industrial relations. One of the 30 recommendations of the review (1) was to continue the support for Scottish Union Learning and to agree an approach with partners that 'ensures that union-led learning fulfils its full potential in addressing Scotland's workplace and workforce development challenges.' (Working Together Review 2014: 6) Recommendation 11 called for the creation of a fair employment framework through a stakeholder body. The Working Together Review highlighted the positive role that unions can play in promoting progressive workplace practices, and this was taken forward in the Fair Work Framework which outlined the importance of trade unions in helping realise the ambition of making Scotland a world-leading fair work nation.

In 2015, a new MoU between the Scottish Government and the STUC was signed. The Fair Work Convention was also established in 2015 to advise the government on fair work issues. The Convention published a Fair Work Framework in 2016, setting out what it means by fair work, why it is important, who can play a part in making Scotland a world leading nation in fair work, and how this might be achieved. In 2016, the SNP won a third term and formed a minority government.[20] The above section has highlighted that the trade union movement have worked successfully with different parties of government since Scottish devolution in the area of learning and skills policy, and not just when the Labour Party have been in power.

3.7 Summary

This chapter has highlighted the extent of unions' engagement in the learning and skills policy sphere in recent decades. The review of the literature suggests that unions have become increasingly aware of the need to take a more strategic

[20] On 09 May 2021, the SNP won a fourth consecutive term in government. On 20 August, the SNP agreed a power-sharing partnership with the Scottish Green Party, enabling them to form a majority.

approach and maximise their political role in their efforts to regain political power and influence in the policy sphere. One of the key contemporary UK debates in this research space is presented, which seeks to argue that there is a lack of evidence to suggest that unions' engagement in the learning and skills agenda has allowed them to develop a more influential role with government and has contributed to their revitalisation efforts. This chapter challenges this position and considers whether union learning can be an effective path to renewal. In order to assess whether learning can in fact helps unions regain political power and influence, it is important to have a broader discussion of power and how researchers might conceptualise and assess influence. These issues will be addressed in the next chapter.

This chapter has also introduced the STUC as the case study for this research and has given an overview of the political environment in Scotland, and the skills landscape in which unions operate. It has highlighted the opportunities that devolution has given actors like trade unions to try to exert influence in the policy process in devolved areas such as skills and learning. It has also demonstrated the breadth of unions' engagement with government in this policy area. Reflecting on the policy process in Scotland, considering the issues that are important, and how unions sit within all of this, is crucial in any study that seeks to assess the trade union influence in the policy process.

4. Conceptualising power and assessing influence

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will consider how researchers might conceptualise power and assess influence. The discussion will be driven by Steven Lukes' (2005[1974]) three dimensions of power, which provides researchers with a broader perspective of power and allows them to 'attend to those aspects of power that are least accessible to observation' (2005[1974]: 1). Lukes' theory of power is of critical importance to this research because it helps to unpick and make sense of the complexities of assessing influence, and crucially, does not confine influence to observable outcomes; it also takes account of the more subtle manifestations of influence that are often harder to observe and quantify. Following on from this, the work of James March will be discussed. This highlights some of the problems of measuring influence and how these might be overcome. Building on the work of March (1955; 1956; 1957), the chapter will then consider how the approaches in the contemporary literature can help to develop a model for assessing influence. Finally, the tactics and strategies used by actors to exert policy influence will be outlined before reflecting on their effectiveness.

4.2 Lukes and his three dimensions of power

4.2.1 The first dimension of power

The study and measurement of influence is inextricably linked to debates on power. During the 1950s, many scholars tried to develop a concept of power that could be vigorously tested, while others questioned whether it was worth the effort (Dahl 1957: 201). How researchers define and measure power very much depends on where they situate themselves methodologically, which shapes the approach that is taken. One of the major problems in defining and measuring power is that there is no single generally accepted definition in the existing literature. Power has 'multiple and diverse meanings, appropriate to different settings and concerns' (Lukes: 2005[1974]: 61). Dahl argues that it is unlikely that we will be able to produce a single, coherent definition of power, but we can produce our own unique

understanding; one that is designed to meet the needs of our own research problems (1957: 202).

Steven Lukes, in his highly influential work *Power: a radical view*, presents a generic definition of power: 'I have defined the concept of power by saying that A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests.' (2005[1974]: 37) Lukes seeks to broaden this definition by introducing his idea of 'three-dimensional' power. Building on the existing two dimensions of power debates - the first which examines the role of actors in the decision-making process and the second which explores the way in which actors can control the political agenda - Lukes presents his three-dimensional view where the less obvious manifestations of power are the central focus. He states that '…we need to attend to those aspects of power that are least accessible to observation: that, indeed power is at its most effective when least observable.' (ibid: 1) This approach to power was put forward in response to those who viewed and measured power in the context of observable phenomena, where the exercise of power is observed through concrete decisions.

The first dimension of power is associated with the Pluralist tradition and the work of Robert Dahl (1957; 2005[1961]). This behaviourist view of power considers the role of actors in the decision-making process, and the extent to which actors can affect the behaviour of others in the decision-making process. According to Dahl, those with power are the individuals who "win" in the decision-making process (Lukes 2005[1974: 18). This one-dimensional view of power 'involves a focus on behaviour in the making of decisions on issues over which there is an observable conflict of (subjective) interests, seen as expressing policy preferences, revealed by political participation' (ibid: 19). Where conflicts of interest exist, Dahl argues that power is exercised by defeating or counteracting those opposing viewpoints. One of the main criticisms of this approach to the study of power is that it presents a very narrow conception of power. Reducing power and influence to winners and losers in the decision-making process may neglect other key factors such as access to significant stakeholders, and to campaigning strategies. It is also important to

consider whether conflict needs to be present in order for power to be tested. This approach also neglects factors that are not visible or easily accessible to the researcher. As Bachrach and Baratz point out, 'How can one be certain in any given situation that the "unmeasurable elements" are inconsequential, and are not of decisive importance?' (1962: 948) This issue is picked up in the second dimension of power outlined below.

Although there are criticisms of the first dimension of power, particularly its narrow focus and emphasis on observable manifestations of power, it is useful to researchers studying influence in the policy process because it focuses on the power of actors, such as trade unions and pressure groups, in the decision-making process where there are differing points of view and an observable conflict of interests. It highlights the importance of identifying which actors are involved in the decision-making process and what their preferences and policy priorities are. Those with influence can be seen as those actors who achieve outcomes that come closest to their desired policy position. It can be argued, however, that there are also valuable insights to be gained investigating those actors who participate, and these should not be overlooked in a study concerned with assessing policy influence.

4.2.2 Second dimension of power

The second dimension of power outlined by Lukes is associated with the work of Bachrach and Baratz (1962). These authors criticise the Pluralist view of power for failing to recognise that actors can influence the decision-making process by controlling or shaping the political agenda. Bachrach and Baratz argue that power and influence are not just embodied in "concrete decisions", where A is involved in the decisions that affect B. It is also the case that A can exercise power by shaping the political agenda and giving public attention to "safe" issues i.e., those issues that will not be to the detriment of A. This approach effectively prevents B from raising issues that will harm A's interests (1962: 948). The key point here is that an individual or group can be said to have power if they can prevent policy conflicts from entering the public sphere. However, this view is challenged by Lukes

(2005[1974]) who states that it is inaccurate to state that power can only be exercised in situations of conflict.

Studying and measuring power purely in terms of how it is exercised, according to Bachrach and Baratz, neglects other key factors such as sources of power and influence in the decision-making process. They argue that power is not just about 'who gets what and how' (Laswell 1936). It is also important to consider why some issues enter the political agenda while others are excluded; why some are prioritised while others are given little or no attention. Bachrach & Baratz state that we cannot distinguish between important and unimportant political issues without analysing the "mobilization of bias" present in the community (1962: 950). They argue that it is important to understand that the values, interests and biases within the political system 'give real meaning to those issues which do enter the political arena.' (ibid).

The marginalisation or exclusion of certain issues, or 'non-decision making', constrains decision-making to "safe" issues i.e., those issues that will not be to the detriment of the decision-maker. Parsons (1995: 135) states that '[b]ias against certain interests in society may be routinized, thus making it very difficult for certain demands to penetrate the black box of the political system.' This highlights that power and influence is not just present in observable decisions, but also in non-observable 'non-decisions' (ibid). Lukes' second dimension of power operates at a deeper level and is expressed through control of the political agenda. Here, power is exercised by controlling or regulating the issues that get onto the agenda and are available for debate.

4.2.3 Third dimension of power

The third dimension of power presented by Lukes poses a different problem in the study of power and is related to his idea of 'latent conflict'. Lorenzi (2006:92) describes this latent conflict as 'a contradiction between the interests of A (those exercising power), and the real interests of B, which are excluded.' This then leads us to consider why any actor would behave in a manner that would harm their own

best interests. Lukes' third dimension of power includes the ways in which powerful actors affect the behaviour of the less powerful without the use of overt force or coercion. Lukes' third dimension of power is an ideological form of power that offers an explanation on how the political system prevents some issues or preferences from entering the political agenda or even being articulated (2005[1974]: 25). Understanding why some issues are prevented from being aired in public is important in the study of power and influence because it demonstrates that the political agenda can be controlled not only through concrete decisions or policies, but also by preventing grievances from entering the political sphere and becoming part of the political dialogue. This can be achieved by controlling and shaping the preferences of groups and individuals in the political community.

A measure of power that only considers concrete and observable decisions also neglects the role of inactivity in the political process. A measure of power that focuses on how power is exercised assumes that power is 'both individualistic and intentional, that is, it seems to carry the suggestions that the exercise of power is a matter of individuals consciously acting to affect others' (Lukes 2005[1974]: 41-42). Power debates have often assumed that actor A is conscious of the fact that they are affecting the behaviour of B through their actions. However, we could argue that inaction on the part of A, which they may not be aware of, has a direct impact on the interests of B. In this scenario, it is important to consider whether power has been exercised if A has no knowledge of the consequences of their inaction. Although the study of inaction may yield significant results in the study of power, researchers are faced with the challenge of studying something that they cannot observe.

The third dimension of power presents the most powerful actor as shaping the dominant discourse by influencing the ideology, that is, the beliefs and perceived interests of the other actors. These actors are able the control the way in which issues are defined and considered. Using such a framework, actors may focus their attention and activities on limiting the fall-out from unfavourable reforms or policy.

Arguably, reducing power and influence to achieving outcomes neglects other 'wins' for the actors involved. There are occasions when engaging with key stakeholders, presenting your case and being part of the policy discussion can also be viewed as a success.

4.2.4 Some reflections on Lukes' three dimensions of power

This thesis does not seek to engage in debates over Lukes' account of power. Rather, it uses his three dimensions of power to inform how researchers might conceptualise and assess influence in the policy process. Lukes' theoretical approach to the study of power is significant because it makes us question why power is important (2005[1974]). Lukes understands power as an actor's ability or capacity, which they may or may not exercise. It is viewed as real and effective, both directly and indirectly. Power can be most effective when it is least accessible to observation, but this causes difficulties in terms of its study. One way to resolve such a problem would be to take a much broader approach to the study and measurement of power and influence. Analysing the decision-making process may be a key component in the analysis of power; however, the researcher must also take account of other key factors that shape the decision-making environment, for example, the interests and biases of the actors involved. An in-depth exploration of the types of resources and strategies used by actors to exert power and influence in the political process would enhance this debate. Another key consideration is understanding the underlying conditions that allow some groups to "win" in the decision-making process while others "lose out" or are kept on the margins. These issues, along with a range of others, will now be included in the wider discussion of the contemporary literature on policy influence.

The work of Lukes is key to this study because it gives a broader perspective on how researchers can go about studying and assessing power and influence. His three dimensions of power help us understand the complexity of the influencing process and uncover the nuances of influence. Here, influence is understood not just in terms of outcomes in the decision-making process and the ways in which actors

seek to control the political agenda, but also uncovering those more informal aspects of power that are less visible and harder to access. In terms of this research, this idea is key in that it is concerned with the exercise of power and influence at a stage of the policy process which has been somewhat neglected in the existing literature: the early, more informal and agenda-setting stages of the policy process. Although it is important to acknowledge that researchers will only ever be able to access some of them, these manifestations of power and influence are crucial to this study and have the potential to uncover new insights in this area of academic research.

Much of the existing literature focuses on outcomes as a proxy in the measurement of policy influence. Evidence of outcomes is usually presented in a fairly simplistic way where Actor A achieved outcome X, and is therefore seen to be influential. The following scenarios, however, can also be considered as examples of influence:

Table 1: Framework for policy influence

• Actor A achieved their preferred policy position/outcome X.
• Actor A part-achieved their preferred policy position/outcome X.
• Actor A did not achieve their preferred policy position/outcome X, but prevented a less favourable outcome.
• Actor A is part of the consultation or discussion around a policy area where they have an interest. Being part of the on-going discussion gives them the opportunity to improve their influence over a period of time and move closer to achieving their preferred policy position X.

The last point in Table 1 is particularly important; influence is not simply about achieving a specific outcome. Building relationships, being part of consultations, having representation on committees allows individuals or groups to build their potential influence over time. It also gives them the opportunity to revise their

strategies and tactics as the policy landscape, or their particular policy position, changes or evolves. These different scenarios demonstrate that influence can be exerted through a number of different means and not only by achieving a specific outcome or policy position.

4.3 The concept of influence and the 'problem' of measurement

4.3.1 Developing operational measures for policy influence

The first and second dimensions of power place great emphasis on concrete decisions, where observable outcomes in the decision-making process are seen as a marker for power or influence. This is also reflected in the literature where a great number of studies conceive influence in terms of an actor's ability to achieve specific outcomes. During the 1950s, James March wrote a series of papers on the concept and measurement of influence (March 1955; 1956; 1957). According to March, interest in the study of influence in the social and political science literature comes from 'its conception as the fundamental intervening variable for the analysis of decision-making.' (1955: 432) At his time of writing, many of the studies on influence were empirical in nature, and so researchers were encouraged to take a more theoretical approach and try to develop some operational measures of the study of influence. March describes influence as that which induces behaviour in another (ibid: 438). This concept of influence is closely related to the first and second dimensions of power outlined above where there is a commitment to behaviourism and the study of concrete decisions.

March, like many other scholars that followed him, examined the role of influence in the decision-making process in an attempt to develop a framework for measurement. The task of measuring influence, however, is fraught with difficulties. In his 1955 work, March explores these difficulties and presents options to help overcome these. One of the main issues in the measurement of influence, according to March, is the absence of an appropriate yardstick for measurement. March states: 'At present, there is lacking not only an immediately obvious unit of measurement, but even a generally feasible means of providing simple ranking'

(1955: 434). This statement is still relevant today. Another problem is generality. March argues that the relationship between influence, which has varying definitions across disciplines, and the topic of consideration, is not always made explicit in the literature. March outlines three approaches in an attempt to overcome the problem of measuring influence: measures of attributed influence, where individuals are asked to assign a value to influence; measures of opinion change, which involves gauging opinion after an event or interaction; and measures of direction interaction, where opinion change is measured through interaction techniques such as observation at different points in time (ibid: 445-450).

4.3.2 Measures of attributed influence

Measures of attributed influence is a method that involves asking group members or research participants to rank each other according to their influence at the individual or group level. This is viewed as a simple process provided that the respondents are given clear, broad categories from which to assign levels of influence. The use of such observational methods allows the researcher to record group behaviours and compare these with their influence position, for example, identifying whether the most senior figure(s) in the group contribute most to the conversation. This method, however, does require some caution as it can lead to participants giving a distorted view of influence. This method also makes it difficult to determine the form of influence involved, that is, what kind of change has taken place in the entity or object that has been influenced. This level of detail could lead to greater insights in this field of research.

4.3.3 Measures of opinion change

Measures of opinion change is a tool that was used most frequently during this period and commonly involved defining an attitude, the interaction and the subsequent position on the attitude post-interaction (March 1955: 446). Here, the attitude or behaviour is observed over two different periods of time before recording any changes, which may be caused by interactions in between observations. The advantage of such an approach is that the individual is more

external in the process: they indicate an attitude, and the researcher measures this attitude. However, this approach again introduces the 'unit problem' as there is no common scale that can be used, which makes it difficult to measure opinion change (ibid: 447).

4.3.4 Measures of influence attempts

This approach concentrates on the 'interaction pressures' themselves (ibid: 448). Influence can be measured either by influence attempts or by an agreed index of influence. The units in an index of measurement include sentences and non-verbal interactions such as laughs, frowns or pauses. Here, the researcher or observer can also create other units of analysis such as an "influence attempt". One of the major criticisms of such an approach is the assumption that each unit should be given equal importance. All of the approaches outlined by March are problematic in that they relate to an observable decision process. In terms of the specific research problem of assessing union influence in the policy process, the researcher is concerned with how they can observe or measure influence attempts, for example, in real time. It is of interest to consider whether the approaches outlined by March can be used retrospectively in order to measure trade union influence on skills and learning policy.

4.4 Moving beyond observable outcomes in the decision-making process

4.4.1 Understanding the determinants of lobbying success

The approaches outlined by March above provide a useful starting point in developing a model for assessing union influence, but do not go far enough in terms of helping researchers gain a deeper-level understanding of influence. Each approach takes account of an observable decision process, which neglects the less visible and harder to access manifestations of influence that may be present. This chapter will now consider some of the approaches in the contemporary literature, which have the potential to build a more effective model for assessing policy influence.

Mahoney (2007), in her study of interest group influence, introduces a model for measuring lobbying success and asks, 'Why do some lobbying tactics work while others fail?' This study considers the institutional structures of the political system, the characteristics of the issue at hand, and the characteristics of the interest group and their lobbying strategy. Mahoney asks us to consider the determinants of lobbying success in both an EU and a US setting. To date, scholars have avoided the study of lobbying influence because of the difficulties in defining and measuring the concept of influence. Mahoney finds this puzzling; she argues that the study of lobbying must involve the role of influence (2007: 35). In order to study lobbying influence in a broader context, Mahoney proposes that researchers look at factors at three critical levels: institutional, issue-specific and interest groups factors in order to determine the success or failure of lobbyists (ibid: 36). These factors were tested by interviewing 149 advocates across 47 different policy areas.

Mahoney highlights that lobbying success is not a measure of influence; however, success in a policy debate can help us understand why some actors are "winners" in policy decisions while others are "losers" (ibid: 44). Actors were also asked to identify the issue they were working on and any other key players who were involved in the issue. The interviewer then gathered background information on the issue and asked advocates if they had any goals for policy change, what their lobbying tactics were, what arguments were being put forward, if they experienced any opposition over this issue, and whether they had the support of allies on the issue. This interview data was complemented by other organisational and issue information. This approach allowed the researcher to map out the key players and issues in a particular policy area and identify the factors that make some actors more likely to succeed in policy debates.

4.4.2 Measuring policy influence: the value of expert informants

In his 1992 study, Hall attempts to measure legislative influence. Hall's tool for measuring influence is a survey instrument which he presents to key figures in the legislative process. Using reputational measures, where respondents are asked to

rate the influence of others, can be useful when the researcher is attempting to measure behaviour that is not observable. It is also a reliable measure in that the researcher can ask the same set of questions of multiple respondents. However, it does present the problem of validity, and specifically the recording and measuring of unobserved behaviour. It is important to consider whether this tool will give a measure of perceived power rather than actual power, and whether this a serious issue for the researcher. Another issue in the measurement of influence is that preferences may be shaped by the thoughts or preferences of others.

To overcome these problems, Hall proposes a measure of influence that is not made up not of preference-level data, but data from expert informants who have information on the preferences of members on specific pieces of legislation. This instrument allows for the fact that preferences can be ambiguous and endogenous (Hall 1992: 210). The influence of members was rated by interviewing legislative staff who had responsibility for staffing the bills under investigation. Staffers were then asked to rate members of a committee according to their influence on that particular bill. One strength of this method is that it is issue-specific: '…it taps the variable influence that different members have on different issues, so that the scope and conditional nature of member influence becomes a subject for theoretical investigation, not for summation by the participant-observer.' (ibid: 211) The strategic positioning of these expert informants also enables them to distinguish between influence and agreement, according to Hall. One of the issues with such an approach is accessing those knowledgeable individuals and discerning whose views matter. Although it is very difficult to demonstrate who influenced whom, the researcher can observe which particular arguments are presented to key decision-makers in the policy process. Having a persuasive argument can be an effective indicator of influence as it reflects the ability to affect an outcome. However, it is important to take into consideration that no matter how persuasive an actor is, there has to be room for influence in the political environment. The conditions and requirements of the political environment are key determinants of

what is politically possible in terms of an actor's ability to exert influence in a particular policy area.

4.4.3 Process-tracing, attributed influence and preference attainment

Overcoming the problems of measuring influence is also addressed by Dür (2008a; 2008b), who points to three distinct problems in measuring influence. Firstly, influence can be exercised through a variety of means, for example, through media campaigns, lobbying and accessing key decision-makers. Secondly, the practice of counteractive lobbying can make measuring influence difficult. Even if a policy decision has not moved towards the desired position of the interest group in question, it is important for these groups to counteract the efforts of other groups who represent an even less favourable position. In this sense, the interest group has wielded influence in that they have prevented a more negative outcome. Thirdly, influence can be wielded at different stages of the policy process: agenda-setting stage when decisions are taken and when decisions are implemented (2008b: 561).

Dür presents three methods for overcoming these problems: process-tracing, assessing 'attributed influence' and gauging the degree of preference attainment. Process-tracing is a widely used method for measuring interest group influence in the EU and uses semi-structured interviews. Here, interest group influence is measured by comparing group preferences with policy outcomes. The researcher is tasked with analysing the groups' influence attempts, their access to decision-makers, the response from decision-makers and whether group preferences are reflected in policy outcomes (Dür 2008b: 562). The advantage of this approach, especially in smaller studies, is that the researcher is likely to be aware of most of the factors influencing decisions. Interview methods also give the researcher a deeper understanding of the factors involved in interest group influence that would not be possible with survey methods. In terms of weaknesses, not all interest group influence can be observed; the researcher might conclude that a group lacked influence when it did not. Evidence of influence may not be found simply because the researcher did not have the necessary resources. Also, human memory is

subject to error, so that the accurate recollection of events may prove difficult and could distort research findings.

The 'attributed' method (see March 1955) uses survey methods and has a self-assessment approach to the measurement of influence. Here, respondents are asked to assess the influence of other group members. This method can be problematic in that respondents may exaggerate or underestimate influence. Another problem, which is common to all methods used for measuring influence, is the recording of perceptions of influence rather than actual influence.

The method of preference attainment measures influence as the distance between an outcome and the ideal position of an actor. One of the advantages of this approach is that influence can be detected without being visible. Here, issues are coded and assigned a value to determine whether an outcome matches the preferences of the actor(s) involved. One of the main advantages of this approach is that researchers can put a value on the level of influence, rather than just determining whether a group had influence or not. It does, however, cause the researcher significant problems in determining preferences. Even if we use interviews to try to determine preferences, they are 'likely to uncover the – possibly strategic – positions of actors rather than the underlying preferences.' (2008b: 568) Another issue is salience. Just because a group was successful on five per cent of an issue does not necessarily mean that they lacked influence. It may simply indicate that other issues were also significant in the process.

One solution to these method problems is methodological triangulation, where multiple methods are used to compensate for the inadequacies of others. However, Dür (2008b) calls for some caution with this approach and states that 'methodological triangulation brings the problem of what a researcher should do if, for example, process-tracing leads to different results from the attributed influence method' (ibid 570). Although this method is not without its faults, Dür argues that this approach is more likely to produce reliable results.

4.4.4 Analysis of the earlier, agenda-setting stages of the policy process

Leech (2010; 2011) also contributes to these debates. She stresses the importance of information in the study of influence. As we have seen with the long-standing debates on power, much of the work on influence has concentrated on concrete decisions and outcomes. Leech, however, stresses that 'we must look more closely at informal interactions and at agenda-setting processes…' (2011: 20). These interactions include contacting officials, campaigning, presenting research results, mass media presence and the monitoring of policymakers' actions. It is of interest to consider whether studying these lobbying attempts could provide a more effective measure of influence rather than focusing solely on policy outcomes.

Leech goes on to highlight the potential gains for researchers if they change their focus from influence to collaboration and consultation. It is argued that this may be more effective in their attempts to overcome the problem of measuring influence. Leech states that we are 'measuring the wrong things in the wrong ways' (Leech 2010: 2). She goes on to argue for a broader approach to the measurement of interest group influence, where all 'influencing' activities are investigated (ibid: 3). A measurement of influence that concentrates solely on policy outcomes reduces influence to a yes-no proposition. Focusing on policy outcomes is problematic for the researcher because 'it turns our attention away from the earlier stages of the policy process in which interest groups may have the most influence (ibid: 9). It is worth noting that the end result may not always be the most revealing in terms of the analysis of influence. The influence of most interest groups has been developed over a significant period of time where a number of resources have been committed in order to influence policymakers. The policy dialogue has been shaped and framed through the building of alliances and the carrying out of research (ibid: 10). Having just highlighted the importance of analysing all influencing activities (or tactics) when measuring influence, the next section will now explore this in greater detail.

4.5 Understanding and influencing the policy process

4.5.1 Tactics and strategies

There is a breadth of literature that examines the various tactics and strategies actors use to exert influence in the policy process. Before discussing these further, it is important to set how researchers might understand 'tactics' and 'strategies'. These terms are frequently referenced in the political science literature, where tactics can be generally understood as the means, or set of specific activities, that actors use to achieve short-term policy goals or objectives. A strategy however refers to an overall plan or a pathway to achieving your goals. In terms of this study, which seeks to assess trade union influence, the researcher's focus will be the tactics, which can also be understood as actions or activities used by unions to achieve policy priorities.

How researchers to attempt to influence the policy process is one of the most common questions in public policy research (Weible *et al.* 2012). This influence can take many different forms: a new policy, the amendment of an existing policy, influencing public opinion to get a policy issue on the policy agenda, or nullifying the ideas of other groups and individuals that may pose a threat to your own interests. Policy actors such as interest groups and government officials attempt to shape policy from within a policy subsystem. Policy subsystems can be understood as the venues for influencing policy (ibid: 7), or as 'a space where relevant actors discuss policy issues and persuade and bargain in pursuit of their interests' (Howlett and Ramesh 2003: 53). In some instances, actors may have to modify their objectives to gain concessions from others, usually those actors who have attained an inside track to the policy process. Policy subsystems include individuals, or policy participants, who have an interest in a particular issue within a particular territory, and can operate at different levels - State, national, regional, and community levels (ibid: 6). Without access to the policy subsystem, actors such as interest groups may struggle to get their ideas onto the political agenda and to the attention of key decision-makers.

4.5.1.1 Knowledge, networks and participation in the policy subsystem

Weible *et al.* (2012: 9-15) outline three strategies for understanding and influencing the policy process: develop in-depth knowledge in a policy subsystem; invest in networks; and participate for an extended period of time. Developing in-depth knowledge, or a greater self-awareness of one's belief system, is key in this process, and is an 'important step toward self-expression and goal attainment' (ibid: 17). Having such knowledge of the subsystem is important because policy issues have a history, and therefore must be understood in the wider context, i.e., the relationships that exist and the actors involved. The next strategy for influencing the policy process is to develop networks and share resources such as knowledge and expertise. This approach can be an effective means for network members to achieve their policy objectives. The third strategy for influencing the policy process is to participate for long periods of time. Weible *et al.* state that 'the political battle does not end at policy adoption but continues in implementation and agenda setting activities' (ibid: 14). The interests of the various actors in the policy process also need to be promoted and protected throughout the stages of the policy process. These actors must be aware that opponents can challenge their policy position at any time: they can launch a new campaign and can gain public awareness of the issue using another, more effective lens. According to Weible *et al.*, it is only when policy participants take part in the policy process for a sustained period of time, that they can effectively try to influence policymakers and counteract those groups who seek to undermine their position.

Weible *et al.* stress that there are no guarantees for influencing the policy process, but actors can put themselves in the best possible position by adopting the strategies outlined above. This approach has great potential for assessing influence in the policy process. Once in-depth knowledge has been attained, networks have been developed and time has been invested in the various stages of the policy process - not just in decision-making and implementation - actors such as trade unions can put themselves in a good position to try to influence public policy where they have an interest.

4.5.1.2 The insider/outsider approach

Jones (2011) provides an overview of monitoring and evaluating policy influence in the context of international development work, and specifically the activities that seek to influence policy. Influencing policy is important for bodies such as the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in order to gain representation and funding for their policy interests. Engaging in policy dialogue with key decision-makers helps such actors gain wider recognition for their work and/or interests. Activities that seek to influence policy can be distinguished as those that take the inside track or outside track (Jones 2011: 2). Those that take the inside track work closely with decision-makers, whereas approaches taking the outside track tend adopt a more confrontational approach in their attempts to influence change. The author outlines three types of policy influencing activities: evidence and advice, public campaigns and advocacy and lobbying and negotiation. Typical activities under the heading of evidence and advice include pilots of policy programmes, communicating research through seminars or government briefings, and sharing research findings with decision-makers. In terms of public campaigns and advocacy, activities might include political debates or using the mass media to communicate a particular message and raise public awareness of the issue. Lobbying activities usually include direct communications with key decision-makers such as government ministers, or more informal contact with other partners such as interest groups.

The interest group strategy of taking an 'insider' or 'outsider' approach is also discussed by Maloney *et al*. (1994). Here, an insider/outsider model is used to describe the status of interest groups in the policy process and the strategies employed to influence decision-makers (1994: 17). If we consider the role of interest groups in the political system, 'insider' status suggests an inside track; a close relationship with decision-makers. Such groups are understood to have consultative arrangements with policymakers where they are 'invited in' to discussions covering a particular policy area (ibid: 19) This close relationship with decision-makers, however, does not always necessarily translate into policy influence. It is therefore of interest to consider what distinguishes those groups or

individuals that are involved in consultation with key decision-makers from those select few that then go on to exert influence in the decision-making process.

This insider/outsider approach also considers whether the influence of insider groups can be attributed to factors such as economic status. Outsider groups, on the other hand, may have to rely on public appeals and contact with the mass media in order to exert influence over policymakers. One of the key issues that emerges from this discussion is whether we have the evidence that demonstrates that some groups are excluded or denied access to policymakers simply because they have less financial power than others. It is important to understand which factors shape whether someone will be an insider or outsider, and what resources these groups or individuals bring to bear on their activities. Maloney *et al*. go on to say:

> 'It is argued by some that the power of the insider group does not depend on its political resources but on the power of recognition by the State: the State accepts as insiders only those groups with which it is predisposed to agree.' (1994: 22)

This leads us on to consider whether examining the instances of consultation and negotiation would be a more effective means of measuring interest group influence (ibid: 25). Maloney *et al*. suggest that governments grant insider status to those groups who possess valuable resources such as economic power or valuable information. Deciding whether to take an insider or outsider route to influence is a strategic decision and very much depends on the objective at hand. It is also a key consideration of this thesis.

This theme is developed further by Binderkrantz (2005) who explores the ways in which groups use various methods to influence decision-makers. To date, most research at the European level has concentrated on the direct interactions between interest groups and decision-makers (Bouwen 2002; Eising 2007; Mahoney 2007). There is the assumption within some of the existing literature that the 'insider' strategy is the most effective in terms of influencing policymakers. However, it is

important to point out that some groups deliberately take an outside approach in their attempts to influence policymakers (Binderkrantz 2005: 696). This study uses survey methods to explore the strategies of interest groups and argues that it may be useful to describe these approaches as direct and indirect as this avoids the assumption that one approach is superior to the other. Interest groups can choose from a range of strategies to influence decision-makers - the key issue here is which strategy to pursue and when. Binderkrantz presents four strategies of influence and their associated activities: administrative, parliamentary, media, and mobilisation strategies. Direct strategies include contacting the relevant minister and contacting party spokespersons. Indirect strategies include issuing press releases, publicising research reports and arranging public meetings and conferences.

Binderkrantz carried out a survey of Danish interest groups to explore the various tactics and strategies used to influence key decision-makers in the policy process. Statistical analysis was used to see if there is a correlation between the status of interest groups and the influence strategies that they adopt. Results show that not occupying a privileged 'insider' position does not necessarily lead to interest groups taking up indirect strategies such as petitioning and acts of civil disobedience (2005: 710). In fact, evidence suggests that interest groups tend to use a range of strategies to influence key decision-makers, at least in the Danish context. As we have seen with other interest groups studies, influence has to be measured in a broader context. The nature of the political system and the biases and interests of specific groups are also important determinants of interest group strategies.

4.5.1.3 Lobbying and use of expert knowledge and information

The insider/outsider approach is just one strategy adopted by interest groups as they attempt to influence key decision-makers in the policy process. Another strategy, which is widely discussed in the existing literature, is the tactic of lobbying. Authors such as Austen-Smith (1993: 799) discuss lobbying, which they describe as 'strategic information transmission'. Here, lobbyists can influence the policy process through the specialist information that they hold. Decision-makers often must choose between policy initiatives without complete information, so those with the

information required to develop policies and make decisions are seen to be in a position of power and influence. Groups exchange information and other resources such as campaign contributions in return for access to key decision-makers. Government and policymakers approach groups with policy-relevant information because of their concern over policy outcomes. It is common for policymakers to be concerned about the consequences of policies, and so groups that hold valuable policy-relevant knowledge allow decision-makers to map out potential outcomes and develop policies that are better informed.

Jordan (2010: 1) also discusses the tactic of lobbying in the British context and describes this as an attempt to 'modify public policy in specialist policy debates through persuasion and information.' In a political environment where groups compete for influence, the decision of whether to take an inside or outside track to influence is an important one. A key consideration is whether groups should adopt an 'insider' status and take the more consensual approach to influence, or an 'outsider' and the more indirect route to influence where there is more emphasis on conflict and on pressurising decision-makers. It can be argued that providing information to policymakers is a more effective means to exert influence and avoids actors having to engage in conflict behaviour. Lobbying that includes 'information-based' transactions between decision-makers and those with a specific interest or interests, is a means for interest groups to modify or shape public policy. This activity allows interest groups to 'advance their interpretation in policy debates' (ibid: 5).

4.5.1.4 Access and special interests

The strategy of using access to influence the policy process is widely discussed in the existing literature. Bouwen (2002) seeks to develop a theoretical framework that explains the access of business interests to European institutions. The aim of such a framework is to understand how interest groups influence legislation at the European level. Rather than measuring influence, Bouwen proposes the alternative approach of looking at access, specifically how political actors gain access to European institutions. It is, however; important to point out that 'access does not

necessarily mean influence.' (2002: 366) Bouwen argues that access to key decision-makers in the policy process is an indicator of influence or power; however, this does not necessarily mean they will then be able to influence policy decisions.

One of the ways in which actors with business interests gain access to policy-makers and try to influence policy decisions is through 'access goods' which they have at their disposal. These are described as '…goods provided by private actors to the EU institutions to gain access.' (ibid: 370) One example of an 'access good' is what Bouwen refers to as 'Expert Information'. This is where actors hold specific or expert information in a policy area such as the economy, which is seen to be of value to institutions when making key policy decisions. In the exchange of such access goods, some actors gain access to key decision-makers because of the specific information they possess, while others do not; this was discussed earlier in this chapter. The development of this theoretical framework is an attempt by Bouwen to understand why some actors gain access to policymakers at the EU level while others remain on the 'outside', and makes a valuable contribution to the existing research and the problem of measuring influence.

4.6 Summary

Despite the many challenges that researchers face in conceptualising and assessing influence, this chapter has demonstrated that by adopting a broader understanding of what we mean by power and influence, a model can be developed that takes account of both observable and less visible manifestations of influence. Underpinning this is the work of Lukes [1974(2005)] and his three dimensions of power. Lukes' theoretical approach is useful because it demonstrates that observable outcomes are not the only proxy for influence. Other manifestations of influence, which include being part of established networks where key decision-makers are present, taking part in consultations, part-achieving a policy goal and preventing a less favorable policy outcome, are just as important and have to the potential to uncover new insights in this area of research.

There are various approaches outlined in the contemporary literature to try to overcome the problem of measuring influence in the policy process. Some considered the determinants of lobbying success, and others developed a survey instrument to measure legislative influence. All of these approaches have their strengths and limitations, and so it is for researchers to determine which elements are most suitable when developing a model for assessing influence. If researchers want to improve the research around interest group influence and how this can be assessed, it is important to address the gap in the current literature: an analysis of the earlier stages of the policy process. A deeper-level understanding of all the factors influencing decision-making in the policy process is also highlighted in the literature as having potential to uncover new insights in this area of research. This will give the researcher the opportunity to assess whether the tactics used by actors in the policy process help them to achieve their policy priorities. The next chapter on influence in the policy process will discuss these issues in greater detail.

5. Influence and the policy process

5.1 Introduction

Before discussing influence in the policy process, and the role of trade unions in influencing policy, it is important to define what is meant by 'policy' and the 'policy process'. The issue of State power will then be discussed before outlining some of the different approaches to studying the policy process and the challenges that these present. This will be followed by a review of the debates on how actors such as trade unions can influence the policy process.

5.2 'Policy' and the Policy Process

The term 'policy' is often vaguely defined in the literature as academics in the field struggle with its complexities. A very basic definition of policy would be to describe it as a course of action pursued by different actors, which include government, political parties and interest groups. An alternative definition views policy as a stance from which decisions can be made. Hill states:

> 'Policy may sometimes be identifiable in terms of a decision, but very often it involves either groups of decisions or what may be seen as little more than an orientation' (2005: 7).

Defining policy is complicated by the fact that it is not a concrete phenomenon; policy evolves and contains different 'stages' and processes. Policy also involves a range of actors, decisions, interests and networks that, when taken together, form what we understand 'policy' to be (ibid). For the purposes of this research, policy can be understood in terms of government policy, where government or government agencies/bodies take a course of action with regard to a particular issue or 'problem'.

There is consensus in the literature that the policy process is extremely difficult to study; it is messy and complicated and involves multiple actors, institutions and stages, all of which play a key role in its functioning (Parsons 1995; Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Hill 2005). It is a process in which various groups and individuals seek

to gain recognition for their policy preferences. In such a contested and competitive space, actors such as trade unions and other interest groups carry out various activities in an attempt to get their ideas and preferences onto the political agenda, and to the attention of key decision-makers. Identifying the activities of such actors is key when measuring policy influence. It is also important to highlight that these actors may have resources, such as expert information, that would be beneficial to policymakers, but the relevant channels must be in place to enable them to access policymakers and influence the decision-making process.

5.3 Studying the policy process: the stages approach

Weible *et al.* describe the policy process as 'the study of change and development of policy and the related actors, events, and contexts' (2012: 3). Policy cycle scholars such as Lasswell (1956; 1971) describe the policy process as a sequence of stages or phases in the 'decision process': intelligence; promotion; prescription; invocation; application; termination; and appraisal. The first stage involves the gathering, processing and disseminating of information for those actors involved in the decision-making process. This is followed by the promotion and recommendation of policy options by those who take part in decision-making and includes the influencing activities carried out to affect outcomes. The third stage of the process, the prescribing phase, refers to the prescribed course of action (articulation of rules and norms). In the fourth stage the rules of the policy are implemented, and include sanctions and penalties should anyone challenge or not follow the prescribed course of action set out by decision-makers. The policy is then applied before running its natural course and is then terminated. Finally, the policy is assessed in terms of its successes and failures.

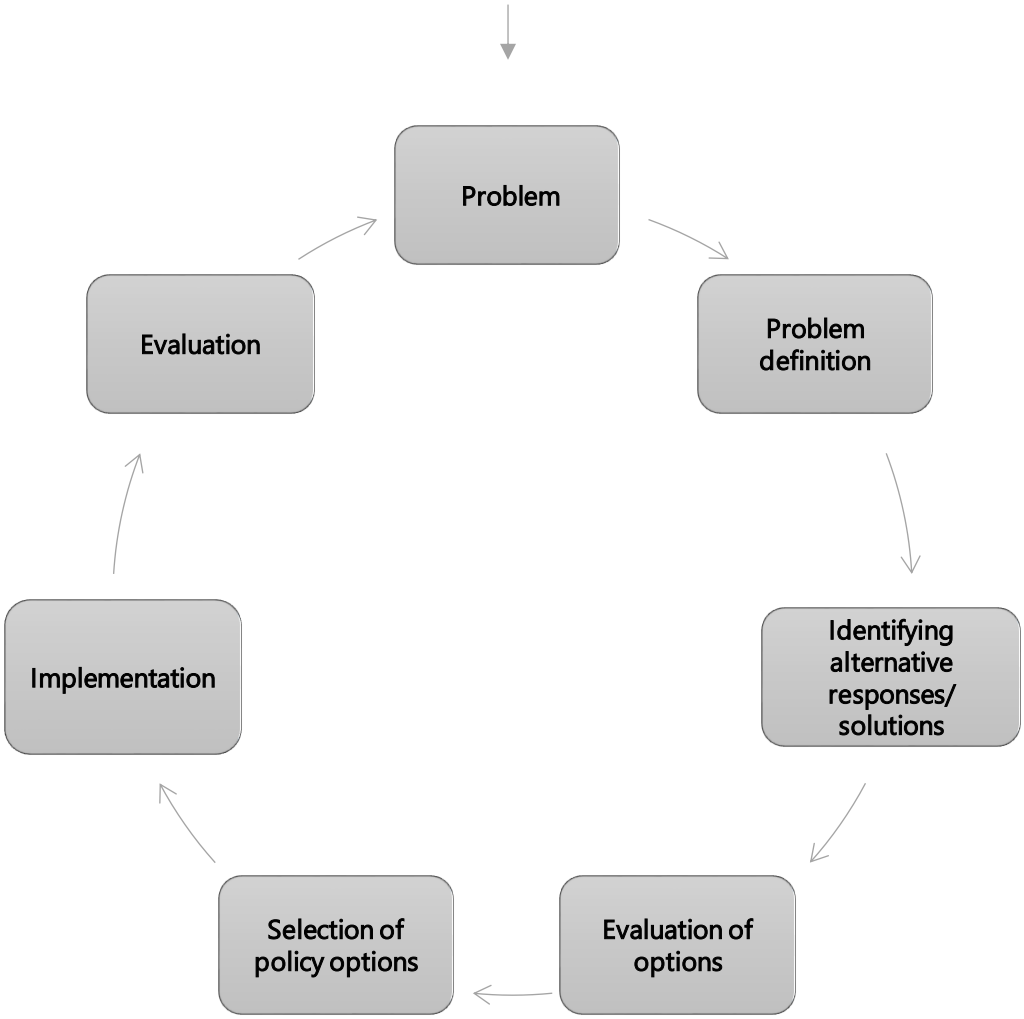
Lasswell's approach to the policy process is very different to other theorists such as Kingdon (1984), who takes a much narrower approach and examines distinct stages, such as agenda-setting (Weible *et al.* 2012: 3). In a process where various actors compete to represent and further their interests, a key consideration is whose interests dominate, and why, and perhaps more importantly, why some interests

are pushed to the margins and sometimes excluded. This leads researchers to question how power is exercised in policy-making, and the nature of power in the policy process (Hill 2005: 26). Although studying the policy process is fraught with difficulties, Hill and Ham (1997: 5) stress the importance of understanding this process, and state that 'we must continue to try to understand the policy process - however irrational or uncontrollable it may seem to be - as a crucial first step towards trying to bring it under control'. This understanding is vital for actors in the policy process who want to influence key decision-makers and achieve their policy outcomes.

Hogwood and Gunn (1981; 1984) outline seven varieties of policy analysis. These vary from studies of policy content and the policy process to studies of policy outputs and evaluation studies. Mapping the various stages and functions of the policy process is an important first step for its analysis. From Herbert Simon in the 1940s, to Hogwood and Gunn in the 1980s, academics have sought to develop models to understand the various stages of the policy process. Parsons (1995: 77) summarises the various approaches that have emerged in the literature during the 1970s and 1980s - what is described as the 'policy life cycle' (see Figure 2 below). Although presented as a cycle, it is important to point out that the policy process does not flow seamlessly from one stage to the next. Problems encountered in implementation, for example, may lead policymakers to reconsider their original policy option(s).

The policy life cycle outlined below is useful as it demonstrates the various points at which actors can influence the policy process.

Figure 2: Policy life cycle



5.4 Criticisms of the 'stages' approach to the policy process

Although the 'stages' process has remained a popular choice among academics trying to understand the complexities of the policy process, it is not without its critics. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) acknowledge the merits of the stages approach to the policy process but argue that it contains 'serious logical and empirical deficiencies' (1993: xii). The authors outline five main criticisms of the stages approach to the policy process (ibid: 1-4). The first criticism is that it is not a

causal model; the model is heuristic in that it divides the policy process into smaller, more manageable pieces for analysis. Although this is a useful first step, this approach fails to explain how these different stages are linked and what relationships exist. This model also does not take account of influences and drivers, which are key components of causal models. In sum, this model lacks causal mechanisms. The second criticism is linked to the first. The authors state that empirical analysis cannot take place without the existence of causal mechanisms. This is a key consideration for researchers trying to develop a model for assessing influence, and will be discussed in greater detail in the methodology chapter. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith go on to argue that clear hypotheses are required to explain the necessary 'conditions under which the policy process will move from one stage to the next' (1993: 3).

The third criticism of this model is that is uses a 'top-down' approach to policy-making, a focus which may lead to other important actors, such as interest groups, being overlooked. Various actors take part in the different stages of the policy process in order to affect processes and outcomes. It would be simplistic to suggest that policy results from identifying a problem, deciding on a course of action, and then carrying out implementation – it is shaped and modified by various actors, all of whom have their own ideas and interests. The fourth criticism of the policy cycle model is that it does not take account of multiple levels of government and the ways in which policy evolves from the interactions of multiple policy cycles. The fifth and final criticism of the stages policy cycle model is that is that it does not include a means by which learning can be integrated into the policy process. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith argue that it is important to understand why certain policies fail, and what lessons can be learned from this. Learning plays a key role in the policy process in terms of whether a policy is adopted, or not, and this should be acknowledged in any model that attempts to understand the policy process and policy-making.

5.5 Dealing with the complexities of the policy process

Despite these criticisms, the 'stages' policy cycle approach provides researchers with a useful tool in order to analyse the policy process (Parsons 1995: 80). Researchers are aware that assigning stages to the policy process may be overly simplistic, but it does have its advantages. What makes this approach so appealing is the fact that it takes a process which is notoriously complex and difficult to analyse and breaks it down into more manageable pieces. Although any model has its limitations and should be treated with caution, Parsons states that the 'stagist' approach 'does allow us to analyse complexities of the real world' (ibid). However, researchers are also asked to consider whether they are imposing stages on a reality that is too complex (1995: 81). Parsons goes on to argue that these conflicting viewpoints could in fact be reconciled by recognising that 'understanding and explaining this complexity is a matter which involves appreciating that reality exists within the context of a multiplicity of frameworks' (ibid). Using these models or frameworks as a 'heuristic device', according to Parsons, is useful in the sense that it allows us to visualise the policy process as a cycle containing distinct stages - starting from problems and agenda-setting and finishing up with implementation and evaluation, or learning. Far from dismissing the policy cycle approach, Parsons urges us to build on this model and incorporate contextual factors such as political opinion, problems, social processes, values and institutions - those advocated by Lasswell (1960) and his 'decision seminars' - to provide a tool that can be used in policy analysis. Lasswell developed these decision seminars to deal with the ever-growing complexities of the decision-making process. The aim of these seminars was to create a 'permissive social environment in which individuals have the courage to break out of conventional stereotypes of thought' (Lasswell 1960: 214). Creating such a social and creative space for decision-making allowed decision-makers to make use of the most effective tools for solving complex problems.

5.6 Reflections on the 'stagist' approach to the study of public policy-making

Using the 'stagist' approach in the study of policy-making has developed considerably over time. Lasswell's (1956; 1971) seven stages model was developed

as an attempt to understand the complexities of the policy-making process; however, analysis is confined to decisions made by government and does not take account of external factors such as the ways in which different actors try to influence key decision-makers within government (Howlett and Ramesh 2003: 11-13). Such an approach would arguably be unsuitable for assessing influence in the policy process as it fails to take account of those manifestations of power and influence that are not necessarily visible or easily accessible. Informal interactions and meetings with government and other key decision-makers also have the potential to produce greater insights into the ways in which public policy is formulated and developed, and therefore influenced.

Despite such criticisms, however, Lasswell's early work has influenced many others. Brewer's (1974) model of the policy process used six stages: invention/initiation; estimation; selection; implementation; evaluation; and termination. Brewer's model of the policy process moved decision-making outside the realms of government by discussing how problems come to be recognised. This was done by clarifying the various stages of the policy process, and introducing the idea of the policy process as an 'on-going cycle', not simply a linear process (Howlett and Ramesh 2003: 13). Brewer's model also influenced several other variations of the policy cycle, many of which are included in textbooks by Jones (1984) and Anderson (1984). These developments in policy cycles have enabled researchers to look more closely at the stages and sub-stages of the policy process, and the relationships that exist both within and between stages (Howlett and Ramesh 2003: 14). These models also take account of the various actors and institutions in the policy process, and the ways in which they can influence outcomes. This is a significant development from earlier models where the role of government in the decision-making process was the primary focus (ibid).

Although the models of the policy process presented here have different stages, they all have certain elements in common: a problem or issue; policy options; implementation; and evaluation. Lasswell's model provides a useful starting point,

but it does not take account of causal mechanisms, that is, the pathways that cause one stage to move to the next and possibly back again. Such a linear model also excludes other potential key factors in the policy process such as public opinion and institutional norms and values; all of which can shape an issue before it is even defined as a 'problem'. Another issue with Lasswell's model is that it does not make space for learning and feedback loops in the process. Feedback and learning are vital parts of the policy process in terms of understanding who the key stakeholders are at each stage of the process, what resources they bring, which tactics and strategies they employ and what outcomes they achieve. Policy learning also helps researchers understand the conditions in place that allow one stage of the policy process to move to the next as well as why some policies are implemented while others need to be adjusted and evaluated, or sometimes dismissed altogether. In these earlier models of the policy process, less attention was given to agenda-setting, which could arguably produce the most useful insights in terms of the formal and informal interactions and processes that take place prior to an issue reaching the policy agenda, or from even being considered a problem in the first place.

5.7 The importance of the agenda-setting stages of the policy process

Kingdon (1984: 3) considers why 'some subjects become prominent on the policy-agenda and others do not, and why some alternatives for choice are seriously considered while others are neglected.' This question is crucial for any study concerned with the ways in which actors seek to influence the policy process. Issues come to the attention of government in a variety of ways and travel through various processes before a decision on them is taken. Agenda-setting is concerned with these processes (Howlett and Ramesh 2003: 120). Many policy scholars view this as first stage of the policy process, and probably the most important. The actions that take place at the beginning of the policy process have a bearing on the entire process in that they can shape decisions and outcomes. Howlett and Ramesh (2003: 121) state: 'At its most basic, agenda-setting is about the recognition of a problem on the part of the government.' This process narrows down the list of problems that

government pays attention to. The challenge for any interest group is ensuring that their policy issues or priorities come to the attention of government and gain entry onto the political agenda. This recognition is a crucial step in the groups' efforts to influence policy where they have an interest and want to exert influence.

In the 1980s, John Kingdon carried out extensive research on the agenda-setting process in the US federal legislative system. This research focused on State and non-State influences on agenda-setting and the role of 'policy entrepreneurs' on the inside and outside of government. Of particular interest were the ways in which these actors make the most of agenda-setting opportunities, or 'policy windows', in order to get their issues onto the political agenda and to the attention of government. The analysis of agenda-setting, and the various ways in which actors attempt to shape the political agenda, can potentially give researchers new insights into the way in which influence is exercised in the policy process. It can be argued that getting an issue onto the political agenda is in itself an indication of influence.

5.8 Summary

Building on the previous chapter which discussed how researchers might conceptualise power and assess influence, this chapter has sought to explore the complexities of the policy process and how actors, such as trade unions, can exert influence. Any study that is concerned with developing a model for assessing influence must understand how the policy process works. The policy process is a congested and contested space in which a number of actors compete with one another in order to gain the attention of policymakers and recognition for their policy priorities. A close examination of the various activities or tactics actors use to promote their policy objectives or preferences is key to understanding their success in the policy process and the extent to which they can exert influence.

One of the best-known approaches in the literature is the 'policy life cycle' or 'stages' approach, although it is important to highlight that each stage does not necessarily flow from one to the next. What is useful in this approach is that it illustrates the various points in the policy process where actors can attempt to exert

influence. Furthermore, it is a useful tool for researchers as it enables them to break down what is a very complex process into more manageable stages that can be closely examined. It also allows researchers to focus on one part of the policy process, for example, the agenda-setting stage, rather than attempt to assess influence in the entire process. The latter would be a much more challenging task for researchers. Focusing on individual stages also allows for a much more thorough examination.

5.9 Reflections on the literature

The study seeks to explore the extent to which the unions' role in workplace learning and skills initiatives has increased their influence on the State and enabled them to achieve their priorities in this policy area. To better understand trade union influence, the researcher has engaged with two distinct literatures: the IR literature on trade unions and the State; and the political science literature on policy influence. Here, the researcher has identified tools found in the political science literature that can be used to better understand the relationship between trade unions and government and the influence choices they make in much more nuanced ways. Although there is an extensive literature on trade unions and the State, there is limited analysis of how relationships play out at the policy level. Having skills and learning policy as the domain of interest allows the researcher to carry out such an investigation.

5.9.1 Model for assessing influence

Following as extensive review of the literature as outlined above, the researcher has developed a model for assessing policy influence. This model is driven by the theoretical approach of Lukes [1974(2005)] and his three faces or dimensions of power, and takes account of the approaches found in the political science literature, particularly the work of Dür (2008a; 2008b) and Leech (2010; 2011). It is important to highlight here that the model seeks to assess the influence of the STUC and not 'measure' their influence, which is the approach often used in the existing literature. Although there are numerous studies that have attempted to measure

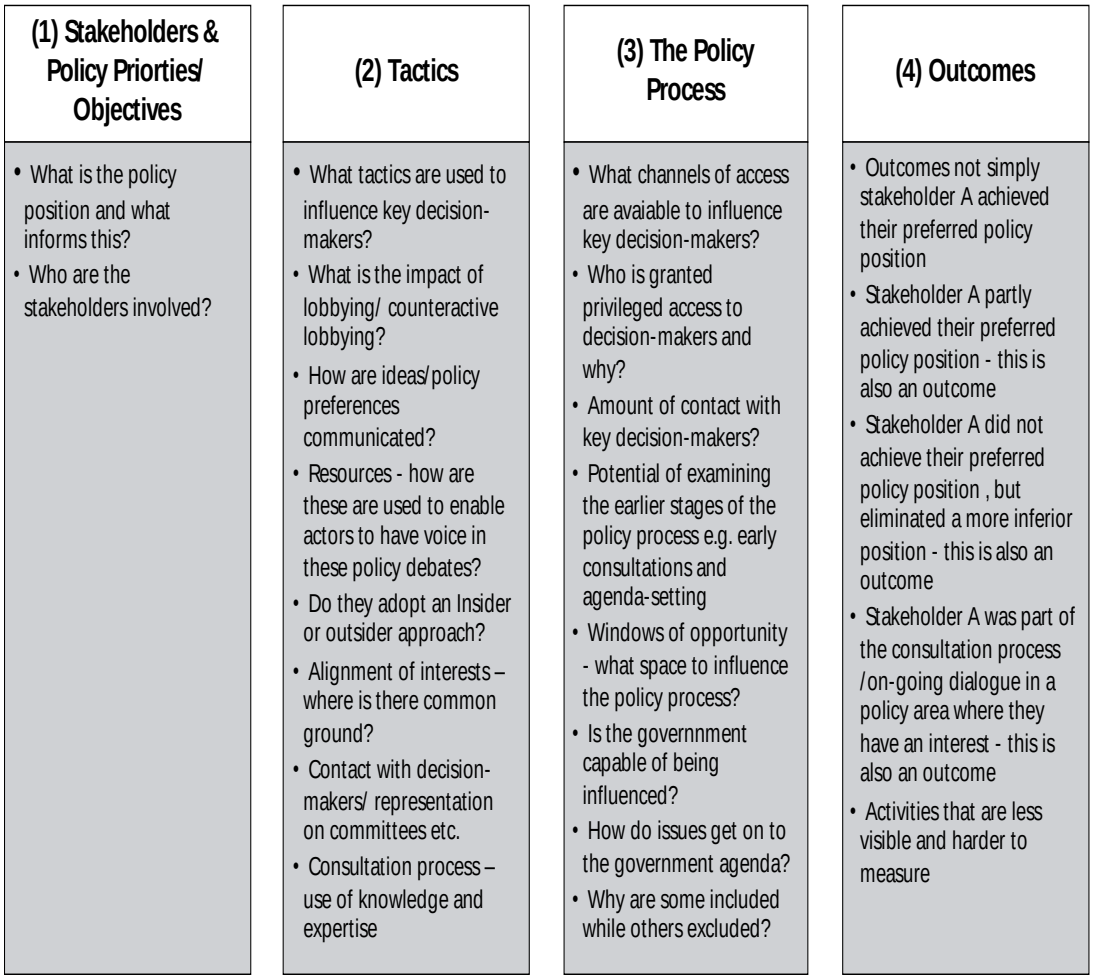
policy influence, the model developed in this research takes the position that influence cannot be measured; it is too complex and nuanced. Perceptions of influence are instead taken into consideration, together with approaches of how researchers might better understand influence in order to develop a model that best fits this study.

The model presented here (see Figure 3 below) uses Dür's (2008a; 2008b) methodological approach, particularly process-tracing, which she highlights as one of the methods for overcoming the problems of measuring influence. Process-tracing is a common method used to measure interest group influence in the EU (Cowles 1995; Dür and De Bievre 2007). George and Bennett (2005) describe this as a method that "attempts to identify the intervening casual process – the causal chain and causal mechanism – between independent variable (or variables) and the outcomes of the dependent variable" (cited in Dür 2008a: 562). This process allows the researcher to trace the steps towards causal outcomes, which starts by identifying the preferences of the actors involved and concludes by examining the degree to which preferences are reflected in outcomes. In her research on lobbying and influence, Leech (2010; 2011) also notes the value of analysing all influencing activities when trying to measure policy influence. These approaches, together with some other key considerations from the literature, including the nature of the policy process, have been incorporated into the model presented here for assessing policy influence. This will allow the researcher to gather data to help answer their research questions.

In the context of assessing union influence on skills and learning policy, and using union learning as the domain of interest to understand such influence, observation of the policy process is not sufficient. It is important to break down the whole of the influencing process and identify the key variables in the model for assessing influence. These variables are as follows: stakeholders and objectives; tactics; the nature of the policy process; and outcomes. This study requires a model that takes account of the complexities of conceptualising power and assessing influence and

incorporates ideas of influence that are both harder to access and less visible. It allows the researcher to trace the steps in the influencing process and identify the actions and tactics used by actors to achieve their policy priorities. Although the model has been developed to assess the influence of the STUC and the wider trade union movement on learning and skills policy in Scotland, it can also be applied in any context where the investigator is interested in which tactics are used by individuals or groups to influence outcomes and achieve their policy priorities. The model is illustrated below and outlines the key considerations under each pillar.

Figure 3: Model for assessing policy influence



5.9.2 Research questions

As outlined above, the model developed here for assessing policy influence will help the researcher gather data in order to address the research questions that this study seeks to address, as set out below.

1. **What are the learning and skills policy priorities for trade unions in Scotland*?***
2. **What tactics are used by unions in Scotland to exert influence over learning and skills policy and how effective have these been?**
3. **To what extent has the union learning agenda given unions in Scotland an influential voice on skills and learning policy?**
4. **Has unions' engagement in the learning and skills policy sphere generated broader policy influence?**

These research questions will be discussed further in the next chapter, which will outline the research methodology and research design.

6. Methodology

6.1 Introduction

While there is a breadth of literature on unions' involvement in the learning and skills agenda, particularly the impact on unions, learners and employers, the specific focus of this research is to examine whether their engagement in learning and skills initiatives has enabled them to exert influence in the policy process. Following on from a review of the literature and an overview of the research case, this chapter will now address the research methodology and research design. It will begin with a discussion of the researcher's interest in this area of study and will then set out the research questions. This will be followed by the philosophical underpinnings of the research and the methodological implications of this approach. Justification will then be given for the location of the research before outlining the research methods, sources of data and how the data was analysed. Finally, limitations of the data will be discussed before considering the implications for further research.

6.2 My role in the research

Prior to undertaking this research, I had a limited understanding of the role of trade unions in this policy space. My knowledge only extended to unions' role in bargaining over issues such as pay and working conditions and their involvement in industrial disputes. It was not until I worked at the Scottish Trades Unions Congress (STUC) on a knowledge management project, which was based in the Scottish Union Learning (SUL) team, that I began to understand the breadth of activity unions were involved in. During my two and a half years in post, I worked closely with individual unions and learners and saw at first-hand the range of learning and skills initiatives the STUC and unions supported. It encouraged me to reflect on the level of awareness by the general public on the role of unions in this area of policy, specifically their contribution to supporting the learning and skills needs of workers and their role in shaping the policy dialogue in this area. This made me want to explore the impact of unions' role in the learning and skills agenda, both in terms of

their relationship with government and in what they were able to achieve for their members and the wider workforce.

I have always had an interest in lifelong learning and the impact of skills and learning on an individual's well-being both in and outwith the workplace. My experience of working in the SUL team prompted me to explore these issues further and investigate the impact of the STUC's involvement in workplace learning and skills initiatives; something I felt was not widely recognised and an area that was underdeveloped in terms of formal research. More generally, I have always been interested in how policy is developed and implemented and the ways in which groups and individuals navigate the policy process and strive to get their interests onto the political agenda and to the attention of key decision-makers.

Although most researchers have a personal interest in their particular area of study, it is imperative that this does not compromise the way in which they approach their research. I myself had no pre-conceived notions of what I was going to find. I knew that unions in Scotland had a role in the learning and skills agenda and had supported many workers in terms of their personal and professional needs. I was also aware of the some of the success stories of union learning, having attended SUL's annual conference and other learning- related events. However, I was not aware of the extent to which the unions' role in this agenda had enabled them to exert policy influence. I wanted to go beyond the anecdotes that I had heard about unions' impact in this area. I wanted to use of union learning, as the domain of interest, to gain a better understanding of what unions do more generally, particularly their relationship with government and their impact and influence on the policy process.

6.3 Research questions

To date, much of the research in this area has focused on the impact of union learning on unions, learners and employers. Its impact on the policy sphere, however, is less developed. The existing literature on policy influence tends to focus on observable outcomes and the latter stages of the policy process, whereas the

earlier, more informal and agenda-setting stages are given much less attention. Also, while there is some secondary data on the impact of unions on skills and learning policy (Lloyd and Payne 2006, 2007; McIlroy 2008; Rainbird and Stuart 2011; Clough 2012) there is little primary research on whether and how unions influence policy around learning and skills, particularly in the Scottish context. This research seeks to address the gap in knowledge: the extent to which unions' role in workplace learning and skills initiatives has enabled them to develop an influential role with government and achieve their policy priorities. It seeks to explore the complexities and nuances of influence in order to uncover new insights into how unions and other actors influence the policy process.

The review of the literature highlights that unions have a number a functions and objectives both within and outside the workplace. However, as their power in the industrial sphere has declined in recent decades, they have looked more towards their political role and how they can exert influence in the policy process. Union learning is situated within the union revitalisation debates and is viewed as a potential path for renewal. However, assessing whether skills and learning has given unions the platform to exert influence in the policy process is extremely challenging. The literature also suggests that researchers must not only adopt a broader understanding of power and influence, but also take into consideration the earlier parts of the policy process where ideas are shaped and agendas set. An in-depth understanding of all the activities or tactics that actors use to influence key-decision-makers must also be considered. This helps researchers move beyond observable outcomes as the only proxy for influence and uncover the more subtle forms of influence that exist, paving the way for way for new insights in this area of research. The above issues raise questions which require further investigation.

1. **What are the learning and skills policy priorities for trade unions in Scotland?**

The first research question seeks to understand why unions engage in the learning and skills agenda, and identify their policy priorities in this area. This question also

aims to identify what other actor(s) are engaged in this policy space and understand what they want to achieve. This allows the researcher to compare union priorities with those of other actors in this policy space.

2. **What tactics are used by unions in Scotland to exert influence over learning and skills policy and how effective have these been?**

The second research question explores the variety of influencing activities, or tactics that unions use to exert influence in the policy process. This question also addresses the effectiveness of these tactics, which is seen as a key step in the path to influence and unions' ability to achieve their policy priorities in skills and learning.

3. **To what extent has the union learning agenda given unions in Scotland an influential voice on skills and learning policy?**

The third research question brings together the first two research questions and considers to extent to which the various tactics adopted by unions helps them to achieve their learning and skills policy priorities. Crucially, this questions also helps to draw out perceptions of union influence from other stakeholders in this policy space.

4. **Has unions' engagement in the learning and skills policy sphere generated broader policy influence?**

The fourth research question builds on the third research question and considers whether unions' influence in learning and skills has given them a platform to influence policy more broadly. It is of particular interest to this study to consider whether learning has helped to facilitate broader policy influence or whether influence in skills and learning has reinforced the already influential position unions hold with government in different policy areas.

6.4 Ontology and epistemology

This research is an exploratory study of unions' influence in the policy process. It seeks to identify the influencing activities or tactics that unions employ to achieve

their policy priorities in skills and learning, and aims to provide a better understanding of the policy process and the path to influence. Crucially, the approach goes beyond observable outcomes as *the* proxy for influence and considers manifestations of influence that are less visible and harder to access, and can occur at different stages of the policy process.

The research methodology is driven by the research questions set out above, which were informed by wider considerations of how researchers might conceptualise power and assess policy influence. Union influence in the policy process is under-developed and not particularly well understood in the Scottish context. This study therefore seeks to adopt a broader understanding of influence, and develop a model for assessing influence that takes account of the nuances and complexities of influence, using union learning as the domain of interest to illustrate the path to policy influence. It also seeks to identify the specific tactics unions adopt to achieve their policy priorities in learning and skills, highlighting the deliberate choices unions make to exert influence upon the policy process. The literature review highlighted the difficulties that researchers face in trying to measure influence, but stressed its importance in terms of understanding how the policy process works and the impact that individuals and groups have on policy outcomes (Dür 2008a; 2008b).

The challenges of measuring policy influence outlined by Dür are important to restate here. Influence can be accessed through different channels, where actors can use direct or indirect means - this is also referred to insider and outsider status in the literature. Counteractive lobbying - where actors may not achieve their preferred policy priority but prevent a less favourable outcome - can also be viewed as influence but makes measurement difficult. The third challenge outlined by Dür is that influence can be exercised at different stages of the policy process: the agenda-setting stage; when final decisions are taken; or when decisions are implemented. Although it would be difficult for any one study to examine all stages of the policy process, it is important to highlight that influence can take place at any stage of the

policy process; there is, arguably, untapped potential in the earlier, agenda-setting stages which have received considerably less attention from researchers.

The following section will discuss the main assumptions of critical realism and present the link between this research philosophy and the researcher's ontological views that have informed the development of this thesis.

The term 'philosophy' conjures up ideas of one's world view; a way of thinking and a set of ideas or practices that guide one's actions. If we take these ideas further, we can understand research philosophy as the way in which our views, values and practices impact upon the ways in which we produce knowledge and how that knowledge is interpreted (Saunders *et al*. 2009). In essence, the research philosophy can be described as a framework that guides how research is designed, carried out and presented. Embedded within research philosophies are ontological and epistemological considerations, key to any study because they shape the choices researchers make in regard to their methods and analysis (Collier 1994; Cruickshank 2003; Edwards *et al*. 2014). Crotty (1998: 10) defines ontology as 'the study of being', while Guba and Lincoln (1994: 108) describe ontological considerations as those which address such questions as 'What is the form and nature of reality?' and 'What can be known about it?' This then leads to questions on the theory of knowledge, or the epistemological question: 'What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known?' (ibid). Put more simply, epistemology is concerned with how we gain knowledge of reality (Van de Ven 2007). Danermark *et al*. (2002:18) view ontology and epistemology as being 'intertwined', where the way in which one views reality will necessarily influence how one chooses to research or measure it. Ontology and epistemology are therefore key considerations for researchers as they help shape their research questions, conceptualise their study and inform how the research is carried out, and 'invariably inform methodological and methods choices.' (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011: 4)

This study on union influence demonstrates a commitment to a realist ontology. For the critical realist, there is 'clear recognition of the existence of an external world, independent of, and often defying our desires of it and attempts to understand and change it' (Benton & Craib 2001: 120). In this research, I am looking beyond which events can be observed and believe that 'there are deeper levels awaiting discovery' (O'Mahoney and Vincent 2014: 10). Moving beyond what can be observed in the social world and exploring the hidden reality that exists requires researchers to develop models or frameworks that can uncover whatever is less accessible and harder to quantify. Much of the philosophy literature I was exposed to prior to undertaking this research was in the field of Industrial Relations (IR), Human Resource Management (HRM) and Management Studies (Fleetwood and Ackroyd 2004; Edwards *et al*. 2014). There is an ever-growing body of research in the field of IR which seeks to explore the ways in which this field can be advanced, specifically through engagement with other social science disciplines like economics and political science (Edwards 2005; 2006).

Although there are few explicit references to critical realism in this literature, there is a focus on providing context and explanation, rather than merely descriptive accounts of phenomena. Here, authors such as Edwards (2005: 264) propose a context-sensitive approach in order to advance the field of IR. This requires an understanding of institutions and processes in terms of context. This approach offers a systematic explanation, and sometimes generalisations, from 'cases' such as countries, workplaces and industries and allows researchers to offer rich explanatory accounts (ibid: 265). Making connections between fields like IR and other disciplines such as political science (which this study does), helps to create new paths both in areas of research and potential new areas of discovery. This is relevant to this thesis as it is concerned with the ways in which unions seek to influence learning and skills policy. Being able to make connections across disciplines demonstrates the value of the critical realist philosophy in the sense that it clears the path for research by removing barriers which may otherwise prevent

the research from being carried out. Fleetwood and Ackroyd refer to this as 'synthetic understanding' (2004: 3).

Although empiricists and positivists share the realist commitment to an objective world, their accounts are limited because they favour what can be observed and quantified in their attempts to produce universal statements about the world (Danermark *et al*. 2002). From a critical realist perspective, this does not sufficiently take account of the unpredictability of the social world and the contextual factors that can influence outcomes. In terms of this research study, it is crucial that the researcher can explain and demonstrate the path to policy influence, not simply describe it. As a researcher, I am interested in not only what can be evidenced empirically, but also in understanding which mechanisms cause events. These causal or generative mechanisms are part of a layered account of reality: the empirical, the actual, and the real level (Bhaskar 1986). At the empirical, or surface level, there exists evidence of what is happening. Below this empirical level is the 'actual' level where there are patterns in evidence. At the 'real' level, there are deep-seated realities; things that cause these patterns. Bhaskar (1978) views reality as 'multi determined', where no single mechanism can determine the result. In the case of assessing influence in the policy process, there are different actors each deploying various tactics in order to achieve their policy priorities. The critical realist researcher 'is inclined to seek out and to clarify the generative social mechanisms at work in any given situation' (O'Mahoney and Vincent 2014: 14).

The social world is undoubtedly complex, just like the policy process, but critical realism allows for the possibility that researchers can still develop a reliable account from conducting research. Realists do not claim that reality is easily observable: '…realists hold that an external reality which is independent of human consciousness exists and can nevertheless be known.' (Delanty 2005: 145) Here, knowledge is viewed as a construction that is shaped by its context (ibid). In critical realism there is a basic distinction to be drawn between our knowledge of the world and the reality of the social world; it is anti-positivist. It attempts to integrate three

methodologies: it defends the possibility of causal explanation, it accepts the hermeneutic notion of social reality being communicatively constructed, and it has a critical dimension. Although empiricists and positivists share the realist commitment to an objective world, they differ in that they limit the world to empirical "facts" - that is, things that can be observed and quantified (ibid: 146).

6.5 Methodology

The key aim of this study is to assess the influence of trade unions in the policy process, uncovering manifestations of influence that are less visible and harder to quantify. To achieve this, data was collected using an intensive and exploratory research design, using a single case to understand and explore the tactics that the STUC uses to exert influence in the policy process. This study does not present hypotheses which can be proved or disproved through the research process. Instead, it seeks to moves beyond what is observable and produce new insights into the theory and knowledge of policy influence. Influence does not speak for itself, and therefore solely descriptive accounts are insufficient. There are activities and interactions that take place, which are not always easily observable, and contextual factors that exist; these are factors which make influence in policy process possible. In this study, the researcher has taken into consideration the contextual environment in which actors operate in order to provide an in-depth understanding of policy influence and how it can be assessed.

6.5.1 Quantitative and qualitative approaches

One of the key considerations in the study and measurement of influence is whether to use quantitative or qualitative methods. In Jones' (2011) guide to monitoring and evaluating policy influence, he argues that quantitative analysis is not a suitable method for measuring influence as it is difficult to demonstrate the impact of influencing activities on policy outcomes. Heike Klüver (2009), on the other hand, argues that a quantitative approach is suitable for measuring influence and proposes a content analysis of texts. This approach is viewed as suitable in the study and measurement of interest group influence because:

> '[p]olitical documents have a great potential to reveal information about the policy positions of their authors: texts can be analysed as many times as one wishes, and they provide information about policy positions at a specific point in time' (2009: 536).

Drawing on the previous work of Dür (2008a; 2008b), which outlined three approaches to overcome the problems of measuring influence - process tracing, assessing 'attributed influence' and preference attainment - Klüver proposes the new methodological approach of measuring policy positions, 'thus paving the way for the large-scale measurement of interest group influence.' (2009: 536)

Klüver (2009) presents three content analysis techniques: Hand-coding, Wordscores and Wordfish. This research paper compares the validity of Wordscores and Wordfish against hand-coding in an attempt to measure the influence of interest groups. Hand-coding involves the manual coding of policy documents or interview data. A scoring system is then developed in terms of categories, themes, instances of certain words/phrases, and so on. Wordscores is a text analysis program developed by Laver *et al*. (2003) to measure policy positions. Here, policy positions are applied to documents after a word score has been carried out. Wordfish, developed by Slapin and Proksch (2008), is a 'statistical scaling model that allows policy positions of texts to be estimated on a predefined policy dimension simply by drawing on word frequencies in texts without relying on reference documents.' (Klüver 2009: 538)

All of these approaches have their advantages and disadvantages. Hand-coding provides the researcher with in-depth knowledge of the content and has high validity. However, it is labour-intensive and time-consuming and does not offer the same level of reliability achievable through a computer program. Wordscores are one hundred per cent replicable and have no reliability issues. However, the usefulness of this method is limited because of the lack of large empirical data sets. Wordfish is a high-validity program which allows the researcher to effectively analyse large volumes of data. However, all these methods present the challenge of

deciding whether an actor's policy preference is a true reflection and not a strategic position. Klüver does not view this as a problem as only transmitted policy positions are taken into account, whether underestimated or overestimated.

In terms of assessing the influence of trade unions in the policy process, the above discussion raises key issues. From a researcher's point of view, it is important to adopt an approach that is most suited to answering the research question(s). This study seeks to assess policy influence. It takes the position that influence is not necessarily quantifiable and cannot easily be measured. It is in fact concerned with manifestations of influence that are less observable and more nuanced, and therefore more suitable to qualitative approaches.

6.5.2 Case study approach

Case studies are just one method that can be used to collect data in both qualitative and quantitative research. This approach is most often associated with Yin (2009) and has been described as 'a phenomenon occurring in a bounded context' (Miles and Huberman 1994). Although there is some debate within the literature about whether a case study can be defined as a method or methodology, authors such as Yin (2009) and Farquhar (2012) present the case study as a research strategy, where the design decisions are open to researchers. This has the advantage of allowing the researcher to tailor their research design and data collection methods to their research questions. The qualitative case study approach allows for an in-depth exploration of complex phenomena in a specific context, making this an appropriate tool to assess the influence of trade unions on learning and skills policy. The use of other research methods such as surveys would not provide the same depth of analysis as the single case study. The exploratory case study also has the advantage of theory building from the research and is particularly useful for 'what' and 'who' questions. It enables the researcher to develop an in-depth, contextual understanding of the case, using multiple sources of information, including interviews, documents, archival records and observation. Yin (2009: 18) argues that the case study approach is a deliberate choice for researchers who want to examine

'contextual conditions' because they believe these to be key to the phenomena of study.

Case studies are also useful in that they allow the researcher to examine an issue in a real-life situation, helping to give the researcher a snapshot of reality. One of the key considerations for researchers here is whether to adopt a single or multiple case design. Although some disciplines consider these to be different 'methodologies', Yin (2009: 53) makes no broad distinction between the two and includes both single and multiples cases under the case study method. Both single and multiple case studies focus on a specific phenomenon, or research issue. What distinguishes them is that single cases allow for in-depth, deeper analysis of a case, whereas multiple cases gather data across different sites which is often considered more compelling and the overall study more robust (Herriott and Firestone 1983, quoted in Yin 2009: 53).

A single case design was adopted in this research in order to carry out an in-depth exploration of a single organisation representative of the trade union movement in Scotland. The unit of analysis is the STUC, the representative body of the trade union movement in Scotland, with the object of proposition being their influence on learning and skills policy (Gerring and McDermott 2007). This can be described an extreme or unique case according to Yin's rationale (2009: 47). This is primarily because union influence in the policy process, specifically in learning and skills, is underdeveloped, with a lack of primary research in this area, particularly in the Scottish context. This research does not seek to generalise across multiple cases. It aims to provide a greater understanding within a single case and gives the researcher the opportunity to adopt a holistic approach without the distraction of having to consider other cases (Gummesson 2007).

The model for assessing influence, informed by the theoretical approach of Lukes [1974(2005)] and the work of Dür (2008a; 2008b) and Leech (2010; 2011), helps the researcher to understand power and influence more broadly, and trace the steps from policy priorities to outcomes. It also allows the researcher to assess the

influence of the STUC and unions in Scotland, using learning and skills initiatives as the domain of interest to understand how events are created and influence exerted in this policy context. The research is inductive in that all data is included in my analysis. Here, the researcher is open to new insights that were not necessarily part of their initial thinking when they first conceived their research study. I could have selected multiple case studies for this research, for example, using three trade unions rather than the STUC as a single case study. However, the STUC were chosen in the end because they span the entire terrain; they are representative of the trade union movement in Scotland. It is important to note that although individual unions may have provided in-depth sectoral knowledge, this was not the focus of this study. The Scottish context is also significant because the bulk of union learning research to date has been conducted at the UK or English level, whereas a Scottish perspective, particularly in relation to union learning and policy influence, is considerably less developed.

The STUC was chosen as the unit of analysis for this research for a variety of reasons. They have actively engaged in the union learning and skills agenda for a number of years, and this work was formalised with the creation of the Scottish Union Learning Team in 2008. They have received dedicated funding from different administrations since devolution, seeking to broaden and deepen their activity around learning and skills. Although there have been several studies on the union-learning agenda in Scotland and its impact on learners and employers, less attention has been given to their impact in the policy sphere, specifically whether unions' engagement in union-led learning has enabled them to exert influence over policy. Although the STUC and trade unions more generally have expanded their learning activity in Scotland over the last two decades, there has not been an in-depth investigation into the STUC's impact on learning and skills policy. Union learning is significant because the STUC and unions have made a concerted effort to focus on learning as one of their core activities because of the demand from union members and the wider implications for the workforce in Scotland. Learning is also significant in terms of the wider debates about the role of trade unions and which activities

they should prioritise and resource. Learning has also been cited in the literature as a potential path to trade union revitalisation.

6.5.3 Criteria for judging the quality of cases

Four tests are commonly used in the positivist tradition to judge research rigour (Campbell & Stanley 1963; Cook and Campbell 1979) and have been adapted by Yin to assess the quality of case studies (2009: 40-45). The four tests are detailed below:

- Construct validity: identifying the correct operational measures for the concepts being studied

- Internal validity (for explanatory or causal studies only and not for descriptive or exploratory studies): seeking to establish a causal relationship whereby certain conditions are believed to lead to other conditions, as distinguished from spurious relationships

- External validity: defining the domain from which a study's findings can be generalised

- Reliability: demonstrating that the operations of a study such as the data collection procedures can be repeated, with the same results.

Construct validity

Yin sets out various tactics that can be used to deal with these tests. Construct validity is concerned with whether the researcher has investigated what it initially set out to. This can be enhanced by establishing a *chain of evidence* to help the reader understand how they progressed from research questions to findings and conclusions. Researchers are also urged to adopt different lenses or perspectives

through different data sources, such as interviews and documentation (research triangulation).

Internal validity

Internal validity is concerned with causal explanation and the relationship between different variables and results or outcomes. The key consideration here is whether the researcher can defend its research conclusions. Internal validity can be improved by having a clear research framework that helps demonstrate how event X led to outcome Y, and that outcome Y was not actually caused by another variable. Another possible tactic is pattern matching, where researchers compare observed patterns with those found in other studies. Researchers are also urged to use 'theory triangulation' - the use of different theoretical lenses or perspectives found in the literature to verify findings.

External validity

External validity considers whether the study's findings can be generalised beyond the case. To allow for generalisation, Yin and others such as Eisenhardt (1989) suggest a cross-case analysis to enable theories to be developed. Here, researchers are urged to set out the rationale for their case selection and provide sufficient detail of the case study context.

Reliability

Reliability refers to replicability and the way in which a researcher will arrive at the same conclusions if they follow the steps of the researcher before them. Here, a case study protocol should be developed to hold details of the research procedures, while a case study database should contain notes, reflections, documents, etc. that can be accessed by other researchers and used to ensure the study can be replicated. Although it is a challenge to replicate the results of a study that uses process-tracing, having a 'predefined yardstick' or, in the case of this study, a model for assessing influence that has clearly defined variables, can help to enhance reliability and validity (Reilly 2010).

6.5.4 Sources of evidence

Yin outlines the six most commonly used sources of evidence adopted in case study research. These are: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artefacts. The table below outlines the two used in this study and includes their strengths and weaknesses.

Table 2: Sources of case study evidence

Source of Evidence	Strengths	Weaknesses
Documentation	• Stable - can be reviewed repeatedly • Unobtrusive – not created as a result of the case study • Exact – contains exact names, references, and details of an event • Broad coverage – long span of time, many events, and many settings	• Retrievability – can be difficult to find • Biased selectivity, if collection is incomplete • Reporting bias – reflects (unknown) bias of author • Access – may be deliberately withheld
Interviews	• Targeted – focuses directly on case study topics • Insightful – provides perceived causal inferences and explanations	• Bias due to poorly articulated questions • Response bias • Inaccuracies due to poor recall • Reflexivity – interviewee gives what interviewer wants to hear

Source: Adapted from Yin (2009: 102)

6.6 Conduct of research

6.6.1 Case selection

As highlighted earlier in the chapter, the unit of analysis in this study is the STUC, who are the representative body of the trade union movement in Scotland. This will allow the researcher to carry out an in-depth exploration of policy influence within this organisation, using union learning as the domain of interest. This study is not interested in generalisation, but rather in understanding the process of policy influence and developing a model that can be applied across different policy areas and involve different actors. The literature has highlighted both the importance of

broadening our understanding of influence and examining all stages of the policy process. This includes all influencing tactics and activities when trying to map the path to policy influence.

6.6.2 Conduct and access

Prior to conducting the interviews, I carried out a review of the key union learning contacts within the STUC, including the SUL team, individual trade unions, senior government officials, skills representatives, and employers. My previous role in the STUC helped me gain access to a number of these participants, many of whom I had come into contact previously through team meetings and other external events. Knowing some of the participants personally also helped me to secure some of these interviews. First contact was made via email, where I introduced the study and explained the key objectives and what was being asked of them. I also shared a participant information sheet with the expert informants that I had identified. This gave more detailed information about the study and included some of the broad questions that would be covered. This gave those invited to interview an opportunity to reflect on the study and the questions that would be asked of them. Those involved in the union learning and skills agenda in Scotland are part of a relatively small and distinct group, and so identifying participants was relatively straightforward. Ideally, I would like to have been able to access a government minister with responsibility for union learning, but on reflection, the senior civil servants that I did interview were much closer to the issues I was investigating and had regular engagement with both the STUC and the SUL team.

6.7 Interviews

As mentioned earlier, having worked in the SUL team has undoubtedly helped me to develop an in-depth knowledge of this area of research and gain access to my interview participants. Having this first-hand experience of unions' engagement in the learning and skills agenda also had an impact on the power dynamic between myself as interviewer and those I was interviewing, as many had knowledge of my role at the STUC and my area of academic interest. In fact, it might be suggested

that the interview respondents saw me as an expert in the interview situation because of my prior knowledge and experience of unions and the learning and skills agenda. This may also have helped in the interview situation in the sense that participants did not feel the need to fill in any gaps for me by giving basic information, and instead were able to reflect more on their role in workplace learning and skills and the role of the STUC and unions in this policy area. As individuals who have been selected as expert informants and invited to share their experiences of union learning and skills and perceptions of union influence, it would also be fair to suggest that respondents were keen to have a platform to demonstrate their expertise in this area and promote the work that they do.

The research interview's aim is 'to obtain information and understanding of issues relevant to the general aims and specific questions of a research project' (Gillham 2000: 2). This study is concerned with creating new knowledge in the field of union-led learning and policy influence. I carried out the interviews with a guide, but depending on what interview participants disclosed I allowed the direction of discussion to change. Although I had broad themes and categories to cover, I adopted a flexible approach so that I was able to react or be led by what the research participants were saying. This ensured that new insights and things I had not previously considered could be investigated and probed further. I was conscious of the dangers of having preconceived notions and therefore missing potential new insights. Gillham highlights that a degree of openness is key in this situation to ensure that the researcher can record things that they are not expecting. He also makes the point that often the greatest insights can lead researchers down a slightly different path, but nonetheless a useful one.

To ease them into process, I opened the interviews by asking participants to reflect on their roles. Asking them to reflect thus also allowed me to assert my role as interviewer and researcher and direct the line of questioning. It also gave me the opportunity to ensure participants understood the aims of the research and the topics that would be covered. I was also very conscious of the power dynamic in the

interview situation – this was not a casual conversation. From the outset I made it clear to the interview participants that they were viewed as expert informants and that their contributions would bring value to the study. Gillham (2000: 7) highlights that people like to be listened to and feel that their opinions and thoughts are being considered, and the interview situation is an opportunity for them to share their knowledge and expertise. Gillham also discusses the advantages of the formality of the interview – from making contact and inviting them to participate, to explaining the study, getting consent, setting the timeframe, and making clear that the interviewee's contribution is of value. There is a time-cost factor of interviewing one-to-one. This includes developing a schedule/line of questioning; interview set-up; travel time and potential cancellation or rescheduling of the interview; transcribing the interview (can vary between 1 and 10 hours); and analysis of the interview. Gillham notes this can be around six hours per interview. Despite these costs, the research interview offers researchers the opportunity to gather rich data from those directly involved in the research problem under investigation.

Interview participants were selected on the basis of being expert informants in the area of union learning and skills, and could give an informed view of the issues being explored. Being experts also made it more likely that these individuals would agree to take part and share their experiences with me. Other methods such as surveys would not be able to provide the same level of detail. The interview schedule was designed around the 4 pillars in the model for assessing influence as set out earlier in this chapter: stakeholders and priorities, tactics, the nature of the policy process, and outcomes. Interview questions were open-ended, giving participants the opportunity to reflect in their own words and make the experience more engaging for them. It also has the benefit of allowing the researcher to explore quite complex problems such as assessing policy influence, and gain responses more detailed than would be possible when using closed/yes-no questions.

The first part of the interview involved understanding the respondent's role and their organisation's priorities around learning and skills. Respondents were asked a series of open-ended questions, including their views on whether learning is an important part of what unions do; the effectiveness of unions' voice on learning and skills, whose interests dominate in this policy space; and reflecting on whether union learning has given the STUC and unions influence at government level. Respondents were then asked to reflect on the policy system in terms of access to key decision-makers, levels of engagement, issues discussed, resources they have at their disposal, and tactics used to influence key decision-makers. The next set of questions addressed outcomes, and whether unions' engagement in union learning and skills has generated broader policy influence. The final part of the interview schedule was designed in order to understand the key players in learning and skills policy landscape, and the key challenges facing Scotland in this policy area.

This study is concerned with union influence in the policy process. To analyse this critically, it was imperative that the accounts of interview respondents were compared to the accounts of other stakeholders, particularly government officials. It was therefore important that I was able to access stakeholders who had good knowledge of union learning and had worked closely with unions on this agenda. In-depth interviews were viewed as an effective means to illicit this information. These interviews allowed me to carry out a more thorough assessment of union influence, and identify whether the tactics employed by the STUC enabled them to achieve their learning and skills priorities and exert influence in the policy process. The mapping of the key players in the union learning and skills agenda identified 27 expert informants. In-depth interviews with these individuals were carried out between September 2014 and March 2015 and can be categorised into the following groups: STUC officials, including those within the SUL Team; trade union representatives; government officials; employers; and representatives from learning and skills bodies. Interviews were recorded on a digital device. This approach is endorsed by Bryman, who states that '…in qualitative research, the interview is usually audio-recorded and transcribed whenever possible' (2012: 482).

Audio-recording my interviews ensured I would not have the distraction of taking extensive notes and could concentrate fully on what was being said. It should be noted however that I did take short notes throughout the interview as a safety measure in case the recording malfunctioned, which thankfully did not occur. The interview data was supplemented by an examination of the policy process and various secondary data sources, including government publications, academic research, and STUC and SUL resources. Interview participants were chosen on the basis of being expert informants in the areas of union learning and the skills policy landscape in Scotland, with some respondents also having direct contact with government officials in this policy area. Table 3 below outlines participant type.

Table 3: Interview participant type

Participant type	Number*	Description
STUC (inc. SUL)	5	Includes STUC, SUL and TUC Education senior officials.
Unions	7	Sectors include journalism, creative, transport, civil service, health and education.
Employers	3	Sectors include transport, engineering and chemical.
Skills practitioners	8	Includes representatives from government skills agencies, voluntary sector, academia and the college sector.
Government officials	4	Senior government officials with experience of the union learning and skills agenda, and also experience with STUC and SUL.

* Total: 27 interview participants

The 4 pillars in the model for assessing influence were used as a guide when developing the interview schedule (Annex A) and to answer my research questions. Within these individual pillars I included a number of questions and prompts to ensure I was staying on track. These pillars helped to develop the sections of my interview schedule, and these were then broken down further into a series of sub-questions to tease out more detail from the respondents. The interview schedule at Annex A was the template used for the STUC (including SUL) and unions, government officials, skills representatives and employers. Slight revisions were made to take account of the type of respondent, particularly when examining how STUC, unions, skills representatives and employers reported union influence in this policy space, in comparison to government officials. This was a key consideration when assessing the extent to which the STUC and unions have been able to exert influence in the policy process. Interviews were recorded and lasted an average of 90 minutes. All but three of the interviews took place at the respondent's place of work and the others were carried out in my university office. The interviews were very relaxed in nature and flowed well for the duration. One of the most interesting things that I took away from the interviews was the way in which the respondents reflected on their tactics or influencing activities, with many not recognising that their activities were having an impact on the decision-making process. While some could not give specific examples of where concrete outcomes were achieved as a result of their actions or the actions of others, they did recognise these as having an impact on the decision-making process.

This research has used a variety of data sources including Scottish Government strategies, union publications, book chapters, journal articles, and other academic research papers. The use of more than one data source to explore a phenomenon is known as methodological triangulation and was used to enhance the credibility of the in-depth interviews with expert informants (see Yin 2009).

6.8 Data analysis

6.8.1 Transcription

Bryman discusses the difficulties of qualitative research and highlights that although it can produce rich data, 'finding a path through the thicket of prose' is not an easy task for researchers (2012: 565). The general process of data analysis researchers adopt in qualitative studies is outlined by Cresswell (2013: 180), although there are variations in this approach. The first step involves preparing and organising the data for analysis. Following each interview, I listened to the audio recording a few times in order to become more familiar with the data. Agar (1980: 103) has suggested that researchers '"read the transcripts in their entirety several times. Immerse yourself in the details, trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts"' (quoted in Cresswell 2013: 183). I then transcribed the interviews verbatim, capturing every word spoken into text on a Microsoft Word document. This process was labour-intensive but extremely worthwhile as it ensured that my transcript was a complete reflection of what was said during interviews. Carrying out the transcription process myself also meant I could record non-verbal communication such as pauses and laughter, which can affect the interpretation of the data (Davidson 2009).

6.8.2 Hand-coding

The next step in qualitative data analysis outlined by Creswell (2013) is reducing the data into themes through coding, and then further refinement of these codes. Although some researchers use the qualitative data analysis computer software NVivo to analyse and find structure in their data, I used hand-coding instead. I did however use NVivo to organise and store my interview data securely. Coding is acknowledged as key step in the process of data analysis and has been described by Charmaz (2001: 683) as '…the pivotal first analytic step that moves the researcher from description toward conceptualization of that description.' Earlier in this chapter it was highlighted that although hand-coding does not provide the same level of reliability as content analysis techniques such as Wordscores or Wordfish (see Klüver 2009), it does provide the researcher with in-depth knowledge of the

content and is a high validity measurement. It was important that I adopted an approach that would be most suitable to my study. Wordscores or Wordfish would not allow me to uncover those aspects of influence that are less accessible and harder to quantify. Hand-coding, on the other hand, allowed me to carry out a deep analysis of the data and develop a more in-depth understanding of the themes. It also enabled me to explore the path towards influence and focus on context and explanation, rather than produce purely descriptive accounts of phenomena.

The interview schedule at Annex A was organised under key themes, including the pillars in my model for assessing influence: stakeholders, tactics, nature of the policy process, and outcomes. This helped when reviewing and analysing each interview transcript and highlighting the evidence that could be matched under each key theme. This also helped me get a sense of what different respondent types had to say on different issues. Further analysis was undertaken to break down these broad themes into sub-categories to try and make more sense of the data. This helped to give a richer account of union influence in the policy process and uncover the more nuanced manifestations of influence.

6.8.3 Data presentation

The third step in the data analysis process outlined by Cresswell (2013) is the representation of data in a discussion. Chapters 7-9 of this thesis present the data from this single case study. Chapter 7 presents the STUC's key priorities around learning and skills and attempts to gain an understanding of what informed these. These are set out under the broad themes that emerged from the interviews and will be considered in the wider context of what other stakeholders reported. Having data on the STUC's main priorities in skills in learning is a key component in the model for assessing influence. Chapter 8 presents the influencing tactics used by the STUC and unions and considers how effective these have been. These will again be organised under broad themes that emerged from the interviews. Part 1 of chapter 9 will present data on the STUC's outcomes in relation to learning and skills. Part 2 of this chapter will set out data on the STUC's broader policy outcomes and will

consider whether their role in union-led learning has enabled them to exert influence beyond skills and learning.

6.9 Ethical issues

As was discussed earlier, my previous role in the union learning team at the STUC undoubtedly had an impact on this study. It shaped my interest in the subject area and helped me access my research participants, many of whom I had either worked with or had contact with at union learning and other events. My experience of this agenda and professional relationship with specific individuals should not however be viewed as a weakness. As touched upon earlier, this perhaps meant that interview respondents did not feel the need to fill any gaps for me and instead could give a more detailed and rich account of their role in this policy agenda and perceptions of union influence. Assuring the anonymity of research participants was also a key consideration. Although the findings presented in this study are not controversial in nature, I made sure that views were kept confidential, and transcripts anonymous. Direct quotes were labelled using generic numbered job roles. Research participants were also assured that any potentially attributable material would only be used with their full consent. Interview transcripts were also made available to research participants, should they want any material to be removed or not included in my findings.

The next chapter will present the findings in relation to the first research question which seeks to identify the STUC's priorities in learning and skills, and understand why the STUC and unions choose to engage in this policy area.

7. Trade union priorities in the learning and skills agenda

7.1 Introduction

The aim of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of trade union influence in the policy process, with a particular focus on policy debates on learning and skills. An examination of influence can only take place if there is an understanding of what actors want to achieve in a particular space and who they engage with along the way. This chapter will outline the STUC's key priorities around learning and skills. Drawing primarily on empirical data from interviews with expert informants, it will explore the priorities identified and attempt to gain an understanding of what informs these. These will be organised under broader themes that emerged from the interviews and will be considered in the wider context of what other stakeholders reported. This will give a more nuanced discussion of the issues and identify where common and diverse interests exist. The model for assessing policy influence (see Figure 3), specifically pillar 1, will be applied to interpret the data and address the following research question:

1. **What are the learning and skills policy priorities for trade unions in Scotland?**

The chapter will conclude with a summary of the STUC's learning and skills priorities and will reflect on why they choose to engage in this area of policy. This will give important context to the discussion that will follow, and highlight why these priorities are important to the STUC and wider trade union movement, and why they continue to dedicate resource to this strand of work.

7.2 Understanding union priorities in learning and skills

As outlined in chapter 2, the primary objective of trade unions is to represent the interests of their members. This encompasses activity in the industrial sphere with bargaining over wages and workplace conditions, but also reaches out into the political sphere where trade unions seek to influence the policy process in order to best represent the needs and aspirations of their members. The STUC's objectives are informed by their affiliated unions and in turn their members. Union learning

activity is just one example of a service that the STUC provide, and reflects the demands of members (Findlay *et al*. 2012). The creation of Scottish Union Learning (SUL) in 2008 offered 'a separate form of accountability' for the STUC's union learning activity and was recognition of 'the important role that this work plays within the STUC' [STUC 1]. In fact, according to one senior official, it has 'become an increasingly important part of what unions do' [ibid]. The creation of SUL is evidence of the commitment from unions to this strand of work. This is supported by a dedicated team, knowledge and expertise, and a plan of work directed towards securing continued funding from government. and reaffirming the importance of union learning activity to the STUC and the wider union movement. The significance of resource allocation was highlighted by Flanders (1970), who stated that we can understand union priorities if we identify where they dedicate their resources. The STUC could, of course, commit resources to other areas of activity but have chosen to make learning one of their key priorities.

This point is emphasised further by one STUC senior official, who highlights the various resources, or 'assets' that they use to engage with government and others in the policy community. These assets are described as a 'mechanism for achieving [their] broader strategies and objectives'. They go on to describe these in more detail:

> '…[T]he assets we have are our General Council, our staff, our members and their insight, so that's a key asset. We [have] got an asset, which is the capability, the evidence that we gather formally, the papers we write. We seek a response from unions to our various policy initiatives and things that are happening. Our Congress policy is all things that we can feed into influencing these discussions or influencing our objectives. We've got resource, I suppose that's public resource, but these investment funds that we have from Scottish Government, both from the Development Fund and the Learning Fund, helps to ensure that these objectives that we have can be met in the context of skills and learning.' [STUC 1]

Here we see evidence of resources being used to help the STUC achieve their objectives around learning and skills. This is supported by government funding, thereby bolstering their efforts in this area of public policy. The importance of funding to support union learning is key to this discussion. It will be addressed later in this chapter, and when outlining the outcomes unions have achieved around learning, which will follow thereafter.

7.3 Improving the life chances of members

7.3.1 Upskilling the workforce

Unions exist to best represent the interests of their members, and learning is just one example of how they achieve this. Interviews with STUC and SUL representatives highlighted the contribution of the learning and skills initiatives delivered by unions and how these can impact on the life chances of union members. One STUC official commented:

> '... [P]eople are best transformed in a positive way through access to education, training and learning generally. So that's the main mission statement obviously for union learning, enabling people to do that…. And just generally to open up learning opportunities for members...' [STUC 3]

The learning and training delivered by unions is seen to improve the life chances of members because it is tailored to their needs. This is an agenda that 'is very much driven by what the needs of the individual and individual members, and collectively what the needs of the workforce are expressed through their union' [STUC 1]. This is a distinctive feature of the unions' involvement in the workplace learning agenda - supporting the learning needs of the individual and the workforce. This will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

According to another official in the SUL team, the unions' main priority around learning and skills is '[t]o upskill the workforce in basic terms, to improve the skills of workers throughout Scotland' [SUL 2]. This sentiment was also expressed by one STUC official, who acknowledged that members wanted to access skills and learning

opportunities for both personal and professional reasons that were principally related to improving job opportunities and employability, and enhancing their career progression. The official suggested that by offering learning opportunities to members, unions are able not only to support them in the short term in terms of their current role, but can in the longer term, equipping them with the necessary skills should they wish to secure new employment or progress in their existing role.

7.3.2 Wider impact on unions and sectoral interests

The importance of upskilling workers and the focus on developing core skills was also highlighted in the union interviews. For one union representative in the journalism sector, the key priority around learning was 'raising standards' and 'demanding that there is [sic] enough resources for journalists to do the job' [Union 5]. They argue that this helps the union protect members in a variety of ways. One of these is by making the case that staffing levels need to be maintained and training supported in order to produce quality output and maximise circulation and advertising revenue for the employer. This also has the benefit, they argue, of 'making the union members more valuable by equipping them with more skills and widening their range of skills' [ibid]. This suggests that supporting the skills needs of workers not only helps the individual, but also the union and the sector as a whole. Another respondent from a public sector union spoke about the focus on upskilling migrant workers and helping them retain employment which then helps to 'give them the confidence to go forward and take on various other [union] roles' [Union 4]. This brings obvious benefits to the worker in this example in terms of improving their employability, but also has the potential to strengthen activism within the union, and bolster membership revenues.

7.3.3 Common ground between unions and employers around skills

Upskilling the workforce and developing core skills was also highlighted as a priority by employers. Some employers viewed their own learning and skills objectives purely in terms of supporting the needs of the business, whereas others viewed these as playing a key role in maximising the effectiveness of workers. This would

apply particularly with advancements in technology, and in helping workers progress and compete in the job market. Employers, in a similar vein to individual unions, spoke of the need for specific industry-related skills to keep workers 'moving forward' [Employer 1] and give them the skills 'they need to do the job that they're paid to do' [Employer 3]. One particular employer in the chemical sector discussed the challenges they were facing due to site closures and discussed the ways in which they were supporting workers affected by redundancy, where they were actively 'trying to upskill the workforce [to enable them] to go out into the open market and look for jobs' [Employer 2]. In this example, many workers were already well- skilled but needed to supplement skills to allow them to secure employment. They commented that '…although they have the skills and they've got the experience, they don't have what other companies are looking for' [ibid]. The interviews highlighted the common ground that exists between employers and unions - the commitment to supporting the long and short-term skills needs of workers. It is important to highlight here that the priority of some employers is to prioritise not only the needs of business, but also the skills needs of workers in their current role, as well as helping them secure future employment.

7.4 Capacity, sustainability and embedding learning into wider union structures

It has been argued that learning must take on a more prominent and established role within the wider trade union movement to sustain this activity in the long term [SUL 1]. When the SUL team was established in 2008, the STUC identified a lack of capacity within unions to meet the demand for learning from their members; in order words, to be able to access skills and learning, for both personal and professional reasons. They understood that there was a need to provide union learning a more strategic direction; a plan of action outlining goals, key objectives and success indicators for their union learning activity. Creating a dedicated team to build and develop union learning activity not only gave credibility to this work within the trade union movement, but also demonstrated to government and other agencies that the STUC and unions were committed to the learning agenda and

servicing the demand for learning amongst its membership [STUC 1].

Issues around capacity and sustainability are also more formally considered by the SUL Board. Established to scrutinise the STUC's learning activity, the Board comprises members from the STUC General Council, as well as those nominated by members of affiliated unions so as to allow the voice of individual unions to be expressed. These views, and the direction of SUL's work, is therefore said to 'reflect the broader objectives of the STUC and its members' unions' [ibid]. It is important to note that this learning activity does not sit in isolation within the organisation; it influences and informs the STUC's overall approach of representing the views of their members and servicing the demand for learning activity, as well as representing the collective view of the workforce in Scotland. During the interviews, respondents from SUL and the STUC showed an awareness that embedding learning into the wider structures and work of the STUC is crucial not only in terms of its sustainability but also in terms of its status and how it is regarded outside of the union movement with key partners such as the Scottish Government.

Findings from the interviews suggest there is still some work needed for this to be achieved. In fact, one SUL official conceded that in terms of learning being viewed as a key function of trade unions, it was 'still very, very early days', and the structures within the union [are] still trying to find a space' for such learning activity [SUL 1]. It should be noted that this comment was made six years after SUL was established. Part of the wider issue, they argue, is the way learning is perceived by some within the union movement who perhaps view learning as 'the softer side of things' and not at the 'heart' of what unions do, as compared to their more traditional activities such as wage bargaining and representing workers individually and collectively in disputes with employers. One of the key challenges for the STUC is how to they continue to support their learning work alongside their other priorities, and what level of resource they dedicate to each.

7.4.1 Links between learning and organising agenda

This same SUL respondent goes on to suggest that some within the union

movement are overlooking the potential of the learning agenda and that learning has 'a huge role to play in organising that people don't yet appreciate' [SUL 1]. It can be argued that the learning agenda gives the STUC an opportunity to make these links more explicit, particularly when they are working with unions and communicating the wider benefits of unions' involvement in workplace learning initiatives. The links between the learning and organising agendas have also been the subject of much academic interest (see Wood and Moore 2007; Warhurst *et al*. 2007). The literature suggests that much more needs to be done for learning to be viewed as a core union function. Research does however make the case that learning is not only benefiting individual union members but is having a much broader impact in terms of union activism and promoting the worker voice, thus helping to make union learning provision more sustainable (Warhurst *et al*. 2007). One example cited in the interviews was the positive impact that union learning activity has had on employer engagement (which will be discussed in greater detail below), and on the workplace more generally in terms of productivity and worker morale.

Whether those within the trade union movement view learning as a core function is perhaps not even the main issue here - union learning does not have to be considered the most important union activity to foster credibility within the union movement. Arguably, the more pressing issue for the STUC is that unions achieve their objectives around learning and skills, which will be explored in the next chapter on tactics, and that they use their role in workplace learning to leverage influence in this policy space and in others where they have an interest.

7.4.2 The pressures on learning provision

The interviews also highlighted that the STUC are aware of the importance of finding a space for this learning activity and ensuring that sustainability of this activity is a priority for the organisation going forward, where 'union learning is exactly the same [as other union activity] despite pressure from elsewhere' [STUC 3]. Here, the STUC official argues that the status of union learning should not be

compromised, even when resources come under pressure. They go on to stress that even if industrial issues do arise, 'broadly most unions accept now that developing skills, [the] learning agenda, is an important part of their work and they need to put resources into that' [ibid].

This viewpoint was also supported by some employers. The interviews highlighted the common ground between unions and employers in this area, with each recognising the benefits of union learning. In fact, one employer discussed how learning had thrived in their workplace - despite some industrial challenges - because of the role of the union and the way in which they have worked constructively with the employer to maintain learning activity and support the learning and training needs of the workforce. Although learning activity is not necessarily recognised as a core union function by some observers, both unions and employers understand its importance in developing workers:

> 'What we have is a common goal. The common goal is for the development of the employees, the staff of this business. I'll say management as well, but … So, it's about finding that common thread that we have … And its development, and irrespective of what's went on, and there have been sometimes industrial sort of issues, but that doesn't come into this [learning] forum. You oversee all that.' [Employer 3]

Despite the other pressures that this employer has had to deal with, they maintain that learning is a key priority in their workplace and is not under threat from any industrial issues that may arise; as they see the shared benefits for workers, the employer and the union.

It is important to highlight that although learning has a dedicated team within the STUC and is something to which they have committed a significant amount of time and resource, it does have to compete with other traditional union priorities such as bargaining over wages and working conditions. These competing priorities have caused some tension within the trade union movement, as highlighted in the STUC and SUL interviews. This is challenging for the STUC as an organisation as they try to

satisfy those who do not think that learning should be such a priority, as well as those who want to see learning have a more established role. It can be argued that the main issue here is one of resource - securing greater funding and further developing capacity around union learning that will enable them to achieve their key priorities without compromising other union work. Also, it is important to stress that unions will always be faced with resource constraints. Regardless of what resources the STUC have at their disposal, they will always be faced with decisions on what activities they should prioritise.

7.5 Continued funding for union learning

Another key priority to emerge from the interviews was funding, which respondents highlighted as being a vital component of sustaining union learning activity. One senior official from SUL stated:

> 'I think the priorities are to continue funding, to continue building infrastructure and capacity within the unions, and to continue to deliver learning to members.' [SUL 1]

This respondent goes on to say that funding is essential in delivering union learning activity and [to] ensure that 'all the operational things are in place to deliver on the objectives that are set in the business plan that we need to take forward' [ibid]. It allows the STUC and unions to continue to support the learning and training needs of their members.

7.5.1 The effective use of funding

The STUC rely on government funding to support most of their learning activities they provide. However, this brings with it some significant challenges. One STUC official discussed the expectations that might arise from accepting funding from government, and the danger of STUC priorities getting 'watered down' or compromised as a result:

> 'One of things we have to avoid in that though, is that we simply, we have to be careful not to meld what we do into the other's objectives just for the

> opportunity to access some funding, for example. It's important that our objectives are aligned for the right reasons, so that we can realise and meet the demands of our unions and their members, and at the same time that allows other organisations to meet their demands' [STUC 1].

This is a key consideration for the STUC when engaging with partners; to work alongside individuals and organisations where there are shared priorities that can be achieved by working together. For the STUC, it is also of key importance that their union learning activity is driven primarily by their objectives, not simply the interests of their partners or funders, such as the Scottish Government [STUC 1]. The STUC are also mindful, when looking to secure funding for learning initiatives, that there should be capacity within the organisation to deliver this work. They maintain that it would be counterproductive to have funding in place and then insufficient numbers of staff to support learning activity. This might also have a negative impact in terms of how they are viewed by funders, undermining their credibility in this area and therefore their ability to influence policy outcomes. This is a key consideration for unions in their attempts to demonstrate that they can deliver positive outcomes in this area of public policy and add value to these policy debates.

These issues are usefully summed up by another STUC official:

> '…I think we've got to be very clear though is that if we are accepting money or funding from government, whatever source, that it does meet the aims and objectives, the aspirations, the vision of the trade union as well… In saying that though, I remember one union officer maybe about ten years ago, maybe a bit longer actually, saying unions shouldn't constantly look for a handout from government and therefore they need to embed learning within their structures and so on. And I think that's a challenge for unions, that once you start to receive funding year on year you then start to accept that that's where that funding's going to come from…' [STUC 3]

This highlights some of the tensions that exist within the union movement when

accepting funding from government, with the concern that unions may become too reliant on government and one significant source of funding to sustain their learning activity. It also raises questions around how much freedom unions have in pursuing their policy agenda. The challenge for unions is that both internal and external sources of funding can be unstable and carry conditions on what should be delivered; for example, supporting learning that broadly supports the Scottish Government's economic strategy.

Whether unions should accept government funding to support their learning activity is not the only issue here. As mentioned above, there is also the challenge of how the funding is administered, with one union official commenting that developing a strategic programme for skills and learning becomes somewhat compromised when '…you're kind of living one year to the next...' [Union 2]. This union official goes on to comment:

> 'Each year you are being tasked with coming up with a twelve-month project and inevitably there's a certain amount…[an] element of duplication in there that wouldn't be there if you could say: "Right, here's the plan for the next three years, the next five years." …. And one of the things we have spoken to the STUC about over, you know, over the past twelve to eighteen months is we have a kind of strategic vision for the skills and learning we want to deliver in Scotland, but that kind of depends on starting with and building a foundation and building on that. When you're only getting twelve months' funding, you're kind of saying, well, to a certain extent every year we've kind of got to rebuild a bit of the foundation and we can't make longer-term plans like, you know. Once we've done this bit we can go on and do that bit and broaden out to that because we don't know if we'll have the funding…. In all honesty, in January we could be told: "Right, there's no more funding…" and, you know, everything just grinds to a halt.' [ibid]

This suggests that these short-term funding arrangements not only impact on the strategic development of learning, but could also potentially lead to duplication of

provision, therefore wasting resource that could be used to support more learners. One SUL representative also pointed out the challenges of delivering more short-term projects because of the funding arrangements, which has caused 'uncertainty' amongst the unions [SUL 2]. It can be argued that this could have an impact in terms of gaining buy-in from the unions, some of whom might be skeptical of engaging in learning activity if there is no guarantee that their initial projects will be able to secure additional funding to develop their learning programmes and deliver more outcomes in subsequent years.

One skills representative suggested that one way in which this issue could be tackled is to raise funds for learning through collective bargaining. This, they argue, would put the STUC and unions in a much stronger negotiating position going forward and strengthen their voice in these policy debates. They highlight the powerful position of government in this policy area:

> '[T]he Government is the major player because the Government is the only person that's got discretionary funding to hand out. That's why the Government is very, very, very powerful. And I would like to see other people having funds for training raised through collective bargaining through industry voluntary levies or whatever it may be, so that…in a sense the social partners on both sides have actually got money of their own, because that would make them much more powerful players in the system. If you're only basically waiting for Government to give you some money, or begging Government to give you some money, your bargaining position is much weaker.' [Skills 1]

Whatever viewpoint unions may have on receiving government funding for learning or the nature of the funding arrangements that are in place, the findings from the interviews suggest that embedding learning into the wider structures of unions is key to its long-term sustainability, while continuing to seek other sources of funding and ways to deliver learning activity in a sustainable way should government funding be cut or stopped altogether.

This issue around government funding also brings to light the importance of taking an insider or an outsider approach. The evidence above suggests that some within the union movement see the STUC and unions as better placed to adopt an outsider position and not rely on or accept any government funding, allowing them to carry out a more critical role and question government policy. As was discussed earlier, some within the union movement believe that accepting government funding compromises the trade union role and their ability to achieve their policy priorities. As the interviews with STUC respondents highlight, union policy priorities must remain the driving force behind their learning work, regardless of the source of their funding. Arguably, working more closely with government and adopting more of an insider approach gives them the opportunity to shape these policy decisions more effectively, and this could influence future funding decisions. These debates will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter on tactics.

7.6 Supporting specific economic objectives

7.6.1 Improving skills utilisation and the workforce development agenda

Skills utilisation was another policy priority to emerge from the interviews, and this remains a key policy issue in Scotland. The 2015 Employer Skills Survey, for example, states:

> 'Under-utilisation [of skills] represents not only a waste of individuals' talent but also potentially a missed opportunity for employers to increase performance and productivity, improve job satisfaction and employee well-being, and stimulate investment, enterprise and innovation.' (Vivian *et al*. 2016: 14)

In recent years, Scotland has been at the forefront of the skills utilisation debate, with academic and skills practitioners making the argument that more effective utilisation of skills can help to unlock the potential in the Scottish workforce (Payne, 2011; Warhurst and Findlay, 2012). There has also been a willingness from the government in Scotland to engage with these issues, recognising that better skills utilisation can drive more productive workplaces that can in turn deliver improved

economic outcomes. The STUC have been prominent in pushing the skills utilisation agenda, broadening the debate beyond skills supply, and encouraging government and employers to think about how the investment in skills and learning will help to create better and more productive workplaces.

One senior STUC official discussed the link between skills utilisation and workplace innovation and the ways in which the STUC have 'pushed out beyond issues around acquisition of skills' to wider discussions on how workplaces can be more productive:

> 'How does skills and learning sit alongside wider strategies that businesses and organisations have for innovation, for investment? So, I think we've moved the agenda from a simple agenda of how do we get union members more opportunity to access skills, how do we get more opportunities for union members to access skills in the context of how do we improve the workplace more generally.' [STUC 1]

This suggests that it is important for unions to highlight the links between the effective utilisation of skills, workplace performance and national economic productivity. This is an argument that would arguably hold more sway with government. The STUC continue to make the case that this is not simply about the accumulation of skills, but how these skills are deployed in the workplace and the positive impact on productivity.

This view is echoed by another senior STUC official, who discusses this from an economic development perspective. For them, this is about:

> '…recognising that the model of economic development, highly deregulated economy, both labour and product markets, which kind of shoved companies down low road competitive strategies based on cost minimisation rather than higher productivity. As long as you're working in that climate, then getting people to take learning and skills seriously in the workplace is going to be difficult, you know. There are loads of good

> examples out there as well but in general terms that is the kind of economy we're stuck in, you know. I think that without changes to the economic model, then I think progress is going to be constrained, you know. And I think we kind of work in an environment where we assume that if we improve the supply of higher skills, they will find their own demand, and I think what we've found over the last thirty years is if we improve that stock of skills actually the quality of jobs doesn't really improve. It's very crudely put, the world is more complex than that, but that expectation [of] investing in higher skills is going to lead to those higher skilled jobs, I would say, has been kind of disproved of twenty years of experience.' [STUC 2]

This statement suggests that the STUC are attempting to push forward a much broader vision for skills policy, one that takes a longer-term view about how the better use of skills can support economic development and better quality jobs.

7.6.2 Supporting workers and the economy

Interviews also highlighted that contributing to a growing and successful economy is another of the STUC's key objectives in the learning and skills domain. This learning activity is said to help build a common cause where members benefit by being able to access good quality jobs while also supporting the government's wider economic objectives. One senior STUC official discussed the links between the union learning agenda and creating 'decent job opportunities' in Scotland, which help to 'improve the quality of work, to improve worker voice within the workplace…' [STUC 2] This sentiment was echoed by one skills representative from Skills Development Scotland (SDS) who discussed the government's focus on 'making sure the people of Scotland are equipped to maximise their personal goals to contribute to Scotland's economic success' [Skills 4]. It should be noted, however, that this respondent viewed economic objectives as the policy priority. The STUC, on the other hand, consider these objectives as being a natural companion to their learning and skills work, where supporting the learning needs of individuals helps them and the economy simultaneously. In other words, these objectives are considered to

complement one another. The STUC's primary consideration is supporting the skills needs of workers whilst recognising that workers' employment needs are best served in the context of a successful, well-functioning economy.

This skills representative goes on to stress the importance of ensuring that learning provision aligns with economic priorities, and that this can only take place when people, especially young people, make well-informed learning choices. Whilst recognising the 'value of learning for learning's sake', they stress that where there are restrictions in public funding, the main priority should be on 'equipping people for economic success…[where]…we create a population that's economically successful, because that will be good for Scotland.' [Skills 4] The agenda for unions here is identifying opportunities for alignment and synergy, and demonstrating the value that they can bring to the policy agenda. These themes will be discussed in the next chapter, which explores the tactics used by the STUC to achieve their skills and learning priorities.

7.7 Supporting and recruiting young workers

7.7.1 Apprenticeships and supporting the young workforce

Creating high-quality apprenticeships and supporting young people into the labour market was identified as another key priority for the STUC. Supporting a new generation of workers is seen as vital for the STUC in terms of developing a more 'progressive' approach to workplace relations, which can not only make a positive contribution in terms of the success of organisations but can also enhance job security and the terms and conditions of members [STUC 1].

This senior official goes on to stress the importance of having a broader outlook when it comes to youth employment and the targets that government sets for apprenticeships to address the high levels of youth unemployment. They state:

> 'I'd been saying to officials and ministers, through the various engagements that we had, you need to think about a different way of looking at this issue. I was concerned that it had become very driven by targets in relation to

> apprenticeships and that was really the only thing that was driving the policy… the government saying we are going to fund 15,000 apprenticeships and the opposition in the Parliament would say but we want you to fund 20,000 and if we're elected…. There was no real consideration to what broadly the strategy needed to be around youth employment. So, I would say to ministers and to officials, you need to lift this out of the political maelstrom, you need to get cross-party consensus around this, you need to look at this in its wider context. It's not just about apprenticeships, it's about these pathways out of school and college into the workplace and it's about re-establishing vocational education, or work-based education as a really important option, a really valuable and valued option for young people.' [STUC 1]

Here, the STUC are continuing to encourage a more informed debate on young peoples' prospects, where funding for apprenticeship places is just one piece of the puzzle. The STUC argue that focusing purely on the number of apprenticeships deflects attention from a more pressing issue: the potential of work-based learning and vocational routes and the effectiveness of the existing channels that support young people from school to further learning and training, or into employment. They seek to move the discussion forward into broader debates around improving the quality of apprenticeships and ensuring more diversity in the apprenticeship programme. This would include improving job opportunities for women and minority groups. Another key point they highlight is the importance of helping young people navigate the complex education and training system, giving them greater support in their education and career decisions.

The STUC also stress that improvement in the economy will not necessarily lead to better opportunities for young people while these structural issues remain, for example, where there is a mismatch of skills to the jobs available. It may also be the case that young people living in more rural areas have less support and services available to them when trying to access job opportunities. They go on to state that

there is:

> '[a]n appreciation that as the economy improves, if it improves significantly, then there will still be challenges and issues in relation to young people in accessing jobs. So, that's been an important emphasis, it has been an important interest that Government has addressed. Work that we've been doing with Government, Scottish Government over the last couple of years, focusing on the opportunities for skills and employment development amongst women [has] become much more to the fore, and issues that relate to improving the position of women in the labour market.' [STUC 1]

The STUC argue that a thriving economy on its own is not sufficient to improve job opportunities for young people. With their proximity to the workforce and experience of providing workplace learning opportunities, the STUC also have an informed view as to what is needed at the workplace level. They argue that this is what should be informing policy: quality opportunities for young people and more diversity in training programmes such as apprenticeships, not just a focus on the number of apprenticeship places.

7.7.2 Supporting young people to become more prepared as they enter the labour market

The interviews also highlighted that there was a general consensus on the skills and learning priorities facing Scotland, particularly 'a broad recognition of the importance of ensuring that employers engage more in recruiting and training young people' [STUC 1].

One SUL senior official commented:

> 'I think the whole youth unemployment [issue] needs to be addressed and we need to find more and better opportunities for our young people. I think we need to address the equality issues, particularly in terms of vocational learning and apprenticeships - try to move away from the stereotypical roles for male and female workers.' [SUL 2]

Like some of the issues raised earlier around apprenticeships, this comment illustrates the commitment from the STUC and SUL to moving these debates forward and having a broader conversation about some of the challenges in learning and skills provision.

The importance of qualifications and accredited learning in supporting young people in education and work was another key priority to emerge from the STUC interviews. One senior STUC official stated:

> 'We will have broad recognition of the importance of broadly ensuring that employers engage more in recruiting and training young people. We would have a broadly similar view to other organisations about the important role that qualifications play [in that] …' [STUC 1].

This was also acknowledged by a skills representative and former government official. They highlighted the importance of supporting the future workforce and making sure young people are equipped with the skills they need to enter the world of work:

> 'Around learning and skills [our priority] is to fulfil the ambition set out to develop the young workforce. So, the key thing really is to make sure people coming to college are gaining qualifications and developing skills that prepare them for the labour market and give them a really good chance of being able to compete in the labour market.' [Skills 5]

7.8 Servicing the learning and skills needs of individual unions/sectors

Another STUC priority highlighted during the interviews is helping to service the skills and learning needs in individual unions and/or sectors. One union representative in the journalism sector discussed the importance of their members having specific skills to do their jobs effectively. The priority for the STUC is to support these sectors in their training needs. This union respondent spoke of 'demanding that there is [sic] enough resources for journalists to do the job' and cited the example of an online course that was developed to improve the grammar

of journalists as one which has supported the training needs of their members [Union 5].

Although this union were aware of the tensions that exist within the wider union movement between, for example, traditional bargaining activities and the learning agenda, they argued that learning should be a key priority, where unions are committed to maintaining standards and producing quality output.

They go on to highlight the wider benefits of such engagement:

> 'So, it's about trying to persuade the employers that if the quality goes down, your circulation and the advertising goes down because people don't want to be associated with poor quality. So, as a trade union, arguing that quality should be maintained backs up our argument that staffing levels need to be maintained…' [ibid]

This union respondent also highlights their 'proactive' approach in trying to ensure 'training is provided in the workplace' through trade union learning. They cite the example of new technologies coming into the industry which are helping workers widen their range of skills, which they see as 'protecting members in different ways.' This is another example of how the STUC, and individual unions are supporting both the individual and collective needs of workers through union learning initiatives. They help members through upskilling, particularly in an industry which now requires greater levels of digital skills. Servicing the skills needs of workers to enable them to use new technologies arguably makes members more valuable and employable. This demonstrates how the unions are not only supporting workers in their current role by helping them to upskill and do their jobs more effectively, but also their future employability should they wish to move jobs, or in the case of redundancy need to find alternative work.

7.9 Challenges in achieving objectives in learning and skills

7.9.1 Employer engagement

The most common challenge reported by the STUC and unions in achieving their

learning and skills priorities is employer engagement. From the STUC's point of view, it is crucial to get employers to recognise the role that unions are playing in supporting the learning and skills needs of the workforce. One respondent said:

> 'We will not address some of our issues around participation, employment, employability, productivity, unless we've got more employers being more ambitious and more appreciative of the role that unions can play in that, and also the role that the union can play in supporting their objectives in upskilling the workforce and developing the workforce and changing the way the workplace functions and operates.' [STUC 1]

The earlier discussion highlighted the importance that the STUC has placed on youth employment, particularly around apprenticeships and the need to secure greater employer engagement to address this issue. This challenge was also highlighted in the government interviews:

> 'For a long time, all governments are trying to engage employers in this agenda. I think we're…trying to go to a new place in terms of that employer engagement…a system which is much more kind of influenced by what employers are after, but also the delivery of some of that stuff is part of the responsibility and the input of employers. And you see that also clearly in apprenticeships where it's built in but trying to get employers to engage with schools, to engage with colleges.' [Gov 4]

This comment supports what the STUC are trying to achieve in terms of supporting more young people into work and encouraging employers to take a greater role in this. There is acknowledgement that in order to deliver the necessary training and produce the young workers that employers need, they must take a greater role in the training of young people, as well as engaging with young people while they are still in education.

However, engaging employers in this agenda and encouraging them to take a greater role remains a challenge, as this skills representative highlights:

> ‘I think a huge challenge is going to be to get employers to accept that they need to do more, and then do more. And that’s been a challenge for thirty years and we haven’t got much further down the road in cracking that one, and I don’t think that Skills Investment Plans[21] are powerful enough levers to force the employers to face up to the fact they’ve got to do more. But running out of money might…’ [Skills 1]

This skills representative suggests that employers may not take sufficient action in funding the training for more young people unless their hand is forced, the money runs out, and they have no choice but to address the issue. They do, however, go on to stress the merits of a more formalised Social Partnership Model where the responsibilities of each stakeholder are more clearly defined:

> ‘I mean, in particular it would be very helpful to know what employers really were meant to be doing, and basically have a clear statement of what it was the government and other stakeholders expect employers to do, in terms of providing more work experience, providing apprenticeships, whatever it is. And having agreed that, then being able to say to employers, “Look, you know, this is what we all agreed - you’re not doing it.” That’s what would be really, really, really, really, really helpful, but it would also be an immensely painful and high-risk strategy to actually formulate that set of responsibilities, so everyone shies away from it. I mean, the Wood Committee’s[22] second stage of his Report was supposed to be about what employers were responsible for, but it didn’t turn out like that. It’s very hard to have that conversation, and most other countries have it.’ [Skills 1]

This is perhaps an agenda that the STUC and unions could help to drive forward

[21] Skills Investment Plans (SIPs) are facilitated by Skills Development Scotland on behalf of Scottish Government and describe the skills challenges and opportunities across Scotland's key sectors.

[22] Chaired by Sir Ian Wood, the Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce was tasked with bringing forward a range of recommendations designed to improve young people's transition into employment, including how employers can be more involved in education and employing more young people. The Commission's Final Report was published on 3 June 2014.

with the Scottish Government, where the policy community look to learn lessons from other countries that have been more successful in ensuring employers take an active role in the training needs of the young workforce, which would include the investment in such training.

Government respondents also discussed the challenges of engaging employers in this agenda and the need to have more effective mechanisms in place. They stressed that this it is a balancing act for government in terms of encouraging employers to engage more with this agenda without being seen to dictate what they do:

> 'We're talking about the importance of work-based learning, and so it's employers in a sense that hold the key to that; they're such an important partner in that. So, it's about hearts and minds actually, and getting to a point where there is a shared recognition that perhaps working in particular kinds of ways is more likely to unlock the potential of the workforce and sometimes that's quite a hard message. So, I completely agree; a sophisticated method or a more open way of having that engagement with employers, which isn't about just listening or just telling, it's about trying to work together. Some of the recommendations from the Working Together Review[23] are starting to get into that territory, I guess.' [Gov 1]

This message is reinforced by another government representative, who, while understanding the challenges of engaging with employers around workplace training, also wants to maintain a good working relationship to achieve positive outcomes for all those involved:

> 'It is an inherently complex thing, just in terms of the number of different businesses, the way they operate…and I suppose the inherent issue that there is about government telling business what to do, you know, it's not

[23] The Working Together Review is an independent review chaired by Jim Mather. It investigates industrial relations throughout Scotland and seeks to determine the manner in which greater engagement between employers, trade unions, and government could have a positive effect in workplaces, sectors, and nationally

> something that we're: (a) in a good position to do. But actually, what we're trying to do is set out a range of choices that individual businesses, individual employers and employees can make for themselves. A key factor from our perspective is awareness driving forward improvements and delivering better outcomes both for the businesses themselves and for the employees.' [Gov 2]

This is a balancing act for government and a situation that the unions can arguably use to their advantage. Working in partnership with government and employers, unions find themselves in a good position to help deliver the skills that both government and employers need, helping them to support the needs of workers and giving themselves a platform to inform these debates going forward.

The interviews also highlighted the issue of employer funding for other training needs, particularly around Everyday Skills, which includes literacy, numeracy, basic IT skills, digital skills, English language for migrant workers, and supporting workers who may have dyslexia or other learning differences. One SUL official, who has worked closely with unions on the Everyday Skills agenda, commented:

> 'I think employers could play a bigger role in all of this. I know they're involved to a certain extent, but I think they could be involved much more, and I feel that some of them could contribute more than they do in terms of paying for learning, part-funding learning, giving learners better release from work to attend learning. I think if we look to other models of workplace learning like in some Scandinavian countries where you have a really good partnership between the government, the employers - it does seem to work really well but there is a much higher investment from employers in learning and training and I don't just mean like job-specific training, I mean learning that we're trying to facilitate.' [SUL 2]

This point touches upon some of the issues raised earlier. Although many of the employer respondents were supportive of upskilling their workers in situations where funding is constrained, it is perhaps unsurprising that employers tend to

prioritise job-specific skills and training. It is important to highlight that unions play a key role in servicing the demand that exists for learning that is not always supported by employers, such as providing assistance to unions in accessing Everyday Skills opportunities for their members.

7.9.2 Capacity issues

One STUC senior official noted earlier the importance of accessing government funding to support their specific objectives around learning and skills, and not just to deliver the government's policy agenda. There is also a capacity issue related to this, which needs to be explored further:

> 'There must be always opportunities to ensure that we've got greater engagement, or more extensive engagement, or engagement that results in better objectives for us. The other side of it is also that we've got to have the capacity to do that, so there's a capacity issue for us. Sometimes you need to be careful for what you wish for…. [T]here are opportunities that we maybe offer to engage in this way or that way which we might struggle to meet just because we don't have the capacity to do that. So, we need to be careful about that too, but that's not to say we would reject opportunities, it's much more a case of us looking at what's the most effective way of us actually engaging that can add value and make a difference. We would carefully consider any invitation that we received to participate in a commission, or a committee, or whatever. We wouldn't just take the view, "Well, you know, we've got to have the unions there just for having the sake of having the unions there." Sometimes we do that because it's an important signal to give to people but most of the time, well, what [is] the real thing by sitting on that committee, is that the best way of us exercising influence, or could we exercise influence on the work of that committee in a different way through a different type of engagement?' [STUC 1]

This also links back to the earlier discussion on where the STUC dedicate their resources. A key consideration here is whether assigning staff to specific initiatives

or engagements is the best use of resources. Working with the government on the modern apprenticeship programme, for example, which is part of the government's work on developing the young workforce, is not enough in itself for the STUC and unions. Sitting around the table and being a partner in discussions is arguably just the start of the influencing process. This gives them an opportunity to be visible, to actively take part in discussions and present their case. However, the above statement by the STUC official highlights that this may not always be the best option. In some instances, taking a more 'outsider' approach and adopting a more critical role to influence decisions more effectively may produce bigger gains for the STUC and unions. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, whether the STUC and trade unions decide to take an insider or an outsider approach is a strategic choice - it depends on the issue at hand and what would be the most effective option(s) to help them achieve their priorities around learning and skills, as well as in other policy areas where they have an interest.

7.10 Summary

Trade unions engage in the learning and skills policy sphere because it allows them to best serve the interests of their members. Workers are at the heart of the union learning agenda; their needs are paramount, not those of the employer or other stakeholders. It is a service demanded by union members and one that is driven by their individual needs, as well as those of the workforce collectively. Union learning activity has become embedded into the wider structures of the STUC through the establishment of SUL, where its activities are scrutinised by a Board having broad representation and including members of the General Council, representatives of affiliated unions, the STUC General Secretary, and a nominated member from the TUC. It is supported by dedicated funding from government to allow the unions to identify the needs of learners and develop learning activities with their partners, delivering benefits for learners, unions, employers and the economy.

This chapter has outlined the STUC's priorities around skills and learning. These include improving the life chances of members by upskilling the workforce; building

capacity around learning and embedding learning into wider union structures; contributing to the organising agenda; maintaining funding for union learning. Other priorities are supporting specific economic objectives; supporting the training and recruitment of young workers; servicing the specific skills needs in individual unions/sectors; and improving employer engagement around learning and skills, particularly in supporting the young workforce and encouraging employers to support workers' training needs and not just those that are job-related. These priorities have demonstrated the different ways in which the STUC and the wider union movement seek to serve the best interests of their members, at both at the individual and collective level.

The STUC, however, operates in a challenging environment where they must make choices between different priorities when resources are constrained. The STUC have committed themselves to the learning agenda and have dedicated significant resource to this activity. They are operating in a competitive policy space where many actors are seeking to have their voices heard and deliver on their priorities around learning and skills. Although the findings in this chapter have demonstrated that the STUC and unions have good working relationships with government, practitioners and some employers in this space, they have to continue to work hard to make sure the voice of the learner is heard and their needs accounted for.

Some of the challenges the STUC face in achieving their policy priorities around skills and learning are around making the case that learning should be a priority for trade unions and communicating the benefits to the wider union movement. Although the interviews have highlighted some of the positive engagement with employers around skills and learning, the STUC and unions continue to argue that employers need to take a much more active role in the training and development of the workforce. A good example of this is Everyday Skills provision, learning that many unions provide but which arguably should be provided or better supported by employers. This presents a challenge for the STUC and unions who want to build a more positive relationship with employers, especially in developing the young workforce and providing better training and job opportunities for young people.

The relationship with employers, although constructive, needs to be managed carefully and monitored to encourage employers to buy into the union learning agenda and work with unions to support the learning and skills needs of workers, while also being encouraged to invest more in workforce training and development.

The STUC's priorities are shaped by possibilities: dedicated funding from government has given them the opportunity to extend learning provision significantly over the last two decades. There are conditions of funding which inevitably place constraints on the kind of activity that can be supported. By understanding, however, the government's broad objectives are around learning and skills, the STUC have managed to identify where there is overlap and channel activity effectively in that area. The interviews also made clear that the STUC and unions could deliver even more with greater resource, but this must be handled with caution as they not only need to have the capacity to deliver this additional activity, but they must also ensure that the funding received does not have criteria attached to it that would restrict or compromise what they are trying to achieve for their members.

This chapter has set out to outline the STUC's priorities around learning and skills and has sought to understand why they engage in this area of policy. Having a clear understanding of their policy priorities is vital to this study, as it a key component of the model for assessing influence that seeks to illustrate the pathway from policy priorities to policy influence. Fundamentally, all the STUC priorities around skills and learning are directed towards best representing the interests of their members and improve their life chances. Despite any challenges they face in achieving these policy priorities, whether that is funding, capacity or improving engagement with employers around training, the interests of workers remain their number one priority. The next chapter will discuss the tactics used by the STUC and unions to achieve these priorities, and will consider how effective these have been.

8. Influencing Tactics

8.1. Introduction

Learning is a service demanded by members and benefits them in numerous ways. It improves their life chances; it allows them to access skills and learning opportunities to improve their job prospects and earnings, secure future employment by broadening their current skillset, and can aid career progression (see Findlay *et al*. 2007). Unions also engage with learning because it has become an increasingly important part of what they have to offer. Despite some tensions within the union movement from those that do not feel unions should be engaging in this agenda, interviews demonstrate that there is broad support for union learning within the trade union movement. Arguably, one of the more pressing issues for the STUC is the sustainability of union learning activity and ensuring that this becomes more firmly embedded into wider union structures despite any industrial issues that may exist. Findings also highlight that the STUC are aware that more work needs to be done to promote their learning work more widely and to strengthen relationships with partners. Continued funding for skills and learning initiatives is highlighted as another key priority for the STUC, and one that is vital to help sustain this work. Funding is also cited as a key issue to further develop the infrastructure and capacity within unions to help deliver their policy priorities and continue to provide learning opportunities to their members.

The following chapter will outline the various tactics, which can also be understood as the specific actions or activities, employed by the STUC and unions to achieve their priorities in learning and skills, and will consider how effective these have been in helping them to exert influence in this policy area. As in the previous chapter, these will be organised under the broad themes that emerged from the interviews. Pillars 2 (tactics) and 3 (the policy process) from the model for assessing policy influence will be applied to analyse the interview data and address the following research question:

2. **What tactics are used by unions to exert influence over learning and skills policy and how effective have these been?**

The STUC uses various tactics to try to exert influence in this policy space. This includes the lobbying of key decision-makers in their attempts to influence the actions and policies of actors such as the Scottish Government and employers. Other tactics used include using the most effective means to communicate and promote their learning and skills priorities and success stories. The resources that the STUC uses to achieve their policy priorities in skills and learning will also be highlighted. This chapter will also explore whether stakeholders adopt an insider or outsider approach when trying to achieve their policy priorities in skills and learning and will discuss the ways in which the STUC identify where common and diverse interests exist with various partners. The STUC's engagement with key decision-makers will also be highlighted, along with the ways in which they use their existing networks to try to influence learning and skills policy. This chapter will also explore how the STUC use their knowledge and expertise to exert influence in this policy space.

The following findings highlight the difficulties of assessing influence. It is important to restate that this research does not seek to make claims that this influence is objectively true; it cannot easily be measured. Influence is complex and nuanced. The model for assessing influence used in this study takes account of perceptions or insights of union influence, and this is reflected in the findings below.

8.2 The use of resources to achieve learning and skills priorities

8.2.1 The distinctive voice of unions

The distinctive voice of the STUC in learning and skills was cited as a key resource during the interviews. This distinctiveness comes not so much from the fact that they engage in the workplace; this is also the case for employers and some learning providers. The STUC's distinctiveness, they argue, comes from the role that they have developed in workplace learning, and the trust relationships they have built with their members. One senior STUC official states that unions are:

> '…honest brokers in the relationship between individual workers and their employer, and can get over some of the apprehensions, the reservations that workers might have in engaging in employment and skills issues because of the way they impact on other aspects of their terms and conditions of employment, including what they're paid, the types of jobs that they do, the way their work is organised, or reorganised… [It] can get over some, I suppose, underlying concerns that the employer's agenda on employment and skills may not be an agenda which is in line with, or aligns with, the individual and collective objectives of the workforce.' [STUC 1]

Having this relationship with workers and engaging with them directly to understand both their individual needs and those of the workforce more generally is a valuable resource at the STUC's disposal. They can effectively articulate the needs of learners because of their proximity to workers, which makes them stand out from other stakeholders who engage in this policy space.

One SUL representative stated:

> 'I think unions have an advantage over other stakeholders in that they are in there with members of the workforce, and they see the situation in a more operational level, on a day-to-day level, whereas other stakeholders are perhaps only hearing from particular groups on what the situation is. I think unions are right in there among the workforce and are better placed to inform others.' [SUL 2]

Unions' close proximity to workers, and the STUC's ability to articulate the collective needs of the workforce, are resources which also help them to contribute to a broader and more informed dialogue around learning and skills policy.

8.2.2 Articulating the needs of the workforce

The STUC have access to a significant proportion of the workforce - workers that the Scottish Government want to engage with. This workforce perspective gives them a valuable resource when being part of discussions around learning and skills and

having the opportunity to influence policy decisions. There are many different aspects to this. Through their union learning activity, the STUC and unions have a good insight into and knowledge of workers' skills and training needs. They have direct access to workers, enabling them to build trusting relationships and create conditions where workers may feel more inclined to discuss their individual training needs. They are viewed as being key intermediaries in the employee-employer relationship. The 'honest broker' role that unions have developed with workers around learning and skills needs was also highlighted by Scottish Government respondents, who viewed this as being a key asset or resource:

> 'For me, it's not so much that they're saying something different; it's more about the unique kind of access and trust relationships that are more likely to bring in more learners than [in] more conventional settings, and I guess the importance of work-based learning and learning you can do in the workplace. I think we're all beginning to realise the strengths of that and the potential impact of work-based learning over and above more conventional learning routes. It's that combination of the particular trust, supportive, trust relationship within a union setting based on workplace learning [and that] is what can add to the value.' [Gov 2]

Articulating the needs of the workforce within a workplace setting is a unique aspect of the union-led learning agenda. Another Scottish Government official commented that '…the trade unions are the best proxy, the most representative group that we can engage with [in terms of getting the voice of workers/employees]' [Gov 1]. This highlights the valuable resource unions have at their disposal, which can then be used to try to influence decision-making with government around skills and learning.

This is also acknowledged by a skills representative, who makes the point that government is willing to work with the unions, particularly around learning, because:

> '...they're able to articulate those messages from the workforce, but also they're able to help the Scottish Government articulate its policy…for example, literacies development and provision and how this might relate to…in an economic sense, in terms of the productivity of the country…[and]…the development of skills and confidence at the individual level.' [Skills 2]

The value that the STUC and unions bring as a result of their trusted position in the workplace and their ability to articulate the needs of workers is also highlighted by union representatives:

> '…it's the confidence angle, the trust angle. I think unions can talk on behalf of - can and do - talk on behalf of people, but not in a threatening way. So, individuals, workers, don't feel threatened or under pressure…' [Union 7]

This union representative goes on to discuss the key role that union learning representatives play in this scenario. Here, unions are described as those 'who are in the same workplace, who are peers rather than managers or anyone else. It's non-threatening, it's non-judgmental, and I think that is the distinction in the voice that unions have. It's being able to relate to people and talk to people on their level and be trusted by people' [Union 7]. One STUC official goes on to say that '...it's about reaching parts of the workplace that others can't reach...' [STUC 3]. Not only this, but the STUC are also able to articulate the collective voice of workers in a credible way:

> 'I think it's traditionally quite difficult in the world of learning to get the learner voice articulated well around the decision-making table, and the trade union voice is one way of doing that' [Skills 4].

The unions have built and developed a credible role for themselves in the learning and skills agenda. They are a trusted intermediary between workers and their employers and are viewed by government as adding value in this area because of their proximity to workers and their ability to articulate workforce needs effectively,

which arguably other stakeholders would struggle to achieve.

8.2.3 The union voice in policy-making

Providing credible evidence is another key resource used by the STUC to inform skills and learning debates. One STUC official describes their voice as 'distinct but informed' and discusses the importance of bringing in a range of voices to develop effective policy. They also highlight the issue of the employer community presenting a collective voice with 'opinions based on anecdotes', rather than engaging with workers for a sustained period to gain an understanding of their skills and learning needs. They state:

> '…I've challenged a number of representatives and employer organisations in the past, for example, the issue of youth employment. So, well we've got: "This person I know got somebody, came for an interview, and they were late, and they couldn't read and write and that means that the education system is failing all young people". Well, it's not actually evidence of that because when you look at the evidence that is more broadly drawn in relation to how young people, how well-equipped young people emerging from school, for example, are to enter the world of work. A lot of the evidence is very positive, that the school system actually does well in that respect. It's not to say that it can't be improved, and that was one of the issues that the Wood Commission was looking at. But this idea that, you know, because somebody has an antagonistic experience that is somehow - the situation more generally - is one of the dangers of widening out the access, or the role of stakeholders to policy. So, I would say the key thing is [that it] has to be credible and informed.' [STUC 1]

Taking account of some of the issues raised previously, the STUC use their proximity to the workforce, the trusting relationships with workers they have built over time, and their understanding of the skills and learning needs of workers to present a credible and informed case to government and other stakeholders. This is an asset that they can bring to the table when attempting to exert influence in this area of

policy.

8.2.4 Mitigating the employer voice

During the interviews, other stakeholders also acknowledged the key role that the STUC and unions play in ensuring there is a more balanced range of voices in these policy debates. One skills representative and former Scottish Government official stressed that the STUC and the unions play an important role in mitigating the powerful and prominent voice of employers. They discuss the 'distinctive' voice of the unions in terms of representing the learner voice, where they articulate the needs of workers in relation to learning and skills issues, which they argue should not be overshadowed by voice of the employer. They go on to say:

> 'I think it's [union voice] distinctive because it comes from the perspective of the individual and the employee. So, although the big policy debate is around labour market needs and responding to the needs of employers - that's really important - but it's also really important to be thinking about individuals' needs, which not always necessarily are the same as employer needs. So, I think trade unions, maybe not uniquely, cos I suppose there are other organisations that pay attention to the individuals - Scottish Adult Learning Partnership and people like that. I think the trade unions are an important voice. When I was with them [Scottish Government] that was an important group to listen to.' [Skills 5]

Although representing the worker voice is acknowledged as being important when developing policy in this area, the voice of the employer remains dominant. When pressed on why the employer voice tends to dominate in these policy debates, this skills representative and former government official goes on to say:

> 'Well, I think part of it is because employers can be very loud, and there's organisations of employers and sectors that are very loud and they get an audience with certain ministers. The key thing about all of that - and that's absolutely fine - the key thing about all of that, and where I think the unions can be a good balance to that, is that you shouldn't just react to loud voices;

you should test things out. I'm a big believer in evidence and backing up things and testing things in different ways. So, employers can make perfectly valid criticisms of the learning and skills system, but on the other hand they can also make ridiculous claims. I mean, I think the CBI[24] consistently make ridiculous claims about learning and skills and back it up with really poor evidence. So, and I think the danger for governments is to knee-jerk react to that kind of thing and not actually look at some of the substance. So, if you look at…. Personally, if I look at the quality of evidence I see from the [S]TUC on learning and skills compared to the CBI, it's night and day. One's based on evidence and has got a robust argument, and one's just based on talking to a few employers who happen to be big players…' [ibid].

In a situation where the employer voice tends to be dominant, the STUC attempt to mitigate this by continuing to produce robust and well-informed evidence to inform these policy discussions. The ways in which the STUC produce such evidence will be explored in greater detail below.

8.2.5 Developing more informed policy

The discussion above has highlighted the role that the STUC play in contributing to a more informed debate around skills and learning by ensuring that the voice of the worker is represented and heard by key decision-makers. However, it must also be stressed that unions are not necessarily saying something very different to other stakeholders in this space. The previous chapter highlighted the commonly recognised key policy areas in learning and skills, including greater employer investment in training and helping to support young people's transition into the labour market. Arguably, what makes the STUC's contribution different to that of other stakeholders is that it has wider implications. The representation of the worker voice allows the STUC and unions to contribute to a broader and better-informed debate on skills:

[24] The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) is a UK business organisation, which in total claims to speak for 190,000 businesses. It has offices across each nation in the UK and internationally. CBI Scotland describes itself as the voice of business in Scotland.

> ‘Well, I like to think of the world as a world that has many prisms. So, one of the things that a trade union can do, an effective trade union at least, is it can look at the world through the prism of the employee, and when you add the views of different prisms together you get a much richer answer than when we look at the world through a single prism.’ [Skills 4]

The STUC are also described as having a distinctive voice in terms of the wider debates on the supply and demand of skills. One official describes the employer perspective on this as ‘simple supply-side driven to make sure that the stock of skills exists within the economy…’ [STUC 2].

Unions, on the other hand, take a much broader view:

> ‘I think ours is much wider, it’s about trying to, it’s related not just to giving the individual the opportunities to make the most of themselves, but to make sure that [the] learning and skills agenda supports the wider economic development agenda to ensure that people have the means to progress in terms of skills and employment in a way that if simply left to the market they probably wouldn’t have.’ [ibid]

Arguably one of the advantages that the STUC enjoys in this agenda is their engagement with a wide number of agencies, including enterprise agencies, employer representatives, third sector organisations, campaign groups such as The Living Wage Campaign, Scottish Government, TUC Education, and other unions. This will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter when discussing the STUC’s partnership working on learning and skills.

8.3 Use of knowledge and expertise

Interviews with various unions highlighted the different approaches to skills and learning. One education union representative spoke of the pressing issues they faced, particularly in relation to changes in the curriculum and workload concerns associated with this, together with regional restructuring in Further Education. These are areas in which they were ‘engaging with politicians’ and voicing their

concerns about how this could best be managed. This respondent also discussed how they have dedicated some of their resources into building a network of union learning representatives, supporting their members and the demand for Continuing Professional Development (CPD). As was previously discussed in the chapter on the role of functions of trade unions, analysing where unions dedicate their resources is a good indication of their priorities. In this example, we can see that learning provision is a key function both in terms of their members' development, and education policy more broadly. This is described as the 'dual function within the union', where they not only look after the interests of their members, but also make an important contribution to wider education policy in Scotland; for example, in informing change such as when the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) was introduced in 2010 [Union 1].

This union uses its expert knowledge and experience in this sector to service the development needs of its members and to help develop more informed education policy, where it has first-hand experience of the issues. Having access to ministers, sharing knowledge, and drawing on their experiences gives this particular union the platform to influence decisions both at the individual and collective levels.

Another point of interest to emerge from the interviews with STUC officials and other key stakeholders is the value of their experience in the learning and skills policy domain. The STUC's experience not only comes from the provision of learning and skills initiatives for their members, but also from their engagement with workers and representing the experiences of the workforce. Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) were cited as one example where the STUC were able to effectively articulate the thoughts and experiences of the workforce.[25] One senior STUC official commented:

> '…so government develops [a] policy which is well-intended in terms of

[25] ILAs were replaced by Individual Training Accounts (ITAs) in October 2017 to help support the Scottish Government's Labour Market Strategy - https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/what-we-do/employability-skills/sds-individual-training-accounts/

> engaging more people in learning, particularly those on lower incomes, but when that policy begins to roll out and is implemented, because of our engagement with workers we can see exactly how that works out, we can see some of the benefits but we can also see some of the deficiencies and that allows us to go back to government with very practical examples, or policymakers, with very practical examples of how this works and how it doesn't work and this is what you might need to do to change it.' [STUC 1]

Being able to articulate the experiences of workers is therefore seen as a valuable resource for the STUC in terms of influencing policy, where they attempt to influence key decision-makers through their knowledge and experience of workplace learning and skills initiatives. Formal channels of engagement, such as the bi-annual meeting with the First Minister, are not always necessary when attempting to influence policy decisions, however. Instead, the STUC can use the various contacts that have been established over time with senior civil servants to make their case. Apprenticeships are cited as one example where the STUC can use their knowledge to make the case to government for change:

> '… if they're not meeting their targets around gender, there are things we can say to them about what we've seen in the workplace that works, what doesn't work, what some of the barriers are.' [ibid]

The STUC use their experience of union learning and articulate the voice of the workforce to try to influence policy. This STUC official goes on discuss the benefits of this experience:

> 'So, attempting to influence policy through that experience is quite valuable…. This is the evidence of what we're doing, you should do that, you should think about that. It's not done in a formal way, we haven't engaged researchers like yourself to go around and do all of this and sit with unions and identify all of that, but I think it's appreciated that we, through various mechanisms that we have to talk to government, to talk to ministers and officials and other policymakers.' [ibid]

In summary, the interviews highlighted that the STUC's knowledge and expertise in the learning and skills agenda is used as a key resource to influence decision-making. They use these resources to best represent the interests of workers at both the individual and collective level. They also use their knowledge and experience of what works at the workplace level and tap into their established networks to best represent the needs of their members, sectors and the wider workforce.

The formal and informal channels, or mechanisms of influence, mentioned above are worth highlighting again. Here, Scotland's policymakers have put in place mechanisms that resemble a coordinated market economy, including strategic interactions between actors and a collaborative approach to policy-making. Formal mechanisms such as the bi-annual meeting are important channels of influence, but informal mechanisms such as the contacts and networks that the STUC have established with government over an extended period of time also play a crucial role. These mechanisms take on even greater importance for unions where no formal mechanisms exist. Here, practices have emerged in this devolved policy landscape that allow STUC to engage with key decision-makers within government. Arguably, devolution makes these channels or mechanisms more workable because of the smaller size of the policy community as compared to the UK, and the ability of actors such as trade unions to access key decision-makers and potential routes to influence. These mechanisms are not necessarily visible from the outside. It is only through the in-depth analysis of the case - the STUC - and using union learning as the domain of interest, that the researcher can demonstrate that both these formal and informal routes exist for trade unions to try to exert influence in learning and skills policy.

8.4 Addressing market failures

Levels of employer funding for training or staff development was another issue highlighted in the interviews, with some unions commenting on the skills gaps that exist within their industries and the role that unions play in addressing these. The impact of redundancies and the changing nature of work in industries such as

television and journalism through digitisation, for example, compounded with a lack of training opportunities from some employers, have given unions the opportunity to help upskill the workforce:

> ‘Over the past perhaps five to ten years, that kind of level of trained individual has diminished and there has been a kind of void there in terms of having high-quality workers.’ [Union 2]

In a situation where employers are under no obligation to train their workforce, the value of union learning comes to the fore. It can be argued that unions are plugging some of the training gaps left by employers, and providing a vital service not only in terms of workers’ skills and employability but also in terms of the needs of the wider sector and economy. One union representative in the arts sector describes how they provide training ‘that our members don’t receive from the employers because historically employers have seen that as not their problem.’ [ibid]

This union official in the media and entertainment sector goes on to discuss that when one of the main training providers, in this case the BBC, stopped providing training, which they blamed on budget constraints, a gap was left which the union now services through union learning funded projects. Another issue raised by this union respondent was redundancies, which has a significant impact on the sector as many workers leave, presenting the company with gaps in skills and experience. This union official goes on to reflect on the benefits of working in partnership to ensure workers get the training they need, especially those who cannot rely on regular employment:

> ‘Over the past perhaps 5 to 10 years, that kind of level of trained individual has diminished and there has been a kind of void there in terms of having high-quality workers. So, from a Scottish perspective what we’ve been looking at doing, there has been kind of slightly different approaches, is to try and push the theatre sector into accepting the people who don’t have permanent jobs, by and large work at the same theatre all year round. So, they’re very closely linked to one theatre, or in the likes of Glasgow or

> Edinburgh they'll maybe work round two or three theatres regularly trying to get a full years' work, but they're very closely linked to those theatres and spend most of their time working for them. In the freelance sector, there tends to be more of a flow and ebb of individuals, and there we've had to look more at partnerships with the likes of ITV, STV and the BBC to work together on training initiatives that give people the skills that allow them to get the jobs, or the work, I should say. [ibid]

The above is a good example of where the unions have used their resources strategically to address a specific market failure, which in this example was having the skilled workers needed to carry out the jobs in this industry. Another union representative discussed the concerted effort to engage with partners; to get various stakeholders around the table to drive the digital agenda forward and so to protect their members as the industry deals with the changes brought about by digital technologies. They said:

> 'We've had round this table here, in the boardroom here, the Equity office. We've had employers from Newsquest, STV, Romana's Group, Johnston Press - where they've all sat round the table, and they've seen what we've produced in respect to the quality of training… but they don't really engage with each other. We then have to go deal with them as individual companies to try and persuade them to then take it forward. And that's fine, we don't have a problem with that, you have to understand that environment…we just make it work, but I would say that would be the concerns that some people have.' [Union 5]

This union wants to see partners working more closely together to support the changing nature of work in their industry. Relying on the union to provide ad-hoc digital training is arguably much less effective than all the employers coming together and working out a way in which they can support the training needs of all workers in their industry. This would not only protect members in terms of equipping them with the necessary skills to carry out their roles, but also benefit the

employer in terms of being able to produce quality output and services.

In the example above, it was vital that the union brought partners together to safeguard members' jobs in the short and longer-term, but also to maintain quality within the industry. The account from this union representative outlines the challenges they face when working with employers on this, many of whom 'don't want to be dictated to by the union, or they'll want to have control over the direction that they're moving in' [ibid]. In this example, the union engaged with employers and used their expertise in the field to make the case that workers in the industry needed updated and transferable skills in order to secure work. They argued that workers need 'a range of skills that can work across the papers but also do predominantly quality work on their websites, which is…an additional area of revenue for them.' [ibid]

Against a backdrop of dwindling training budgets for many workers, unions in this sector have actively sought to bring employers together to devise ways in which they can collectively support the needs of the industry. They understand the importance of making the case that investing in and updating the skills of their workforce not only protects workers but also increases business productivity.

8.5 Alignment of priorities and building consensus

The STUC reports using various tactics to ensure that they can provide the learning opportunities demanded by their members and help support their skills and training needs. One tactic used by the STUC is the alignment of organisational objectives; that is, understanding the priorities of their partners and identifying where mutual gains can be achieved. Although the STUC and unions are pursuing their own agenda in this policy area, they employ specific tactics to achieve shared priorities. Such an approach helps them build good working relationships with partners and achieve their priorities around skills and learning. The STUC adopt an insider approach in relation to this objective, and work closely with government to develop learning opportunities that meet the demands of union members as well as contributing to the government's wider skills objectives. One STUC official

commented:

> ‘I suppose we try and identify where our objectives align so that, in a sense, you’re pushing at an open door in that respect. If you find areas where you can help organisations fulfil their objectives as well as at the same time fulfilling your own, then that can be a very powerful selling point - if I can use that term - in order to encourage organisations to engage with you. It’s very important that we understand what our organisation’s priorities are, where our focus is, in terms of its activity, and then look to see how that aligns with our activity.’ [STUC1]

One SUL respondent does make the point, however, that despite union learning being largely funded by government, ‘being part of the STUC, and the role of the STUC I think does mean that the voice is more independent, more critical, more…less likely to just agree with what’s going on, whatever it is that the government is saying.’ [SUL 1]

They go on to point out that government agencies, such as Skills Development Scotland (SDS), find themselves in a more difficult position because although they are afforded some autonomy in terms of how programmes are delivered, they do not perform the same kind of critical role as the STUC in terms of scrutinising policy and are ultimately responsible for carrying out policy on behalf of government.

Other stakeholders also use the tactic of identifying where priorities are aligned. One skills respondent commented:

> ‘Well, in the organisations that I’m involved in, you know, the…certainly the focus that I have is on making sure that people in Scotland are equipped to maximise their personal goals and contribute to Scotland’s economic success - that’s kind of my driver. So, some of that is about making sure that the learning provision that is made available publicly aligns with our economic needs, and part of it is around making sure that young people in particular, but all people, are well-informed about the learning choices that

> they make, so those are two things that are very important to me as an individual and they kind of underpin the policy direction I think that we see being taken in Scotland around funding for learning and skills.' [Skills 2]

Although one official was keen to stress that the STUC's priorities were informed by the needs of union members and that it was important that their objectives did not simply service the government's agenda, the interviews did highlight that their priorities were also developed with funding requirements in mind. This illustrates that the trade unions are creative and enterprising in accessing resources to support the learning that they want to provide. One SUL official pointed out that in some cases it is about 'understanding what the government's priorities are and [identifying] where there is overlap with what we are wanting to do and to then kind of channel it in that direction where it's relevant.' [SUL 1]

Identifying where priorities align can also help to strengthen arguments, particularly when presenting a case to government. One STUC official discussed a specific time they were asked to give evidence to a Parliamentary Committee on youth unemployment and training:

> '…the strategy would be basically to formulate what you're going to say in terms of the written submission and then you look at who's on the panel, who's on the committee, and speak to the people you think are going to be able to support your policy position…' [STUC 2]

Here, the STUC set out their position before appearing at Committee. They make their case by way of a written submission and then seek supporters, to strengthen their argument and try to influence policy decisions. It is also important to note here that the concern is not just to achieve their objectives around learning and skills and their desired policy position, but sometimes to prevent a less favourable outcome, which was identified earlier in this thesis as a proxy for influence. For example, the STUC may not always be able to achieve exactly what they want in terms of a policy decision, but they can use their knowledge and expertise to challenge the option on the table and seek amendments.

The STUC also stated in the interviews that they have been able to take a 'wider view' in areas such as apprenticeships, where the government has a political imperative and has set specific targets.[26] Supporting the apprenticeship programme is a policy priority for the STUC and is therefore an area where they look to work with government in order to achieve their objectives and use their resources to try to inform the direction of the policy:

> '…[W]e take that wider view, but we recognise that the Scottish Government has a political imperative around apprenticeships - it's made that a priority. SDS have particular targets to meet so we can support them in realising these targets in terms of numbers of apprenticeships. We're concerned about the diversity issues in relation to apprenticeships, for example. So, we've recently undertaken a project with SDS around opening up apprenticeship opportunities to a wider range of people, so women in non-traditional occupations, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities etc. And again, that is to help these organisations and meet their requirements under the public-sector equality duty. So that's a couple of examples where it is important to look at what organisation's objectives are and how they align.' [STUC 1]

Earlier in this chapter the STUC's policy priorities around apprenticeships were outlined. The contribution above highlights that the STUC uses the tactic of identifying where priorities align towards achieving their own policy objectives. By working with the government on informing apprenticeship frameworks and using their skills and experience of directly engaging with workers and delivering union learning activity, they support the government in meeting their targets around apprenticeships as part of the developing the young workforce agenda whilst supporting the needs of the workers.

[26] At the time of conducting these interviews, the Scottish Government had set a target of 30,000 new apprenticeships starts by the end of financial year 2020. This formed a key part of their youth employment strategy.

8.6. Learning activity and the lobbying agenda

8.6.1 Communicating the benefits of union learning activity

Another tactic used by the unions and the STUC to try to influence policy debates around learning and skills is to build their bargaining resources. One way they achieve this is by using case studies and the direct experience of workers who have benefited from union learning activity. One SUL official commented:

> 'I think it [union learning] has a huge role to play in organising that people don't yet appreciate. I think it's a good thing in itself for members to have the opportunity to learn. I think it's a good thing for unions to be associated with. I think it's full of positive stories and positive activity.' [SUL 1]

Effectively communicating their role in the union learning agenda is therefore a key tactic used by the STUC to demonstrate the value of their work and celebrate the success of their members. However, some question whether more needs to be done to ensure these messages are reaching a wider audience. One senior STUC official commented:

> 'I mean a number of employers and others who are really interested in this agenda have said, "I didn't really realise what you were doing. I met somebody and they told me but actually I didn't know that - you don't get that message out." Part of it is a resource issue and part of it is about where you have to devote these resources. If our focus is really ensuring that government continue to be supportive and funders continue to be supportive, others in the policy community around government agencies need to understand what we do…. A lot of our time and resources is focused on making sure that they know what we do. Maybe we don't broadcast that more widely, to a wider audience. Maybe it's a bit internalised as well, we don't look out enough.' [STUC 1]

This statement raises a number of issues for the STUC. They receive a significant amount of funding from government to sustain their union learning activity and

therefore need to keep them informed on the work they are delivering and what impact this is having on the workforce. It is therefore understandable that resource is used to ensure the government continue to be supportive of their work. However, questions can be asked on how effective this strategy is in the long-term. One of the questions is the sustainability of union learning should government funding be cut, for example, although this is not currently an issue in Scotland. Some within the union movement may feel that more resource should be used to ensure that a broader number of agencies understand the role unions play in workplace learning, and the value that they bring to this agenda. In an environment where resources are constrained, the above account from the STUC seems to suggest that they have had more of an internal focus in terms of their communication, which might be to their detriment in the longer-term.

Although this STUC official does acknowledge that perhaps more work needs to be carried out in order to ensure stakeholders outside of government understand the work that the STUC and unions do around learning and skills, arguably their participation in the Working Together Review did give them a platform to communicate their work to a much wider audience. Here, the STUC adopted more of an insider role, where they worked with partners on areas of shared interest. They actively participated in a commission which gave them the opportunity to influence policy.

This official goes on to suggest that there is a perhaps a cultural issue within unions where they do not feel comfortable 'shouting' about their successes in relation to their learning work:

> 'We kind of tend to be a wee bit sniffy sometimes about awards - that's not what we're in this for - but sometimes it's a good opportunity to make sure that people understand what you do.' [ibid]

Promoting these successes more widely could arguably give the STUC and unions more sway when engaging with decision-makers and when making the case that they add value in this policy area. This can then be presented to government and

other partners when trying to exert influence in this area of policy.

8.7 Working in partnership

8.7.1 Broadening the policy discussion around skills and learning

Working in partnership and helping to create a more open policy dialogue is another tactic used by the STUC and unions to achieve their learning and skills priorities. For the STUC, it is not simply about articulating the voice of workers or learners, it is about broadening and reframing policy debates where the voice of employers tends to be most prominent. One STUC official commented:

> 'One of the things that we do try to ensure government appreciates when they're talking about the interests of employers - talking about the interests of industrial sectors - they should be talking about them in the context not just of the owners of industry, but the people who work in industry, not just about the managers of companies, but the workers. There's a bit more work for us to do in just getting government to think about that approach of being much more of a partnership between employers and unions rather than just the interests of employers.' [STUC1]

This emphasis on developing good partnerships with stakeholders in the Scottish policy context is supported by government, as one senior Scottish Government official notes:

> 'I guess from my observation [it] would be that there's been much more of an emphasis on that in Scotland in terms of working in partnership, working in collaboration, having a much more open dialogue. My impression would be that Scotland [has] placed much more emphasis on that, and I guess you can see that in terms of the emerging Scottish approach to policy development…the importance of working with communities and allowing that to really inform what we're doing...' [Gov 2]

This willingness of the Scottish Government to work in partnership when developing policies is of benefit to actors like the STUC as it gives them the opportunity to be

part of a much more open policy dialogue, where different voices are given a platform and where there is the opportunity to influence policymakers. The nature of the policy environment in Scotland is probably more conducive to partnership working and is something that is taken advantage of by other organisations.

This approach to policy-making picks up on some of the points raised earlier in regard to the policy environment in Scotland, where the government have put in place mechanisms that one might typically associate with a coordinated market economy - consultation with stakeholders, network building, and sharing of information and expertise. These voluntary mechanisms put in place by the Scottish Government give actors like trade unions the opportunity to exert influence in the policy process. It is only through an in-depth investigation of a case such as the STUC and using learning and skills as the domain of interest and which is a devolved policy area, that these mechanisms become visible.

One skills representative also discussed the benefits of operating in the Scottish policy landscape as a small organisation:

> 'We are a tiny organisation and we will never get that much bigger than we are now. And the reason for that is our vision…is all about working in partnership with all of the other players in the learning and skills landscape and providing them with support in a facilitative way to think about how they might utilise [our organisation] in their objectives, whatever they are.' [Skills 3]

Working in partnership also allows this organisation to identify where they share common goals and where they can work together to achieve these:

> 'We had Grahame Smith [General Secretary of the STUC] as a guest at our last Board meeting, again just reinforcing those messages about how we are trying to play into the role that trade unions are undertaking in terms of the learning and skills offer to employees.' [ibid]

As discussed earlier, the benefit of having a close working relationship allows the

STUC and their partner organisations to identify where they have mutual interests and helps them work together so each can achieve their objectives. This stakeholder engagement is a huge benefit to the STUC as this gives them the opportunity not only to promote their agenda, but also to influence other organisations and strengthen their position in these policy debates. This stronger, more collective voice has the potential to give them a better bargaining position when negotiating and presenting their case to government.

This skills representative also makes the point that this partnership work with the STUC extends beyond giving learners recognition for their formal and informal learning. They go on to comment:

> '…[T]hey [STUC] would be involved in helping us shape our operational plan for the next year, reflecting back and then looking forward. So, there will be things like – we've had STUC give an input to that very specific presentation on where things are with union learning, what's happening, what are the success factors, and so on. But equally we might have as a theme at one of the meetings how do we better communicate across the education and skills landscape in a joined-up way.' [Skills 3]

The above comment demonstrates that the STUC works with partners to support them in achieving their objectives while also influencing their overall plan of work, which takes account of their own work in union learning. It also again highlights the importance of effective communication in this policy space, promoting the activity and success stories of the STUC and other key partners in this area of policy.

8.7.2 Supporting the public service reform agenda

The STUC also works closely with employers to determine what their longer-term objectives are around learning and skills in their attempts to influence policy in this area. The public service reform agenda and its impact on the skills of workers is cited as one example, where identifying the skills that workers need to support this new agenda becomes essential.

One STUC official commented on the significance of this:

> '…we can ensure that by understanding that, by working alongside employers and unions to support their members and gathering the skills to meet these objectives, then we've got objectives that align for the individual; they're able to develop their skills, they're able to move into or develop more interesting and rewarding jobs, receive better pay and conditions, higher job security, higher job satisfaction.' [STUC 1]

For the public services employer, through upskilling and reskilling, they can respond to the needs of their business. There is also acknowledgment that public services need a range of different skills. The STUC and the wider trade union movement therefore have an important role to play in supporting the skills needs of workers and helping employers deliver the services they need. This was also reflected in the government interviews which identified public service reform as one of the government's key objectives, which was discussed earlier. Key to this is collaborative working in the delivery of more effective public services, and this is something that the STUC actively pursue in their attempts to influence decision-making.

The above discussion has highlighted the various ways in which the STUC works with partners to achieve their shared objectives around learning and skills. This tactic has been used to work with both skills partners and employers on shared skills agendas. This partnership working not only helps the STUC to strengthen relationships with partners where they have common interests and communicate their ideas to a broader audience, it gives them the opportunity to present a stronger, more collective voice to government and exert influence in the decision-making process.

8.8 The STUC's strategic leadership

So far, the discussion has focused on the influence of the STUC as a collective voice. However, the interviews also highlighted how influence can be strengthened through individuals, in particular the impact of the STUC General Secretary's

strategic leadership in this policy area. When asked whether the STUC had an important voice in skills and learning debates at the government level, one SUL official commented:

> 'I think we do, but again, if I'm being honest, at that level I think a lot of it is down to [the STUC General Secretary]. And I think it helps that we do a good job and there are things to point to…' [SUL 1].

They go on to say:

> 'If he wasn't there doing that, our voice wouldn't be heard, I think….to some extent [it's] down to the individual because [the STUC General Secretary] has always had an interest in this area; he is obviously very knowledgeable in this area, and I think if you maybe had a different General Secretary with a different outlook then it might have been a different story. And it could be again. Hopefully not, because hopefully we would have embedded ourselves so much in the STUC structure that we will continue, but I think a lot of the influence that we have or the STUC has, is a lot to do with [the STUC General Secretary]….' [ibid]

The General Secretary's visibility is a factor in terms of exerting influence across a range of platforms, including UKCES, the Wood Commission, SDS Board and the Working Together Review. What became apparent during the interviews is the key role played by the STUC's General Secretary in driving the union learning agenda. This is acknowledged by skills representatives who work closely with the STUC on learning:

> 'I mean in England the General Secretary of the TUC will say things about skills but it's not a particularly big concern for them whereas plainly skills is [sic] a really big issue for [the STUC General Secretary], and that makes a big difference to its standing in terms of how Scottish TUC front up to this, you know, above and beyond simply saying, "Oh, union learning's a nice thing and…" So that's very interesting and it's plain that in a way that's a

distinctive element of the sort of Scottish dimension.' [Skills 1]

Having a General Secretary with such a high profile and leadership undoubtedly gives the STUC opportunities to influence decision-making. However, having access to policymakers is not in itself enough to exert influence. As the previous discussion highlighted, the STUC's position is strengthened through the resources they bring to the table, including access to a significant proportion of the workforce and an understanding of their skills needs, as well as knowledge and experience of learning activity at the workplace level. These are valuable resources, as was highlighted in the interviews with government officials; they strengthen the STUC's position when accessing decision-makers and attempting to influence learning and skills policy. Whether this then allows them to achieve their priorities in this policy area will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter on outcomes.

The STUC General Secretary's strategic leadership also raises important questions around the effectiveness of the organisation, and this strand of work when they are no longer in post.[27] Over a number of years, the presence of the General Secretary on many high-profile platforms has furthered the interests of the STUC. In representing the learning needs of workers and individual unions, it is therefore important to acknowledge how much this particular individual exerts influence on decision-makers, and what the impact would be on union learning when they are no longer in post. One skills representative goes on to comment:

> '…I see [the STUC General Secretary] as a real champion of learning from a skills perspective, from a trade union perspective. So, he sits at many influential tables and is able to add that union voice in a way that is really tangible in Scotland… I guess I see it now cos they're tables that I sit at, but that to me was, I think, it's never been more visible than it is with [their] pursuit of that agenda.' [Skills 4]

For another skills representative, the General Secretary's value to the organisation

[27] The STUC appointed a new General Secretary in 2020.

is very much reflective of the status they have within government circles:

> '…I think that they are treated as being a key – they might feel they still get the short end of the straw [in terms of government funding], as do we financially - but I still think in terms of a public profile and a policy profile, then I think the STUC is actually given quite a lot of space in Scotland.' [Skills 3]

However, this also presents a challenge to the unions going forward. The General Secretary has established such a presence in this space and has made learning such a priority for the STUC, there is inevitably some concern around the direction that this work might take when they are no longer in post. However, if we pick up on the previous point that referenced the nature of the policy landscape in Scotland, it can be argued that if the STUC continues to make union learning a priority, commits resources to this work, and continues to demonstrate their value, they will be offered a seat at the table with government and other stakeholders. They operate in a policy space where a number of voices are given a platform; they have demonstrated the value they bring to this policy area through their union learning activity. This will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter on outcomes. One of the key considerations to take away from this discussion is the effectiveness of strategic leadership and engagement in driving forward the union learning agenda, regardless of who is leading the organisation. Undoubtedly, there is agency in leader choices. However, in terms of the STUC achieving their skills and learning priorities, the strategic leadership role is clearly a key factor.

8.9 Using existing channels/structures to exert influence

8.9.1 Memorandum of Understanding with Scottish Government

The STUC use both formal and informal channels to engage with key decision-makers and try to exert policy influence. In 2002, they signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the then Scottish Executive and in November 2007 signed a new MoU with the incoming SNP Government. This was updated in 2011 and again in 2015. The MoU outlines a formal mechanism for ongoing dialogue

about shared priorities for economic development, public sector improvement and social partnership. The MoU from 2015 states:

> 'The aim of the Memorandum of Understanding is to formalise relations with the STUC, ensuring effective co-operation between the Government and the STUC and adding value to the development and implementation of public policy.' (Scottish Government 2015b)

The MoU represents a more formal channel through which the STUC can access the Scottish Government and senior civil servants within government. It is a valuable resource for the STUC when attempting to influence policy around learning and skills. A key point of interest here is how the STUC secured this MoU with the Scottish Government, and how they use it. One STUC official remarked on the 'long-standing engagement' that they had developed with the Scottish Government which has given them the opportunity the sell the benefits of union learning:

> 'What do we talk about? We talk about what we do, we talk about what we can offer, we talk about how that fits into broader policy objectives that government have, or has, but we also talk about what we think the government should be doing and what I said before about bringing that perspective - both in terms of our Congress policy of our affiliates, but also learners and the workplace into that discussion…. Building up these relationships that we have, we attempt to influence that at the earliest possible stage.' [STUC 1]

The STUC actively seek to build these relationships with government and other partners in order to bring to influence to bear at the earlier, agenda-setting stages of the policy process. This gives them the opportunity to communicate their policy preferences and to influence the direction of policy. The STUC seek to build relationships with key stakeholders and embed these in a more formal context, thus helping to make them more sustainable.

The 'long-standing engagement' referenced by this STUC official can be viewed as

the foundation for the MoU. After many years of engaging with government, representing the views of learners and the workplace, and communicating the benefits of union learning activity, the STUC were able to formalise their engagement with government and work together on areas of shared interest.

This official goes on to comment:

> 'There's an interesting phrase in the Memorandum of Understanding, it talks about something called continuous dialogue. And one of things which we really seek to ensure is that by having that continuous dialogue, we understand, and we know when government is thinking about particular policy changes, if it's going to refresh its skills strategy, if it's going to set up a commission on this, or a commission on that, where its priorities are and how they are going to realise these priorities, or how they are going to meet these priorities. It means we can feed into that.' [ibid]

The MoU allows the STUC to have continuous dialogue with government and the opportunity to understand their policy priorities. It helps the STUC identify where they can work together on areas of shared interest and gives them an insight into the direction of policy, allowing them the time to develop a more informed and effective policy position that they can present to government.

8.9.2 Using collective bargaining arrangements to widen accessing to learning

Another way in which the STUC and unions seek to exert influence in this area of policy is by using existing collective bargaining arrangements to deliver more learning opportunities to workers. The interviews highlighted the growing importance of union learning as a member service. This however was not overstated; stakeholders still recognised the key role that bargaining activities continue to have within the trade union movement, especially in negotiations over learning activity for members. One STUC official discussed the benefits of using existing collective arrangements to ensure that as many members as possible can access learning opportunities. They go on to discuss how some unions:

> '…rely […] on their traditional collective bargaining procedures and processes that they've already got. So, if they've got something round about terms and conditions, they just move that over to, well access to learning, access to some kind of education opportunities. How do we involve our members in that? The good thing about that kind of approach is if you deal with it on a sort of collective bargaining approach then it sweeps up just about everybody in the workplace, whereas all too often learning can be put on or training could be put on and some individuals will miss out on that if they've got caring responsibilities or whatever, or they're not just quite switched on to learning at that stage they'll be left behind. So yes, collective bargaining round about the learning agenda is quite important to some unions...' [STUC 3]

This shows how a collective bargaining approach can help unions meet the demand for learning from their members. This more historical, collective approach adopted by unions where written agreements are in place benefits not only the learners but also the employers, as unions are able to deliver learning at a time and place that benefit both. This approach also has wider benefits. Where these arrangements exist, positive relationships have often developed over many years to overcome other workplace issues - a theme that will be explored in greater detail in the chapter on outcomes.

This discussion on collective bargaining illustrates the tactic of embedding learning into existing workplace processes and practices, helping to make learning activity more sustainable within union structures and thrive outside of funded projects. It also demonstrates the ways in which the STUC and unions use and expand upon existing formal and informal processes - which are concerned with issues outside of learning - to capture learning activity.

8.10 Summary

This section has outlined the various tactics used by the STUC to achieve their policy priorities around learning and skills. Tactics range from using their distinctive voice

and presenting credible and informed arguments to influence policy dialogue, to mitigating the employer voice to ensure that needs of learners are represented; this, by addressing training gaps left by employers and using the strategic leadership of their General Secretary to promote the benefits of unions' involvement in this policy area. These are just some of the tactics used by the STUC to exert influence in the policy process.

To understand how effective these tactics have been in helping the STUC achieve their policy priorities and exert influence on skills and learning policy, the next chapter will outline which outcomes they have achieved and will also consider whether influence over learning and skills has given the STUC a platform to exert influence in other policy areas where they have an interest.

9. Outcomes achieved in learning and skills and beyond

PART 1

9.1 Introduction

Policy influence is concerned with changing policy, so it is important to measure impact. This however is challenging for researchers and presents three distinct problems, according to Dür (2008b). Firstly, influence can be exercised through a variety of means, for example, lobbying and representation on Committees. Secondly, researchers are faced with the issue of counteractive lobbying which makes measurement difficult. Here, actors such as trade unions may not achieve their preferred policy position but are able to prevent a less favourbale outcome, which can also be viewed as influence. Thirdly, influence can occur at different stages of the policy process: the early agenda-setting stage; when decisions are taken; or when decision are implemented.

In the previous chapters the STUC's key priorities were outlined, along with the various tactics they use to try to exert influence on learning and skills policy. But in order to assess the influence of the STUC in this policy area, it is important to explore whether in fact these tactics have helped them to achieve their priorities around learning and skills, and also to understand whether influence in this policy area has given unions the opportunity to exert influence in other policy areas where they have an interest. It is also important to highlight again that while much of the existing literature refers to measuring policy influence, this research does not take this approach. This study builds on the policy literature on how influence is assessed and proceeds from a more complex assessment of influence that eschews simple measures that do not encompass all potential dimensions of influence. Instead, it seeks to assess the influence of the STUC and unions on learning and skills policy, and is interested in how influence is perceived and understood. The findings in this chapter highlight the nuanced nature of influence. These are not presented as an objective measure of influence, but in fact as an insight of what influence looks like.

The political science literature discussed earlier highlights the many different

approaches to measuring policy influence. Influence as a concept is nuanced and presents researchers with many challenges in terms of its measurement. As previously discussed, a common approach in the literature is to measure influence in terms of achieving observable outcomes or policy goals achieved. This was referenced in chapter 4 which considered how researchers might conceptualise power and measure influence. Here it was highlighted that evidence of outcomes is usually presented in a fairly simplistic way where Actor A achieved outcome X, and is therefore seen to be influential. This thesis, however, presents the case this is too simplistic and that influence is much more nuanced. Informed by Lukes (2005[1974]) and his three dimensions of power, this thesis sets out a framework for policy influence (Table 1) that outlines a broader conception of influence in the policy process.

For the purpose of this research, outcomes can be understood and identified not only in terms of the STUC achieving their specific priorities around learning and skills, but including also where priorities have been achieved in part. Where the STUC and unions have been consulted on policy decisions or represented in forums with key decision-makers can also be understood as outcomes. These are examples of places where they can speak and be heard, which may deliver influence but this is difficult to measure and has to be considered in the context of other groups trying to influence in the same space. An outcome can also be identified where the STUC and unions were able prevent an outcome or policy position that would negatively impact them and their learning and skills priorities. All of these scenarios can be understood as proxies of influence. The outcomes that the STUC have achieved in relation to learning and skills will now be discussed in the context of the framework set out above – this framework also forms part of the model for assessing influence (pillar 4). This helps to demonstrate that outcomes can be achieved at different stages of the policy process - not just at the end of the process when a policy priority or outcome has been achieved. Following this, evidence from the interviews will be used to assess whether influence on learning and skills has enabled unions to exert influence in other policy areas. Pillars 3 (the policy process) and 4 (outcomes)

from the model for assessing influence will be applied to interpret the data and address the following research questions:

3. To what extent has the union learning agenda given unions in Scotland an influential voice on skills and learning policy?

4. Has unions' engagement in the learning and skills policy sphere generated broader policy influence?

9.2 Outcome 1: Continued funding to support union learning activity

9.2.1 Continued funding from the Scottish Government to support learner needs

The STUC has received funding from the Scottish Government to help sustain learning activity and support the skills needs of their members over a significant period of time both to build capacity to engage in union-led learning and to deliver union-led learning. In terms of the framework for policy influence outlined above, this is an example of where the STUC and unions have achieved a specific outcome or policy priority. In 1999, the STUC established the Lifelong Learning Unit with funding from Scottish Enterprise to support unions in accessing learning and development opportunities across Scotland. In 2000, The STUC obtained funding from the then Scottish Executive to help unions promote their lifelong learning activity. This was achieved through the Scottish Union Learning Fund (SULF). Additional funding was received in 2002 to support an Adult Pathfinder Project, which ran until 2005 and was then replaced by an Everyday Skills project. The Scottish Government provided the match funding for the STUC's successful application to the European Social Fund (ESF) in 2007, resulting in the ESF Scottish Fund for union learning. This is further evidence of the government's commitment to the union learning agenda. When SULF concluded in 2011, funding from the Scottish Government and ESF led to the Scottish Union Learning and Development Funds. The ESF programme finished in 2015.

The success of SULF projects was highlighted by Findlay *et al*. (2006), with evidence that this funding had enhanced the capacity of unions' learning provision. This

research helped to support the establishment of the Scottish Union Learning (SUL) Team in 2008. With dedicated funding from the then Scottish Executive, it represented a new structure for union learning in Scotland. SULF projects enabled unions to deliver workplace learning in addition to existing provision - learning that was both job-related and non-job-related, accredited and non-accredited, and that reached non-traditional as well as traditional learners, providing lifelong learning opportunities (Findlay *et al*. 2006). This funding commitment has continued, with £2.26 million secured over the period 2014-2017, and a further £100,000 to support Fair Work projects. The funding arrangement for 2017-2019 was £2.26 million and consisted of core funding, the Learning Fund and the Development Fund. This long-standing financial support from the Scottish Government underpinned the STUC's learning activity and their continued commitment to this work, which stretches back to the late 1990s.[28] Until recently, the UK Government had displayed a similar commitment to union learning in England, investing an annual £12 million to fund this activity. In September 2020 however they announced that the Union Learning Fund (ULF), established in 1998, would be cut and that funds would be moved into a National Skills Fund.[29]

The Scottish Government also supports the STUC and unions with a number of distinct learning initiatives. These include inputs such as their work aimed at promoting Modern Apprenticeships and informing apprenticeship frameworks, as well as in developing workplace literacies provision accommodating the needs of workers outside of working hours. Through the learning team, the STUC has also worked with government around the National ESOL Panel; this no longer exists, but was a forum for SUL and the unions to inform the development of ESOL learning and influence how funding should be distributed, representing an important avenue

[28] At the time of writing up this research, SUL had anticipated that the Scottish Government will continue to provide funding for Scottish Union Learning from April 2021 until March 2023, to be approved on an annual basis.

[29] https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/feb/06/uk-ministers-accused-of-settling-scores-by-axing-union-adult-learning-fund

of support for migrant workers in particular.[30] Government funding has also enabled the STUC to achieve outputs, including case studies demonstrating unions' role in effective skills utilisation in the workplace (Findlay *et al*. 2011). These are all examples of how government funding has helped to support STUC priorities around learning and skills.

The continued funding from government for union learning activity over a sustained period of time has given the STUC and unions the opportunity to develop their engagement with government, promote their policy priorities, build their influencing capacity and demonstrate their value in this policy space.

9.2.2 Funding arrangements that help formalise engagement with Government

Earlier in this chapter, funding was identified as a key priority for the STUC, and a means to service the skills and learning needs of their members. The various ways in which the STUC attempt to lobby government was also discussed in the chapter on tactics, including effectively communicating the benefits of union learning and the positive outcomes achieved for workers. The STUC's engagement with policymakers and their ability to demonstrate their value in this policy area is a key factor in securing continued funding to support this work. Government funding helps the STUC to provide learning opportunities for members, this also being a key component of their engagement with government. Having these funding arrangements in place allows unions to work more closely with government, thus giving them the opportunity to influence outcomes around skills and learning, as well as around other workplace issues. One government official discussed the significance of the funding from the Scottish Government:

> 'It's not a huge amount of money but it's definitely got…it's quite a symbolic part of the relationship between the government and the trade union movement.' [Gov 4]

The level of the funding the STUC receives is not necessarily the most important

[30] To support the acquisition of English language skills for those for whom English is a second or other language, as part of the government's wider participation agenda.

aspect of their relationship and engagement with government. As this official has highlighted, it is symbolic of their relationship with government and demonstrates the government's continued commitment to working with unions on the learning and skills agenda. This willingness to work with unions can be viewed as a proxy for influence, as the framework for influence sets out. Here, the STUC and unions are afforded time with government through their engagement in the union learning agenda and the provision of learning and skills initiatives. This gives them the opportunity to exert influence and best serve the needs of workers.

9.2.3 Leveraging additional funding for union learning

While such funding has been crucial for union learning activity at both the Scottish and UK level - funding has recently been cut in England as referenced above - unions cannot rely on this and are increasingly supplementing this with additional resources to help leverage other funding opportunities. One SUL representative commented:

> 'Scottish Union Learning and the unions have become quite heavily involved in some other partnerships… [where] they are able to explore different models of funding for learning that we're unable to facilitate [on our own]' [SUL 2].

Working in partnership is key for the STUC and unions not just in terms of building networks, promoting their work and meeting their objectives, but it also helps them tap into potential streams of funding that may not be available to them as the sole applicant. The sustainability of this learning activity, however, remains an issue. Findings also demonstrate that the STUC understand the importance of the people and partnerships supporting their learning activity:

> '…you do have individuals in key workplaces who see the importance of union learning, and they are important '*cos* they drive things forward, but they can come and go and that's a challenge for unions as well. And I'm sure it's a challenge on the union side, where individuals move on to other things as well in union learning, or just finish up, you know? So…for me it's about sustainability with these relationships.' [STUC 3]

It is one is important to highlight once again a point raised by an STUC official, that the STUC and unions must continue to promote the success stories and value they bring to the learning agenda - not just to government, but within the trade union movement as well. This STUC senior official commented that perhaps the unions have not done enough to promote their role in this policy agenda and the outcomes they have achieved for learners. Communicating their successes and the value they bring to this agenda is vital not only in terms of obtaining funding but also in sustaining union learning activity and developing support networks within the union movement.

9.2.4 Building learning capacity

Working in partnership and building these support networks over time has allowed the STUC and unions to build their learning capacity (and influencing potential), demonstrate their value in this policy space, and access additional funding to sustain their work, thereby continuing to provide learning the opportunities demanded by members.

Interviews with other stakeholders also highlighted the effectiveness of the STUC's lobbying of government, which has helped them to secure continued funding and given them the platform to exert influence in this policy area. One skills representative commented:

> '…I think in times of constraint, I don't think the Scottish Government would continue to fund union learning if it didn't believe it had an important voice in this policy area.' [Skills 1]

The STUC's voice in the learning agenda and the expertise they bring is also beneficial in terms of their relationships with employers. One skills representative commented that unions and employers should be 'joined at the hip' on skills issues 'because it's beneficial for the business and beneficial for the individual…' [Skills 4]. This interviewee to foreground the central role that unions play, both in supporting the needs of business in terms of upskilling their existing workforce as well as supporting individuals who are entering the job market or indeed transitioning into

other roles.

It can be argued that this partnership working gives trade unions the opportunity to demonstrate their value in this policy space to a wider audience. The STUC and unions are key partners, along with employers, in making sure that they are supporting the skills needs of individuals and businesses to support sustainable economic growth - a key priority for the Scottish Government. Union learning activity has given the STUC a platform to show how well they can deliver in this policy area:

> 'I think we've developed a partnership. I think we've come on a journey from initially convincing government… I wouldn't overstate that… I mean, I'm not saying it was a really hard job, but I mean, I think, we still had to convince Ministers and civil servants and others that we really did add value to what was already there, and it was worth investing.' [STUC 1]

By building specific-issue partnerships, the STUC have been able to exert influence in this policy area. This has allowed them to demonstrate that they can deliver on specific skills and learning priorities, whether that's supporting adult learners with their everyday skills needs or informing apprenticeship frameworks.

The acknowledged by other stakeholders of the STUC's experience of delivering tangible outcomes in this policy area gives the STUC the opportunity to influence at government level:

> 'Yeah, I think it probably has. Erm, because unless you actually do it…I mean one of the great problems with skills policy is that everyone will talk about it till the cows come home, you know, everyone will say how really important it is. The key thing is people doing anything, and I think you know STUC's Union Learn has been a success because it's quite vibrant…it plainly has engaged a lot of people from the grassroots, and because it's enabled the STUC to demonstrate certain sorts of things are possible, and I think you can only…research will only get you so far. At the end of the day, practical

demonstration that you can do 'x' really matters.' [Skills 1]

Other capacity outcomes should also be highlighted. Funding also helps to support the development of union learning representatives, by equipping reps with the skills they need to identify the learning needs of workers. It helps to support project workers within the individual unions who are responsible for managing union learning projects. Each of these union roles expands the complement of learning experts and feeds a contribution into policy implementation and development in this space. The STUC and unions' role in policy development and implementation is a proxy for influence, as set out in the framework for influence (Table 1), and are examples of outcomes that occur at different stages of the policy process. The STUC and unions' development in policy development in particular, highlights the more nuanced forms of influence than can take place in the earlier stages of the policy process where agenda and decision-making can be shaped. Crucially, the intelligence from union learning representatives and project workers informs strategic deliberations around skills and learning and aids the STUC's influencing capacity in this policy area. Promoting union learning success stories is also important when trying to influence policymakers, especially politicians.

9.3 Outcome 2: Developing partnership with government around the learning agenda

9.3.1 Driving forward the union learning agenda

The Scottish Government acknowledge that learning is a key component of their working relationship with the STUC:

> 'In terms of initiating it, definitely I think it comes from the union side. I think [learning activity] it's such a kind tangible part of that relationship with the union movement, with the STUC, that it becomes a very valuable part of that relationship. Quite often there will be…. I've been to things like the kind of the Scottish Government-STUC six-monthly bilaterals, or whatever it's called, and I've quite often been in that partly because the union side want it [union learning] on the agenda, but sometimes because government decides it wants

> it on the agenda, we both want it on the agenda - because it's tangible. There's [sic] other things that you'll talk about, and you'll find the unions are more in a stakeholder, lobbying kind of role, whereas in this it feels like it's part of that, but it's a kind of thing that we're working on together. I don't know if the unions would feel that way about it, but that's certainly how it feels like to me. So, yeah, definitely initiated by the unions but then it becomes - if you're going to do it - it becomes a tangible part of the relationship that you can actually work together on and make progress on so it kind of grows in terms of its influence in the whole relationship between trade unions and the government.' [Gov 4]

This comment highlights the way in which the STUC has adopted an insider approach in terms of its direct engagement with government on learning and skills, where they work together to achieve shared objectives. The government official's comment about the lobbying or stakeholder role that the STUC adopts in other policy areas reflects more of an outsider approach or critical position that they adopt in relation to other workplace issues where they have an interest. As discussed earlier, the decision on whether to adopt an insider or an outsider approach with government is a tactic used by the STUC and unions to try to exert influence over the decision-making process and varies according to on the issue at hand. The government has a close working relationship with the STUC and unions on union learning. This relationship has been built and developed as the STUC and unions have been able to demonstrate the value that they bring to this area of policy, and is an example of outcome they have achieved. As set out in the framework for policy influence (Table 1), the union learning agenda has given the STUC and unions the opportunity to be part on the on-going discussion on learning and skills policy and improve their influence over times, and move closer to achieving their policy priorities in this space. This again serves to highlight that achieving a specific outcome is not the only proxy for influence. Other manifestations of influence, such as being part of policy discussion, building networks, taking part in consultations, are also important and help the STUC and

unions to build their influencing capacity.

9.3.2 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Scottish Government

The STUC's MoU with the Scottish Government also illustrate a partnership approach. This is used both to influence policy (as was discussed in the previous chapter on tactics) and are also evidence of policy influence as this is a specific outcome they have achieved. These agreements are also a means by which the STUC can access key government decision-makers and potentially influence learning and skills policy. So, although do concrete policy position has been achieved here, the MoU is an example of an outcome that help the STUC and unions access key decisions makers and move towards achieving their priorities in this policy space, as set out in the framework for policy influence (Table 1).

Although the STUC have a formal mechanism for engaging with government on areas of shared interest, a key issue for them is one of capacity:

> 'It's very, very rare that you actually have to invoke that Memorandum of Understanding to engage with officials - they want to engage with you. It's really resource constraints at the STUC that prevent us for doing as much with government as we would like to do.' [STUC 2]

This highlights the point that regardless of the mechanisms in place to engage with government on a range of issues, if the STUC and unions do not have the capacity and resources to work with government, they will have less opportunity to influence policy around skills and learning, as well as wider policy issues. It also highlights the influence they have on government where a MoU is in place, but is not necessarily required to engage with key decision-makers in government. This is another illustration of the voluntary mechanisms that the Scottish Government has put in place that would be typically associated with a coordinated market economy. Although formal mechanisms are in place here, the STUC also uses informal means, such as the informal contacts they have built with government over time to access key decision-makers and influence policy outcomes. Here, the STUC uses both formal and informal means to try to achieve their policy priorities in skills and

learning. This again highlights how the State can help actors like trade unions to exert influence in the policy process.

9.4 Outcome 3: Demonstrating value of union learning activity

9.4.1 Upskilling the workforce

The previous chapter demonstrated the importance of communicating the value of the STUC and unions' role in learning activity, value which is acknowledged by government:

> 'Yes, I think it's important for everybody to be upskilling, so the fact that Scottish Union Learning are trying to do that and provide a facility for people to do it outwith the normal college course or to fit in with their work, there's definite value in what they're doing.' [Gov 3]

The STUC and the unions occupy a unique position compared to other stakeholders in this policy space because of their close proximity to workers, as was touched upon earlier in the discussion on tactics. The government recognise the value of the STUC's learning initiatives, where they widen access to learning opportunities by offering courses at or near their place of work.

9.4.2 Value of union learning activity to business

Findings highlight that the government also recognises the value of union learning to businesses because of the STUC's and unions' sectoral knowledge and experience of delivering learning opportunities over a number of years. Another government official referenced further the value that the STUC brings to this area of policy:

> '… I think there are a number of examples of successful environments where there have been successes through trade union learning which have added real value to some of the businesses because … in some contexts, you have a knowledge and experience in the trade unionist who's promoting that, pushing that and creating an appetite amongst employees that would be less successful if it was coming solely from an employer's perspective. It's that collaborative approach which I suppose reduces barriers, gains commitment,

so they can really drive forward.' [Gov 2]

Here, the unions use their knowledge and expertise which was discussed previously in the section on tactics, to push the learning agenda in a workplace context and upskill workers; this arguably would be less successful if purely focused on meeting the needs of employers. The STUC adopt the role of facilitator and can help to support the skills needs of workers and those of employers, which is one of their key policy priorities.

The STUC's role in workplace learning initiatives has also helped them engage with employers in a more productive way, which is another one of their policy priorities. One skills representative involved in adult education commented:

> 'I think there's been a clear demonstration that it's allowed them to work with employers in a different way, and to have discussions on learning and skills that sit alongside and influence industrial relations discussion[s] but are separate enough that the two can continue on in different ways.' [Skills 2]

This point was picked up previously in the interview with one of the transport union officials who commented that, despite any industrial action or issues that may be taking place, union learning activity remains unaffected thus demonstrating the relative independence and hence resilience of union-led learning has both within the union and with the employer. Here the STUC have some indirect influence on employers through their positive engagement with workers on workplace learning initiatives. This is another example of an outcome for the STUC and unions, where they have been able to use their role in union learning to support a positive relationship with employers. The union engagement on skills and learning issues also helps to facilitate an on-going dialogue with employers and gives the STUC and unions the opportunity to improve their influencing capacity and highlight the value that they bring in this area. This knowledge and experience can then be used to start wider conversations, and this will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

9.4.3 Learning agenda supporting workers at risk of redundancy

Another employer also discussed how the provision of learning and development opportunities for staff is one of the company's main objectives around skills and learning. For this employer, recent site closures meant that there was an immediate need for learning and development opportunities, not only to upskill workers, but to improve their employability and allow them to compete in the job market. They discussed how learning and development is not a company strategy, but a course of action needed because of their current circumstances. They stated:

> 'It's what we decided to do as a site as a result of change [that] we're going through' [Employer 2].

Here, the provision of learning opportunities became a necessity to support the existing workforce, as well as those facing redundancy and requiring support to re-enter the job market. These activities were supported by the union and Skills Development Scotland (SDS). It is also important to highlight that in this example the individuals affected were skilled, but found themselves in the position where they needed to refresh or acquire additional skills. Here, the STUC and the union used their existing contacts with government to apply pressure on Ministers and help secure funding to support the training needs of workers:

> 'I mean the first most important thing was to secure a PACE[31] presence on the site because that's been invaluable in terms of actually having somebody there when you need them, somebody who can look over your CV, somebody that can talk to you about interviews, somebody that can talk to you about career management…' [Employer 2]

This example has demonstrated that the STUC, through their engagement with workplace learning, were able to support workers who were facing redundancy. They worked with employers and SDS to support the skills needs of those workers

[31] Partnership Action for Continuing Employment (PACE) is the Scottish Government's initiative dedicated to helping individuals and employers with the advice and support they need when faced with redundancy.

who were already highly skilled in their particular profession, and help them to secure other employment. So, although the STUC and unions could not necessarily protect these workers from redundancy, they provided support to these workers to ensure they were better equipped to compete in the job market and gain future employment. This is another example of an outcome outlined in the framework for policy influence, where the STUC and unions have arguably prevented a less favourable outcome for these working through the provision of skills support.

9.5 Outcome 4: Helping to meet government objectives

Another outcome that the STUC have achieved through union-led learning is helping the government meets its own objectives, particularly in supporting their skills strategy. This was highlighted by one government official:

> 'I think things have progressed over recent years from where we were looking at some of the learning that was on-going; [it] was very much of a social learning: camera club, conversational Spanish, things that they wanted for going on their holidays sort of thing. And there was no evidence of upskilling and accredited learning and we've made a push for accredited learning, so that there's a value in what's being done, and it's not being used just for social purposes, but it is meeting the government's objectives in the longer term.' [Gov 3]

As one senior STUC official commented earlier, it is this kind of 'social learning' that has been a hook for many individuals to engage in further learning. For many workers who have not been engaged in this activity for a number of years, the opportunities facilitated by the STUC and unions are a pathway back into learning. The 'social learning' described above was commonplace when SUL was established in 2008, but this has progressed over the years, with more of an emphasis on qualifications, accreditation and upskilling, and working with partners such as Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) to ensure that learners get the recognition to help them progress.

Part 1 of the findings of this study has outlined the various outcomes the STUC and

unions have achieved in skills and learning policy. This includes continued funding from government to support the learning and skills needs of their members and developing partnership with the Scottish Government around the learning agenda. The STUC and unions have also been able to demonstrate the value of union learning activity and have helped government meet its objectives, particularly in supporting their skills strategy. They have also helped to support the skills needs of those workers at risk of redundancy.

Turning back again to the framework for policy influence that was presented at the beginning of this chapter, all of the outcomes discussed above demonstrate the influence that the STUC and unions have been able to exert in this policy space. In some cases, they have achieved their policy priorities in skills and learning. In others, they have helped to prevent a less favourable policy position or were able to build networks, access key decision-makers and demonstrate the value of their role in this policy area. This last point is particularly important as it gives the STUC and unions the opportunity to build their influencing capacity over time.

PART 2

The previous section outlined the various policy outcomes the STUC have achieved through their engagement in workplace learning and skills initiatives. The next section will discuss whether influence around learning and skills has enabled the STUC and unions to exert influence policy more broadly.

9.6 Outcome 5: The STUC as key partners in wider workplace issues

9.6.1 Key partners in decision-making process

Earlier in this chapter there was a discussion acknowledging the key part that learning plays in STUC's relationship with government. It was noted that the learning agenda is driven by the STUC and unions who use their knowledge and expertise to exert influence beyond learning and skills policy. One government official discussed the nature of their partnership with the STUC:

> 'I would kind of go back to the response that we gave to an earlier question:

> the STUC are key partners anyway, you would always be asking them about workforce issues, about industrial issues, and the fact that they have got expertise in union learning because they are delivering that as well, I don't think it opens doors, it adds a perspective. But I guess there might be some particular examples if you're in a meeting which is ostensibly about union learning when other issues can be raised, but on the whole, I think of course we would be talking to the unions anyway around this set of issues…' [Gov 1]

It is worth highlighting here that government view the STUC as key partners, regardless of their work around union learning, although they do acknowledge that their expertise in learning and skills is a valuable resource. The STUC and unions' role in this agenda has helped them build a partnership with government over a period of time, which in turn has given them the opportunity to exert influence – one of the scenarios in the framework for policy influence (Table 1). A key outcome for the STUC when they engage with government around skills and learning issues is that there is a willingness to talk about wider workplace issues. The knowledge and expertise of the STUC and unions gives them the opportunity to exert influence more broadly. It is also worth noting here that this is not always the case at the UK-level, and the partnership that the STUC have managed to build with government over learning and a wider range of issues is to some extent a function of the nature of the devolution settlement. As highlighted earlier by one government official, there is a commitment within Scottish Government to partnership, consultation and open dialogue when developing policy. This again illustrates the mechanisms put in place by government, which give actors like trade unions the opportunity to influence the policy process.

When asked whether the STUC's engagement with workplace learning activity had led to broader policy influence, another government official commented:

> '…I'm not sure that it has had that sort of impact in the context of Scottish Government, but I'd be open to the suggestion that there was that sort of 'halo effect' in relation to I suppose to some different employers or employee

organisations.' [Gov 2]

The difference in perspective from these government officials is perhaps a reflection of how closely they have each worked with the STUC on learning issues, with the second official earlier describing their 'liaison role with the main business organisations and with the STUC' within the Business Directorate of the Scottish Government. They later go on to discuss their work with the STUC on the Working Together Review and the recommendations on improving the ways in which employers and trade unions engage over industrial relations issues. From an STUC point of view, however, it is significant that the government acknowledge that they 'find it very hard to conceive of a table that they're not at, as it were…' [Gov 2] The STUC, therefore, are considered key partners in a broad range of policy areas, not just learning. Another key point to highlight here is that although this government official may not be able to identify specific examples of broader influence from the STUC's engagement in union learning, they are responsible for ensuring the government is 'honouring the letter and spirit of a Memorandum of Understanding' between themselves and the STUC, and therefore the government's commitment to working with the STUC and unions on areas of shared interest [ibid]. So, although this government official has not cited a specific example of influence here, the MoU does give the STUC the opportunity to raise both learning and wider workplace issues. This is one of the scenarios of influence outlined in the framework (see Table 1).

It is important to highlight once again that achieving specific outcomes/policy positions is not the only indication of influence. The fact that the STUC are viewed as key partners and are consulted on various policy issues does reflect their broader influence. They continue to have a seat at the table when decisions are made. This includes informing apprenticeships frameworks and workplace literacy provision and extends to representation on the Working Together Review and the Wood Commission, which will be discussed in greater detail later. It can be argued that learning is so intrinsic to the relationship between government and the STUC and

has become so established that the STUC does not now need to rely wholly on their role in workplace learning to exert influence on broader policy issues. As acknowledged earlier, they are already viewed as key partners by government. What learning does give the STUC, however, is a platform to demonstrate their knowledge and expertise in this policy area. The bilateral meeting with the First Minister and senior civil servants is just one example of a forum where they have the opportunity to influence decision-making on a broad range of workplace and labour market policies and issues.

9.7 Outcome 6: Supporting workforce development

9.7.1 Investing in the current and future skills needs of the workforce

Employers acknowledged that union learning not only gives the company the opportunity to support their workforce and help develop the relevant skilled individuals needed to keep them 'moving forward', but this learning also has wider benefits for the workforce and unions. One employer commented:

> 'I think trade unions need people to be able to keep skillsets and go and get some further education. It's the next wave of individuals, if you like, that's going [to] be coming through to help better themselves, be able to help their trade union members get the right…get good deals and secure future work and employment, to be quite frank. So, if you invest in your people then you're gonna hopefully help them secure some futures…' [Employer 1].

This employer highlights the benefits of union learning for workers, employers and trade unions. Workers benefit in terms of upskilling and improving their employability, unions benefit by supporting the needs of workers and attracting potential members and employers benefit from having a productive, engaged and skilled workforce. This comment demonstrates that this employer understands what union learning can deliver. They understand that supporting the skills needs of the workforce helps to develop the business in terms of productivity but can also help with staff retention.

This employer also goes on to discuss how workplace learning has opened a space for them to engage on other issues:

> 'I suppose is the question you're asking, by having this interaction [around learning], does that allow us to talk about other things, [make it] easier or more open? ...! wouldn't say it could harm it…well I suppose it's helped it. It would help it. I think [the employer] …as a whole has actively tried to over the number of years, to introduce modern working practices and things where there's been lots and lots of discussion over things like starting times and working hours… I generalise that any time you can get the union members and that around a table with the management, then it can help to socialise. And if you get more interaction then I would say logically you'd like to think that that would help relationships.' [ibid]

These findings suggest that the employer recognises that the good relationships built with the unions around learning have helped with wider workplace issues, including negotiating terms and conditions. This is an example of where the STUC and unions have been able to use their track record in the union learning and skills agenda to build their influencing capacity with employers. Learning is arguably a positive way into some more difficult discussions with employers, and gives the STUC and unions the platform to build a more productive relationship.

9.8 Outcome 7: Supporting other government strategies

9.8.1 Digital participation

The STUC's role in workplace learning has also given them a platform to influence the Scottish Government's digital participation agenda:

> 'I think it has, maybe not to a huge extent, but I do feel that we play a part in influencing government strategy. And there are examples, like the more recent digital participation strategy from Scottish Government. Through working with the Government's Digital Participation Team, we were able to get involved in the latest framework that they produced on digital

participation, and as an action point, we were able to add in that they would work in partnership with Scottish Union Learning to support work by trade unions.' [SUL 2]

The status that the STUC's learning work has within government and their track record of delivering learning outcomes for their members gives them the opportunity to broaden their reach in terms of influencing government policy. This example illustrates that through their engagement with government on their digital participation strategy, they were able to negotiate working arrangements around digital skills, supporting the digital skills needs of their members in the process. It should also be acknowledged that there are lots of resources in the STUC not specifically about learning that are also brought to bear in these kinds of situations. In terms of the framework for policy influence, the STUC on-going engagement with government in the digital learning space has given them the opportunity to exert influence and move towards their preferred policy position.

9.9 Outcome 8: Supporting broader economic objectives

9.9.1 Better utilisation of skills

Through their work in union-led learning, the STUC have demonstrated that they have the knowledge, skills and capacity to deliver outcomes for learners, and this has given them a platform to exert influence more broadly:

'So, I think government has confidence in the fact that we can deliver what we say we can deliver. We have a very developed infrastructure now within the STUC and within unions that taps into and engages with a range of workers that no other agency is able to engage in learning. And as I say, that meets certain broader objectives of the Scottish Government's Economic Strategy as well as some of the specific objectives that arise out of that, some of the specific objectives of the government's National Performance Framework.[32] For example, I think there's an increasing realisation that upskilling the

[32] Information on Scotland's National Performance Framework and how Scotland is performing against it can be found at: https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/

> workforce - not just in terms of the accumulation of skills, but how skills are used in the workplace – has a significant impact on productivity. One of the Scottish Government's key targets is around improving productivity - just one example of how we would be seen and appreciated. I think the other thing that's appreciated is that because of the very practical engagement that unions have with workers, they have an insight into what works and what doesn't work and therefore how that should influence policy.' [STUC 1]

The STUC engagement with the workforce on the learning and skills agenda aligns with the government's wider economic development agenda. A key part of this is not only upskilling, but better utilisation of skills in the workplace which can help to contribute to a more productive economy. As outlined earlier, skills utilisation is a key priority for the STUC, and the work they have carried out to highlight unions' role in the agenda is a valuable resource when engaging with government and trying to influence policy in this area. The skills utilisation agenda has also been picked up by other public agencies such as Skills Development Scotland (SDS). Over the last decade SDS have engaged in this agenda through their Skills in Focus series which examined the current and future skills needs in Scotland (see Felstead and Green 2013). More recently, SDS published a report that explores the known and emerging issues affecting the Scottish skills system. The report makes the case that everyone involved in skills system needs to work together and 'focus on creating good quality jobs and skills utilisation, ensuring that these translate into increased earnings and greater prosperity' (2017:2). The Enterprise & Skills Strategic Board (ESSB), which has representation from a number of agencies including SDS, SFC, SE and HIE, have also engaged in this agenda. Their strategic plan highlights the key role that policymakers can play in influencing employers' behaviour in this policy area, many of whom lack an awareness of skills under-utilisation, or are not sufficiently incentivised to take action on this issue (2018: 22).

The importance of the skills utilisation agenda is also acknowledged by other skills representatives, with one discussing the work that UKCES was involved in and

addressing the challenge of the under-utilisation of skills.[33] They state:

> 'Skills Utilisation is a really major issue, and it impoverishes individuals, but it also impoverishes our economic contribution. So, based at least partly on a union view the Commission is undertaking some work specifically in that area, and that wouldn't have happened had the unions not been around the table.' [Skills 4]

They go on say:

> '…[T]he learning work is clear and the amount of increased investment that [the] STUC has seen in that I think is testament to the, both the impact that the programmes have had and the value that that voice is seen as… the tentacles of the STUC reach far and wide in this [agenda]…' [ibid].

This points to the key role that the STUC and the union movement have played in highlighting the importance of skills utilisation and its impact on economic outcomes. The STUC have been able to make their case to government and other key partners through building networks and taking part in consultations, which allows them to keep an on-going dialogue with those key decision-makers. This is an agenda they have actively pursued with government and one that has given them the opportunity to highlight the value they bring to policy discussions and enhance their influencing capacity, as outlined in the framework for policy influence. This example also highlights the way in which the STUC and unions have been able to use their track record in the learning and skills policy agenda to exert influence more broadly, in this case, supporting broader economic objectives through the skills utilisations agenda.

9.10 Outcome 9: Policy relating to wider workplace issues

9.10.1 The Working Together Review

In the previous chapter on tactics, good communication was noted as being crucial

[33] UKCES – THE UK Commission for Employment and Skills was a publicly funded, industry-led organisation that offered guidance on skills and employment issues to the UK Government and Devolved Administrations. It closed in March 2017.

in terms of the STUC and the wider union movement being able to demonstrate the value they bring to learning and skills provision. Also highlighted was the importance of widening the scope of engagement to maximise influencing opportunities. One good example of this was the STUC's participation in the Working Together Review. One senior STUC official discussed the role they played in this piece of work and the opportunity it gave them to promote the work of unions as well as the role they can play in creating fairer and more productive workplaces:

> 'We just did an exercise with the Scottish Government which we completed in August… something called the Working Together Review. A lot of that was about trying to get a broader understanding of what unions actually do. You don't get many headlines around this, around union success stories and union contributions to successful organisations and companies. You get plenty of headlines on there's a dispute, something doesn't go right. You don't get many headlines about things that go well, so that was an opportunity to try to identify - not just in relation to skills and learning - but a whole number of other things; the important contribution that unions play.' [STUC 1]

This sentiment is also acknowledged by another union representative:

> 'Very often, I think as trade unions we should be proactive but what we've got to do is react so quickly to everything the employer does, and I think the union learning rep role is very proactive and it allows us to be…. When things are difficult with the employer, or when we've got a new employer, we're able to show how positive we can be and that helps engage the employer a bit more as well; they'll maybe want to talk to you a bit more about other things when they know that it's not all just about dealing with problems.' [Union 6]

Being part of this review was an opportunity for the STUC to represent the needs of workers, not only in terms of skills and learning but also wider workplace issues. A key tactic used to influence decision-makers, which was touched upon earlier, is communicating the union success stories more effectively. The Working Together Review was another platform where the STUC could promote the successes they

have achieved through workplace learning initiatives and how they can contribute to the success of organisations. One example of this is the effective partnership working between unions and management in healthcare and the public sector. Here, unions brought the knowledge from a staff perspective to inform decision-making which helped to deliver improved patient services, modernise infrastructure and deploy staff where required at NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde. This case study also showed that managers recognise the value of their partnership working with trade unions, who are involved in both the strategic and operational management of this organisation (WTR: 64). Learning is also a key feature of the report in terms of its role in developing capacity and capability in industrial relations. Recommendation 1 states that the Scottish Government should continue to support the development of union-led learning and promote the benefits of the learning and skills initiatives that come through the Learning and Development funds (ibid: 58).

Although examples like the one above do demonstrate the positive stories unions have to tell, one STUC official does concede that they still have more work to do to promote their role and work more widely:

> 'Some of the time I don't think we realise there are various other avenues that we can be promoting what we do. I keep saying to unions, I go to awards events about learners and about learning and I often sit there and think we are doing all of that, and we're doing it better and we're doing things that need done that are as good, if not better than some of that - why are we not shouting about it more?' [STUC 1]

Communicating these successes is also key to the sustainability of union learning activity - a key objective that was highlighted in the previous chapter. It can be argued that if the STUC and unions fail to promote their work more widely, as well as the value that they bring through their engagement in workplace learning activities, it will be increasingly difficult to grow and sustain this activity in the longer term. The above example has shown different proxies of influence, as set out

in the framework for policy influence. The STUC and unions took part in a significant government consultation where they were able to not only to promote their value in the learning and skills policy space, but also share their knowledge and expertise in wider workplace issues. This gave them a platform to build their influencing capacity with government and other key stakeholders. They also achieved specific recommendations related to union learning, which is another example of a positive outcome for the STUC and unions, and evidence of influence. However, the STUC and unions could arguably achieve even more positive outcomes in this policy space if they communicated their success stories and value in this area more effectively.

9.11 Outcome 10: Strong and established working arrangements between unions and government

9.11.1 Demonstrating competence in learning and skills policy

The value that unions bring to policy development through their work on union learning is recognised by government, an activity that arguably sets them apart from many other stakeholders in this policy space. This government official cites the example of the Wood Commission, where they expressed no hesitation in working with the STUC and the unions because of the working relationship they had established around skills and learning provision.[34] They go on to say:

> '…[W]e knew we would get value from it, and we wanted them to help shape it. And that then had other spin-offs because people kind of start thinking about the trade union movement in a different way, so it reinforces that thing that they're part of the dialogue with industry…' [Gov 4]

Other representatives from the Scottish Government also recognised the value the STUC and unions bring more generally to this area of policy, with one official

[34] The Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce, also known as the Wood Commission, published its final report in 2014. It was tasked with making recommendations towards Scotland producing better qualified, work ready and motivated young people with skills relevant to modern employment opportunities, both as employees and entrepreneurs of the future. It also outlined the need to encourage more employers to recruit more young people - https://www.gov.scot/Resource/0045/00451746.pdf

commenting that they have a 'determination to get things done' [Gov 3]. They go on to say:

> 'I mean, they are constantly getting people on-board and developing the process, taking folk that really don't have basic skills and getting them to a point where they are confident readers, writers, sometimes people that have absolutely no…[have] come out of school with no qualifications at all and they are taking people to the level where are confident to stand in front of people and speak or read or write, so that's a big thing that they are bringing to the table in terms of getting us then to support the development of that.' [Gov 3]

The STUC's track record in this policy space has enabled them to build and develop relationships with key decision-makers and the opportunity to exert influence where they have an interest, both in learning and skills and beyond. The STUC and unions on-going dialogue with government around skills and learning and wider workplace issues, and their participation in the Wood Commission and their role in developing Scotland's youth employment strategy, are more example of unions influence, as set out in the framework for policy influence (Table 1).

9.12 Outcome 11: Learning as a route into broader policy areas

The STUC's engagement in the union learning agenda has been an effective means to promote the wider contribution of the trade union movement and has helped to create opportunities with partners, which some attribute to the STUC and unions' track record in skills and learning. This is highlighted by officials in the SUL team:

> 'It certainly helps them [Government and other partners] get a better appreciation of what unions do and not just on the learning side. I think it helps them understand the whole trade union movement a little better, but also, I think that while some organisations, and in certain cases individuals, have been put off working with the unions because they were only aware of the industrial relations side. I think the whole learning agenda has opened up new and quite different opportunities to work with organisations that probably wouldn't have worked with us before.' [SUL 2]

The learning agenda has also helped to create new ways for the STUC and unions to work with organisations. A key part of this, which was discussed earlier, is understanding the priorities of partners, and identifying where you can work together.

Another SUL official reflects on this further:

> 'Yes, we have to work with government. Yes, we have to be aware of what their objectives are. But I do think we do pick and choose and bend things to meet with our objectives. We are more active in areas that meet with our objectives rather than anything that wouldn't meet with our objectives. And I actually think that if something that really didn't sit with us as being fair or right or having an equalities bias…if something was wrong or didn't sit with trade union values then I think we would say so… We have to work…to be realistic about working in the environment that we're in and where the money is coming from, so we have to understand what government wants and play into that. But I think it's kind of circular because I think [the STUC General Secretary] and a lot of work that he's been involved in, we have influenced what government is interested in anyway. So, with the workforce development stuff, it's actually been circular…it's up [on] their agenda, but we've probably contributed to pushing it up their agenda in the way that it's being looked at now and then we're taking advantage of that.' [SUL 1].

This is an illustration of the importance the STUC place on not compromising their priorities when working with government but continuing to look at where shared priorities exist and using the learning agenda to push wider issues, such as the workforce development agenda. The space created through their engagement in union learning gives them the opportunity to promote these wider issues. In terms of the framework for policy influence, this also demonstrates union influence where they have not necessarily achieved a specific outcome in this example, but they have been able to promote a specific policy priority with government and make them take notice, this giving the STUC and unions the opportunity to move towards

achieving their policy priorities in the workplace development space.

9.13 Outcome 12: Supporting the young workforce

9.13.1 Contribution to policy development and implementation

The government and the STUC have a shared priority around providing better-quality apprenticeships and improving routes into the labour market. For the STUC, it was key to broaden the debate around youth employment; not simply focus on the number of apprenticeship places, but to look at routes out of school and college into the workplace and promote the value of vocational and work-based education. Here, the STUC and other unions were able to bring an informed voice to the table. One STUC senior official stated:

> 'Now, this sounds as if I'm taking credit for the establishment of the Wood Commission, others I'm sure were doing exactly the same. When the Wood Commission was established, it was clear to me that that was as a result of, maybe not directly, but a response to the sorts of things I'd been saying, I'm sure others had been saying, about the importance of looking at this in a different way. Now you've got a commission…. That commission which I served on…has come up with a report with lots of recommendations around this which now needs to be implemented. But just as an example of what can happen through understanding what government's priorities are, having access to the people who make the decisions and then helping them implement the decisions - to participating on the commissions, and now working with them to take forward the recommendations of the Wood Commission - is just one example of how that sort of thing can work.' [STUC 1]

The above demonstrates that the STUC understood the direction of government policy and their priorities around developing the young workforce. This intelligence was then used as a key resource when engaging with government, by using the existing channels to access key decision-makers and then representing their views in a formal setting and helping government to take forward the recommendations. Here the STUC were able to establish themselves as key partners and provide

valuable insights into this high-profile and important piece of work. This is evidenced in the final report from the Commission which recommended that a supervisory board, drawing its membership from unions, senior business leaders and public agencies, should come together to help develop the Modern Apprenticeship programme and promote its value to industry. The report stated that the board should also help to improve the speed of the Modern Apprenticeship framework process and members should act as ambassadors for the programme (2014: 31). Unions and Scottish Union Learning have continued to be involved in the delivery of Developing the Young Workforce, working with employers and Skills Development Scotland (SDS) to support apprentices. Scottish Union Learning also has representation on the Apprenticeship Approvals Group (AAG) which has responsibility for approving all Scottish apprenticeships from April 2020. This was previously the responsibility of government-led Modern Apprenticeship Group.

One government official also reflected on the STUC's role in policy development and implementation through their work on the Wood Commission:

> 'You're always wanting to demonstrate to people that you work with are helping to shape what happens that makes a difference, and sometimes that's in a fairly classic kind of influencing, lobbying role. So, taking…of what they're saying, but sometimes it's actually by involving them in the development. The more you can…if you've got some really key stakeholders, having them influencing the shape of policy and the shape of implementation of policy. So, unions are a good example where quite often if we're doing pieces of work that require bringing together a group of stakeholders to actually help develop the policy but also help to implement it and help to champion it as well. So, the Wood Commission is a great example of that… so you have STUC as strong, prominent, equal partners in that commission and really did a good job on it. So, the policy - certainly the recommendations which turned into policy - were shaped by that commission and in that commission the unions were an important part.' [Gov 4]

Significantly, this official acknowledges the value of not only what the STUC are saying around learning and wider workplace issues in terms of developing policy, but also the benefits of having them as part of the implementation process, where they can go out and promote the policy more widely to partners. The above example illustrates how the STUC established themselves as key partners and had their views considered in a commission where a broad range of voices and interests were represented, and all competing for the Scottish Government's attention.

This official goes on to say:

> 'I probably wouldn't try and do very much now … about labour market, skills-type stuff without just having them involved. Because it's not just about ticking a box; they actually give you so much. Depends on what you get but [the STUC] give you so much. Then once you're actually out of the policy development of the commission, the actual implementation of it, so there's various parts of the implementation programme where we have unions in as kind of partners on shaping implementation. So, for example, [The STUC General Secretary] is on the national group for the creation of regional investment in young people groups. [EIS General Secretary], I think, or EIS anyway, are obviously involved in Curriculum for Excellence management board which is an important bit of this. Both of them are on overall the national advisory group. For me, I kind of learned so much about doing this through the Wood Commission that you don't just have people in so you can tick a box, you have people in because they will actually shape what you do and hopefully make it better as a result of them being there and contributing to it…' [ibid]

The fact that the STUC were involved in the Wood Commission demonstrates the influential role they have created for themselves within government circles. And as this official highlighted, they are not simply there to tick a box and make up the numbers; they are there because of their knowledge and expertise and the value they bring in terms of creating more informed policy. This underscores once again

the fact that the government values the contribution of the STUC and unions on a broad range of policy areas - from skills and learning to the workforce development agenda. In this example, the STUC are not only helping government develop policy to develop the young workforce, but also playing a key role in helping to implement these policies, one of the key contributions being their engagement in union learning, and their input into apprenticeship frameworks. This also again highlights that influence can occur at different stages of the policy process – not just when specific policy priorities or outcomes have been achieved.

9.14 Outcome 13: Improving employer engagement

9.14.1 Impact of learning on wider workforce issues

The STUC's and union's engagement around learning is also acknowledged as being an effective means to improve the relationship between workers and employers. Although the needs of workers remain the priority for unions, they have actively sought to engage more with employers around learning and in other policy areas, which is also one of their key policy objectives:

> 'I think it has; I think the way in which they have engaged around union learning has meant that…I think, you know, if you went back to the 70s and people saw, some people within government, saw unions as some rabble-rousing, you know, block-putting organisations to try and create clear water between employers and employees, I just think that is just so changed now. And whilst absolutely STUC will always, always put employees first, you do hear STUC talking about the need to engage employers and the need to bring employers and employees together. And I think that that more, if you like, more balanced view from the STUC and the work that union learning does, just means that other stakeholders just give them that bit more space and that bit more credence because they think they have got a more balanced story to tell than they did thirty or forty years ago.' [Skills 3]

One senior SUL respondent goes on to discuss the importance of the emerging employer engagement agenda with unions in recent years, and how this is actually

'turning things round in the workplace, not just about the learning [opportunities] that it's giving to learners, but about how it influences the actual delivery of training…' [SUL 1].

This is another example of how the unions' engagement in the learning agenda has given them the opportunity to achieve positive policy outcomes beyond their learning work. Although it is difficult to point to a concrete outcome in this example, the STUC and unions' work in workplace learning and skills initiatives has helped to create more positive working relationship with employers, and move towards their preferred policy position (see Table 1) which is creating more happy and productive workplaces and encouraging employers to become more involved in the training of the workforce.

9.15 Outcomes are not the only proxy for influence

This study makes the case that achieving a specific policy priority or outcome is not the only scenario or proxy for influence, and the examples set out above demonstrate this. The earlier discussion on Lukes (2005[1974]) and the challenges that researchers face in conceptualising power and measuring influence is important to highlight again here. Meaning is dependent on the setting and approaches to measurement can vary across academic disciplines. In terms of the policy influence space under consideration in this study, Lukes helps to broaden our understanding of power and influence and the ways in which researchers might approach its measurement, and crucially not confining influence to the achievement of outcomes and things that easily observed and quantified. This study takes the position that influence cannot easily be measured, but that the views of multiple stakeholders engaging in the same policy arena can highlight ongoing diffuse influence. Instead, it seeks to assess union influence in the policy process by adopting a broader understanding of what influence looks like. It is important to reassert that for this study, the less visible and harder to access forms of influence have the potential to produce greater insights into the ways in which actors seek to influence the policy process. The framework for policy influence (Table 1) sets out

that when actor A achieves policy position B this can be viewed as influence, but the same may also be said when actor A does not fully achieve policy position B but does prevent actor C from achieving what they view as a less favourable outcome. Preventing this less favourable outcome, in fact, is often also important for Actor A and can be viewed as their exerting some degree of influence.

Although the STUC do have outcomes they want to achieve in learning and skills, one STUC official points out that sometimes preventing a less favourable outcome is just as important:

> '…quite often we're just making sure the world is not a worse place that what it would be otherwise; you're stopping people doing stupid things rather than actually doing tangible things that will make life better for people in the workplace…' [STUC 2]

This STUC senior official goes on give an example of how, through their economic development role, they achieve outcomes which are often harder to quantify:

> '…I'm not the one who's going in there negotiating for more money to deliver trade union learning with outcomes that are very tangible, real. Quite often in terms of policy development it's, you know, the outcome is the committee not writing something stupid in its report, you know, it's kind of negative. It's not so much about you're in there with things that you definitely want them to say.' [ibid]

This was referenced in the previous chapter on the tactics the STUC use to influence policy decisions, specifically ensuring high-quality evidence is presented, and identifying where there are common interests on a committee and trying to work with these individuals to support your policy position. In this example, the STUC official was able to formulate an informed policy position by carrying out their own quantitative analysis before appearing in front of the Scottish Parliament's Finance Committee and giving evidence. This allowed them to present a robust argument and challenge any position that was at odds with the STUC's policy position.

This senior official discussed the tactic of shaping dialogue around various policies using their expert knowledge. This example related to how much money Scotland invested in active labour market policies compared to other EU nations. Producing data to back up their argument gives the STUC the opportunity to frame the problem in a way that suits their policy position. Although a tangible outcome has not been achieved in this area, having a seat at the table and communicating their policy preference and potentially preventing a less favourable outcome is indicative of the STUC's influence. This can also be viewed as influence in the sense that the STUC have made progress towards a policy priority, even if specific and more easily measurable outcomes are yet to be achieved.

9.16 Summary

9.16.1 Learning and skills outcomes

As a result of their engagement in union-led learning, the STUC has achieved a number of outcomes in the learning and skills policy sphere. They have received continued funding from the Scottish Government, helping them to support the learning and skills needs of workers. This funding has also formalised their engagement with government, where they have been able to demonstrate the value of their learning work over several funding rounds since the late 1990s. Over a prolonged period of time, they have developed a lasting and close working relationship with government around learning and skills, using their track record of delivering learning outcomes for workers to give themselves the opportunity to influence decision-making in this area of policy. The continued funding has also helped them to leverage additional funds for learning and to build learning capacity, both of which continue to be supported by the recruitment and training of ULRs and dedicated union learning project workers.

The STUC's partnership with government around learning has also helped them drive forward the learning agenda, promoting the learning and skills needs of workers and the wider workforce both within and outside of the workplace. The STUC have adopted more of an insider approach with government to this policy

agenda, a tactic they use to identify shared objectives to help them deliver outcomes that benefit both themselves and government. Crucially, however, the needs of workers and learners continue to be the key driver of their objectives in the learning sphere. The needs of learners and workers affect both those who the STUC choose to work with and which projects they dedicate resources to.

The STUC's engagement in this policy agenda has also resulted in a MoU with government. This formal mechanism gives the STUC a means to access government Ministers and senior officials, and the opportunity to influence decision-making - although this is rarely invoked because of the good working relationships that exist. Through their union learning work, the STUC have also widened the access to learning opportunities for workers. Their sectoral knowledge and expertise, which they have developed through union-led learning over a number of years, has also added value to businesses, where they have supported the skills needs of employers and sectors. This in turn has helped them build better relationships with employers and promote a role of the STUC and the wider union movement not just occupied with industrial relations issues. The interviews have highlighted that in many situations learning and industrial relations issues can sit side-by-side and not adversely impact on one another.

The STUC's role in this policy agenda has also enabled them to support workers at risk of redundancy. Working closely with government, employers and other agencies, they have helped workers access the skills and training they need to re-enter the job market. Further, the STUC have helped government meet its objectives, specifically in supporting their skills strategy. Here, the focus has been on upskilling the workforce and helping workers obtain qualifications and learning accreditation - which has been supported through union-led learning initiatives. All these outcomes demonstrate the influential voice that the STUC and unions have established for themselves in the learning and skills policy sphere. These outcomes have also shown that influence can occur at different stages of the policy process, and that achieving a specific policy or tangible outcome is not the only proxy for

influence, as outlined in the framework for policy influence set out at the beginning of this chapter. The next section will consider whether the unions' engagement in this area of policy has given them a platform to influence policy more broadly.

9.16.2 Broader policy outcomes

Determining whether unions' engagement in learning and skills has generated broader policy influence is not a straightforward task. Although there is evidence to show that the STUC have achieved a number of learning and skills outcomes, it is a challenge to demonstrate that influence in one area has led to broader policy influence. The following section will try to get to grips with this issue by presenting the broader policy outcomes achieved by the STUC. It will go on to consider whether these can be attributed to their engagement in union learning, and to the number of learning and skills outcomes they have achieved.

The fact that the STUC are viewed as key partners in wider workplace issues, was evidenced in their role in the Working Together Review. The government acknowledged that the STUC would be seen as a key partner regardless of their role in learning and skills, although this was viewed as a valuable resource. Arguably the unions' role in learning helps with employer engagement and removes some of the elements of opposition that policymakers might encounter from employers/employers' associations in other circumstances. The government interviews highlighted the challenge of engaging employers in the learning agenda. Here, the government wants to create a system that is both responsive to employer needs but also encourages them to take a more active role in supporting the training needs of young people and engaging with them while they are still in education. Unions bring value in this situation in the sense that they can work in partnership with government and employers in order to deliver the learning and skills initiatives that they need. This also helps unions to support the skills and learning needs of workers and gives them the opportunity to inform these policy debates.

This key partner status is attributed to the knowledge and expertise that the STUC

brings to these debates, and their willingness to engage in a broad range of issues. Although learning cannot necessarily be directly linked to broader influence in this example, forums in which learning is discussed have given the STUC and unions the opportunity to raise broader workplace issues, with the government acknowledging that there are very few tables where the STUC and unions do not have a seat. In the interviews with government officials and other stakeholders, respondents frequently highlighted that the union learning agenda shows that the unions can deliver in this policy area; they bring expertise, they add value to these policy discussions, and they help to deliver positive outcomes for learners. It is important to note here again that outcomes are not the only proxy for influence. It has also been argued that because the STUC have a seat at these tables and are consulted on a range of issues, this gives the opportunity to exert influence and improve their influencing capacity over time.

The STUC have also contributed to the development of more productive and engaged workplaces. Through their work in union learning, they support both the current and future skills needs of the workforce. Aided by their engagement in workplace learning initiatives, they have built good working relationships with employers. More generally, engagement in union learning has afforded the STUC and the union movement the opportunity to demonstrate their wider role and contribution to public policy. This role is not confined to industrial relations issues; it reaches out to a number of policy areas, including the economic development, digital participation, job quality, and supporting young workers, all of which are supported through their considerable experience of delivering in regard to learning and skills.

The STUC's engagement with partners across a range of forums, government included, does indicate a degree of influence. They have created a space for themselves in the learning and skills policy sphere, thereby giving themselves an opportunity to raise other issues. They have become embedded in the decision-making process within government. This is aided by their MoU, which outlines a

commitment to work with government on areas of shared interest and extends beyond the learning and skill sphere. Interview respondents highlighted that the Scottish Government acknowledge that the STUC and unions bring significant expertise and experience in skills and learning, and this is viewed as a valuable resource for government. As a result, they do not hesitate to reach out to the STUC and unions for support in other areas. These would include engagement around Developing the Young Workforce agenda and supporting better-quality apprenticeships. Here, the STUC and unions were involved in both policy development and implementation, aided by their track record in skills and learning. The STUC's involvement in the Working Together Review also gave them the opportunity to contribute to a deeper understanding of what unions actually do, including the role they play in contributing to the successful development of organisations.

Although the STUC's and union's influence in broader policy areas cannot necessarily be attributed solely to learning, they have established a legitimate role in this policy space, which has arguably helped them to become influential players with government in the learning and skills agenda and in other areas. This was made possible because of the ecosystem they have established over a number of years, part of which has involved building a network of key contacts and access to decision-makers within government, using formal and informal channels to exert influence in the policy process. The findings of this study have not always been able to demonstrate that a specific outcome has been achieved, but there is evidence that the STUC have made progress towards a policy priority or goal. This is also a proxy for influence in the context of this research.

9.16.3 Reflections and areas for improvement

Examples of STUC influence, both in learning and skills and in broader policy areas have been well documented in this thesis. Using a variety of tactics, the STUC and unions have achieved a number of outcomes in learning and skills policy. Beyond that, these have benefited workers, unions and the wider workforce and economy,

and in many instances have also helped to support the priorities of other partners, including government, skills practitioners and employers.

The picture painted here is a positive one, but it is important to once again highlight where more might be achieved, and also to give a note of caution. It might be argued that more work needs to be done to promote the role of the STUC and unions in workplace learning, and their success stories, to a wider audience. The interviews highlighted that this type of promotion is recognised by the STUC as an area that requires more attention. Although the employers that were interviewed were supportive of the union learning agenda and had worked on projects with unions for a significant period of time, there is acknowledgement by the STUC that there is room to strengthen relationships with employers further, and to ensure that they better understand what unions do operationally in this area and how they bring value. Arguably, there are parts of the union movement where this work could be better promoted. The findings presented here have highlighted various examples where the STUC have influenced government, but on the other hand there is an argument to be made that unions need to balance this approach with promoting the benefits of union learning more within the union movement. It can also be argued that the links between the learning and organising agenda may need to be more explicit, highlighted by SUL respondents. This would apply particularly to the benefits of union learning in terms of its impact on activism and promoting the voice of workers (Wood and Moore 2007; Warhurst *et al.* 2007).

Although interview respondents did not suggest that a re-branding exercise was necessary to improve the visibility of union learning and the influence of the STUC in this policy area, the interviews did highlight that much more work needs to be done to promote this work and its successes. Also, many respondents reflected on the key role that the now former STUC General Secretary played in terms of his strategic leadership in this policy area. Although he is no longer in post, he has arguably left a legacy that gives senior officials a platform upon which to build for the future. The promotion of union-led learning by the STUC General Secretary

across a number of key forums was highlighted by government and other stakeholders in this space. This type of strategic leadership is crucial to ensure that union learning activity is sustained.

Funding was identified as another key issue, specifically the impact on current union learning provision should government funding be cut or stopped altogether. This arrangement however is stable in Scotland and not considered to be under any immediate threat. In the longer term, this could put union learning in a precarious position, although it must be stressed that the STUC and unions have been successful in recent years in obtaining different funding streams. These have allowed them to branch out into other areas beyond their union learning work, most recently with their digital, equality and leadership projects. One of the key issues highlighted in the interviews was the terms of funding. The current funding arrangements with the Scottish Government, which they approve on an annual basis, will continue to be a challenge to the STUC and unions. These limit their ability to develop a more strategic progamme of learning and skills initiatives. The delivery of shorter-term projects has caused some uncertainty within unions, and render employer engagement in this agenda more challenging. Arguably, it would be a huge gain for the STUC to secure the approval of a three- or five-year funding model, thus giving unions time and space to build on the foundations that these shorter-term projects provide, for example, where learners build on their skills and experience.

It is also worth highlighting that although unions have been successful in securing continued funding from the Scottish Government to support union-led learning, they might have been less successful in securing other priorities. More broadly, unions and policymakers engage with each other on lots of policy areas in Scotland – on some they agree/disagree more than others. So, although union-led learning appears to have delivered specific outcomes (learning) and has helped to produce a positive union story and relationships with policymakers, the unions do operate in a competitive policy space and have to compete with other stakeholders in order to

gain the attention of decision-makers. Unions do not always get what they want, but they use a variety of tactics to enhance their influencing capacity and give themselves the best opportunity to achieve their policy priorities.

The final chapter will reflect on these findings, and the extent to which the STUC and unions have been able to exert influence on learning and skills policy. It will then outline the research contribution before finally discussing strengths, limitations and the implications for future research.

10. Discussion and conclusions

10.1 Introduction

Against a backdrop of declining power in the industrial sphere in recent decades, trade unions have identified the need to broaden their activities. They have refocused their efforts towards government and the public policy arena, and increased their activities and engagement in learning and skills - which are important to the experiences and life-chances of their members. Learning and skills policy and practice are also, however, crucial to delivering on public policy priorities in relation to skills and in turn economic development. There is a growing research base on the impact of union learning on learners and employers (Findlay *et al*. 2007; Stuart *et al*. 2010; 2012; Clough 2012), but its impact on the policy sphere is less developed.

Although it is challenging to assess policy influence and impact, particularly in a qualitative research study, this is an important gap that requires to be addressed. Much of the existing literature on policy influence focuses on observable outcomes and the latter stages of the policy process, whereas the earlier, more informal, agenda-setting stages have been given much less attention (Leech 2010; 2011). It is also clear that while there is some secondary data on the impact of unions on skills and learning policy (Lloyd and Payne 2006, 2007; McIlroy 2008; Rainbird and Stuart 2011; Clough 2012), there is little primary research on whether - and how - unions influence policy around learning and skills.

This research has examined unions' role in the workplace learning and skills agenda. The rationale for this focus is the contemporary UK debate on whether union engagement in the learning agenda has enabled them to develop an influential role in the policy process (McIlroy 2008; Findlay and Warhurst 2011; Rainbird and Stuart 2011; Clough 2012). This thesis seeks to challenge the position of McIlroy (2008) who argues that unions' role in this agenda has not increased their influence on the State. McIlroy presents the argument that unions are being used as an administrative function of government, where they help to implement policy, rather

than influence it. This thesis makes the case that the relationship between unions and government in this area of policy is much more complex than that. It requires analysis from both the perspectives of the aspiring influencer (unions) and the body to be influenced (government), and as a result spans the traditional industrial relations debates as well those within political science. This research has made the case that adopting the methods and approach used in the political science literature on policy influence facilitates a more robust investigation of unions' influence to take place. It is through this lens that unions' policy influence can be evidenced and progression in the union learning literature can be made, where influence is understood not just in terms of observable outcomes, but in a much broader context that considers more nuanced manifestations of influence. This broader perspective of influence - influenced by the work of Lukes 2005[1974] and his three dimensions of power - is reflected both in this study's framework for policy influence (Table 1) and in the model for assessing policy influence (Figure 3).

The central thesis is that unions adopt various tactics to exert influence on the policy process and achieve their priorities around learning and skills. Findings show that the tactics employed by the STUC and unions vary according to the issue at hand and the individuals or groups they engage with. Crucially, the STUC and unions have built upon their successful track record in this policy space, having used their knowledge, expertise, established networks and proximity to the workforce to deliver successful outcomes for learners/members over several years. This in turn has enabled them to access key decision-makers within government, and to exert influence on the policy process. Challenging the position of McIlroy (2008), findings from the research have demonstrated that the STUC and unions have used their engagement in the union learning agenda to help develop and influence policy around learning and skills, and not simply to implement the government's policy agenda. In fact, findings show that the STUC have helped to develop, influence, and implement policy in this area. Evidence of policy development and the shaping of policy dialogue in areas such as developing the young workforce is of particular importance to this area of research because it demonstrates that the STUC and

unions have been able exert influence at the earlier stages of the policy process, not just when policies are implemented. Furthermore, the STUC have successfully achieved policy priorities and outcomes around learning and skills that are driven by the needs of workers and learners, giving the STUC a distinctive voice setting them apart from some other prominent actors in this space, such as employers. This drive and willingness to pursue an agenda where they have specific knowledge, expertise and experience is viewed as a valuable asset by a range of stakeholders, including government.

Crucially, the STUC's track record in delivering successful outcomes for learners/members, the driver for their engagement in the union learning agenda, has enabled them to sit at a variety of tables where wider issues are discussed. This is another example of influence that moves beyond simply achieving a specific, observable policy outcome. STUC representation on a variety of forums crucially gives them the opportunity to be part of on-going dialogue and discussions on policy areas where they have an interest and gives them the opportunity to build their influencing capacity, as set out in the framework for policy influence. Notable examples in the past decade are their involvement in both the Wood Commission and its work to develop the young workforce, and the Working Together Review, which gave them a platform to promote the role of trade unions in creating progressive workplace policies. In both their union learning work and their engagement in forums that consider wider workplace issues, the STUC have used their knowledge and expertise and proximity to the workforce to establish networks across the skills and learning policy landscape in Scotland for the purpose of influencing policy outcomes. These key resources are recognised and valued by government and other stakeholders in this policy space. This has given the STUC the opportunity to represent the union voice in a range of forums and achieve their policy priorities around skills and learning and in other policy areas where they have an interest. Although the researcher cannot necessarily attribute broader policy influence solely to learning, the STUC and unions have established for themselves a legitimate role in this policy space over a significant period that has coincided with

the expansion of union-led learning. This is likely to have impacted on their influencing capacity with government in the learning and skills policy agenda and beyond.

10.1.1 The value critical realism to analysis

This study is concerned with union influence in the policy process, and uses union learning and skills as the domain of interest to understand how events are created and influence exerted in this policy context. It seeks to provide a better understanding of the policy process and the path to influence. The approach taken in this study goes beyond concrete, observable outcomes as *the* only proxy for influence and also takes account of those manifestations of influence that are more nuanced, harder to observe, and can occur at different stages of the policy process, including the earlier, agenda-setting stages. The value of critical realism to this study is that it comes from a perspective that seeks to understand a social reality and not simply describe it. It helps the researcher to look beyond what can be easily observed and quantified and uncover those more hidden layers of reality that have the potential to reveal even greater insights in this area of research. This was extremely helpful in the researcher's approach to the analysis of influence in the policy process, where they adopted a much broader understanding of influence than is often presented in the literature, and considered much more nuanced manifestations of influence. This study has made the case throughout that influence can be evidenced through observable outcomes or the achievement of specific policy priorities, but it can also be viewed as part-achieving an outcome, preventing a less favourbale outcome, or being part of consultations and on-going dialogue with key decision-makers, as set out in the framework for policy influence.

Driven by a critical realist perspective, this study seeks to move beyond purely descriptive accounts of influence in the policy process. It uses tools from the political science literature to interrogate the relationship between trade unions and government and the influencing choices they make. It makes connections in the fields of industrial relations and political science to help create new paths both in

areas of research and new areas of discovery. The ability to make such connections across disciplines demonstrates the value of critical realism in the sense that it clears the path for researchers by removing barriers which may otherwise prevent the research from being carried out. The critical realist perspective adopted in the study has also helped the researcher trace the path towards casual outcomes – starting with the identification of policy priorities or objectives and the actors involved, then moving to the various tactics involved to achieve such priorities, taking account of the nature of the policy process, and finally identifying outcomes. This allows the researcher to explain policy influence and the mechanisms and processes that cause events.

10.2 Research Contribution

This thesis makes a distinctive conceptual, methodological and empirical contribution.

10.2.1 Conceptual contribution

Conceptually, this research combines the political science and industrial relations literatures on trade unions and the State in order to better understand union influence. This thesis demonstrates how the tools in the political science literature on policy influence can be used to interrogate the relationship between trade unions and government and the influence choices they make, in much more nuanced ways. Much of the existing literature on unions and the State in the UK has focused on the union/Labour Party link and influence in that context but a broader understanding of how unions interact with governments that are dominated by other political parties is also important to consider. The tools in the political science literature have been used to better understand trade union influence, helping to tackle the complexities of understanding and assessing influence, which is the focus of this research. The work of Lukes (2005[1974]) and his three dimensions of power is crucial to this study because it gives researchers a broader perspective of power and influence. Lukes' theoretical approach helps researchers get to grips with the complexities of the influencing process, and crucially, does not confine influence to

observable outcomes. The work of Lukes takes account of those aspects of power that are less visible and harder to access, thus helping to uncover the more nuanced forms of influence. Here, influence on the policy process is not confined to those outcomes in the decision-making process that can be observed - and the ways in which actors try and control the political agenda - but also uncovers those manifestations of power and influence that are less visible, and so harder to access and quantify. These aspects are key to this study because they help researchers investigate influence at all stages of the policy-process, and not just the point at which decisions are taken.

This research has used Lukes' three dimensions of power to inform how researchers might conceptualise and assess influence in the policy process. Crucially, he argues that power can be most effective when it is least accessible to observation, although he does acknowledge that this presents researchers with difficulties in terms of investigation. To overcome this, this research has sought to analyse the early, more informal, agenda-setting stages of the policy-process, which have been somewhat neglected in the existing literature. It has also been argued that although it is important to acknowledge that researchers will only ever be able to access some of these things, these more nuanced manifestations of power and influence are central to uncovering new insights in this area of academic research.

This study has made the case that it is important to look beyond observable outcomes as a proxy for policy influence. It has therefore adopted an approach, informed by the work of Lukes, which expands on how researchers might conceive influence. This is presented in the framework for policy influence (Table 1) and builds on the simplistic conception of influence, where Actor A achieved outcome X, therefore Actor A is seen to be influential. Influence can also be understood as an actor part-achieving a policy position, not achieving their policy position but preventing a less favourable outcome, and also being part of the consultation process or on-going dialogue, thus giving them the opportunity to improve their influence over time and moving closer to their preferred policy position.

As has been highlighted throughout this thesis, this last point is of particular importance to this study because it highlights that influence can be exerted through a number of different means, and not just through the achievement of a specific observable outcome. Crucially, it also makes the case that influence can occur at different stages of the policy process, and not just when decisions are taken or policies implemented.

This thesis has also contributed to debates on multi-level governance. There is a strong orientation towards social partnership in Scotland, but the constraints of being a devolved nation within the UK - a liberal market economy - shape what can be achieved. An in-depth examination of the STUC and the use of union-learning as the domain of interest, which falls within a devolved policy area, has uncovered voluntary mechanisms put in place by the Scottish Government. These mechanisms, which would typically be associated with a coordinated market economy, include strategic interactions with other actors, adopting a collaborative approach to policy-making, and the sharing information and expertise. These voluntary mechanisms are important resources for trade unions where no statutory or other formal routes exist. In terms of this research, however, both formal and informal routes are evident. Scottish devolution has rendered these mechanisms more workable because of the size and connectedness of the policy community in Scotland, together with the government's willingness to consult with various actors and gather a variety of views to inform policy-making. These mechanisms are examples of how the State can enable influence. The Scottish Government's approach to policy-making since devolution has also supported the building of networks and relationships over time as well as the sharing of information and expertise, thus giving actors such as trade unions the opportunity to exert influence in the policy process. Crucially, the learning and skills agenda - a devolved policy area - has given the STUC and trade unions an opportunity to establish an influential role with government and achieve their policy priorities in this policy area and expand beyond.

The study has also contributed to a better understanding of processes of social dialogue. Here, the union learning and skills agenda, their asset-based contribution and their engagement across policy and practitioner communities has expanded and encouraged greater social dialogue between relevant stakeholders. The STUC and unions' engagement and drive in this policy area help to bring together different stakeholders to work on areas where they have a shared but not always fully aligned interest. This is supported by the nature of the policy-making environment in Scotland in which the government has put in place voluntary mechanisms to support consultation, open dialogue and partnership. These mechanisms help generate a policy environment where a variety of ideas can be expressed, and information shared in areas of common interest. This arguably helps actors like trade unions enhance their influencing capacity with government.

10.2.2 Methodological contribution

Methodologically, the model for assessing policy influence presented in this study, informed by the work of Lukes (2005[1974], Dür (2008a; 2008b) and Leech (2010; 2011) can be applied across disciplines and in any context where the investigator is interested in the tactics used by actors to influence outcomes. Much of the existing research uses a quantitative approach in the measurement of policy influence, for example, Klüver (2009), who uses a text analysis to compare a policy position or objective with the final output. This, however, fails to take into consideration what happens in the earlier, agenda-setting stages of the policy process. Klüver discusses how she draws conclusions about the winners and losers in this process, but this does not take account of the more subtle manifestations of influence - for example - preventing a less favourable outcome or policy position. The model presented in this study (see Figure 3) has been developed to address this gap and overcome the complexities of assessing influence, and it highlights the more nuanced forms of influence as well as helping to uncover new insights in this area of research. This model, developed by the researcher, has been applied in order to assess the extent to which unions' role in the learning and skills agenda has helped them to develop

an influential role with government and achieve union priorities in this policy area. This gap in knowledge is outlined in the methodology chapter.

The model for assessing policy influence also takes account of the subtleties and complexities of influence, and has used union learning as the domain of interest to shine a light on the path to influence. It also acknowledges that observation of the policy process on its own is not sufficient to understand influence, and therefore uses union learning to develop a better understanding. The study recognises the importance of breaking down the whole of the influencing process and identifying the key variables for assessing policy influence. Unlike many approaches in the existing literature, this model does not seek to measure influence. This research adopts the position that influence is a challenging process to measure: it is nuanced and complex. The researcher has argued that influence is not easily quantifiable. A model has been developed that takes account of perceptions of influence, as well as those manifestations that are less observable and therefore more suitable to qualitative approaches. It also incorporates some of the existing approaches in the literature, particularly process-tracing (see Dür 2008a, 2008b), which has been highlighted as one possible approach in overcoming the challenges of measuring influence. The influencing activities - or tactics used - of actors have also been highlighted as key to any study of policy influence, and so are also incorporated into the model. In order to assess policy influence, a model was developed which includes the following four pillars: (1) stakeholders and policy priorities; (2) tactics, (3) the nature of the policy process; and (4) outcomes.

Pillar 1 allows the researcher to identify and understand the policy position of actors and what informs these, as well as the stakeholders who are involved. The second pillar is tactics and helps the researcher to identify which tactics are used to influence key decision-makers, including the impact of lobbying and counteractive lobbying and the use of resources. Pillar 3, the nature of the policy process, considers which channels of access are available to influence key decision-makers and helps the researcher examine the entire policy process, including the earlier

stages which have thus far been given much less academic attention. The fourth pillar, outcomes, helps the researcher assess policy influence that goes beyond observable outcomes, as outlined in the framework for policy influence (Table 1). This pillar takes account of those less observable and harder-to-access forms of influence. These include the achievement of a policy priority, the part-achievement of a policy priority, the prevention of an inferior policy position, and actors being part of the consultative process during which they have a seat at the table where key issues are discussed. Crucially, being part of such consultation with government and other key stakeholders gives the STUC and unions to opportunity to develop their influencing capacity over time.

Methodologically, this research has demonstrated that outcomes, while important, are not the only proxy of influence. This research highlights the breadth of tactics used by the STUC and unions to achieve their policy priorities in learning and skills, and expand beyond. It gives an insight into the methodological difficulties in operationalising influence, where outcomes are often difficult to quantify or 'see' and are incremental over time. The tools in the political science literature have been used to understand and uncover the indicators of influence. This is challenging for any researcher as these are multi-dimensional questions and influence is a nuanced concept. Crucially, this research looks beyond observable outcomes to examine union influence at other stages of the influencing process including when policy dialogue is shaped and agendas are developed.

10.2.3 Empirical contribution

Empirically, this research has assessed the influence of the STUC on learning and skills policy and has presented findings that demonstrate the extent of that influence, with evidence that their role in union learning has given them the opportunity to influence policy more broadly. It also demonstrates that the unions' role in workplace learning is more complex than is often presented in the literature. This study offers substantive insights into the union learning debate, bringing forward evidence of the more nuanced forms of influence that are often

overlooked. In addition, this research takes a different approach to that of the existing literature, which focuses on the UK/English level. In this study, union influence is examined in the Scottish policy context which has received far less attention, but does raise important issues arising from policy influencing in the context of multi-level governance, as referenced above.

The STUC has set out to achieve a variety of policy priorities around learning and skills. This includes improving the life chances of union members; embedding learning into wider union structures; continued funding for union learning; supporting specific economic objectives; supporting the training and recruitment of young workers; and servicing the learning and skills needs of individual unions/sectors. The STUC has acknowledged that the most common challenge in achieving these policy priorities is employer engagement, which includes motivating employers to fund and support the learning and skills needs of the workforce, including young workers transitioning into the labour market.

The STUC have employed various tactics to achieve their policy priorities. These include using their distinctive voice, articulating the needs of the workforce, and helping to moderate the employer voice in order to develop more informed policy that supports the best interests of their members. They also use their knowledge and expertise; support learning and skills initiatives to address market failures within sectors; identify where there is alignment of policy priorities in order to build consensus; lobby key decision-makers; work in partnership; use their strategic leadership; and exploit existing channels to exert influence. The STUC have also adopted an insider approach in the Scottish learning and skills and policy landscape, helping them to develop an enhanced and unique partnership role with government in this policy area.

This study has highlighted the various outcomes that the STUC and unions have achieved in learning and skills and beyond, although it is challenging to attribute this broader influence to their role in the learning agenda. In skills and learning the STUC have achieved a variety of outcomes. They have received continued funding

from government to support learner needs, and this has also helped to leverage additional funding; for example, in digital skills projects. This funding has also helped to formalise their relationship with the Scottish Government and help them build their influencing capacity. Their track record in the learning and skills agenda also demonstrates that the STUC and unions can deliver positive outcomes. The interviews highlighted that learning is a key component of government's relationship with the STUC. The MoU with government also defines their partnership in this policy area. The value of the STUC's learning and skills work is acknowledged by government, where for example they can bring value to businesses by contributing resources such as knowledge and expertise. The interviews also highlighted that these resources helped the STUC and unions to work with employers in a more productive way. Their work in the learning and skills agenda has also supported workers at risk of redundancy, and has helped the government meet its objectives outlined in their skills strategy.

This study has also contributed to the union revitalisation literature, specifically how unions' engagement in the learning and skills agenda has helped them develop an enhanced role with government and exert influence on the policy process. The findings presented here have demonstrated how the STUC and unions have enhanced their strategic capacity through the learning agenda and have strengthened their political role through their engagement in the skills and learning policy landscape. Findings help to make the case that unions' engagement in this policy area can be viewed as one element contributing to renewal. This has been achieved by examining the unions' relationship with government in this specific area of devolved policy. Union capacity has also been developed, not just to deliver learning and skills, but to engage constructively and successfully in the policy domain. This capacity is crucial in terms of unions' human capital and capability.

This thesis has also demonstrated the broader policy outcomes the STUC has achieved. It has already been mentioned that learning plays a key role in the STUC's relationship with government. This study has produced data which highlights the

partnership between the two, with government acknowledging that the STUC are viewed as key partners, regardless of their work in learning and skills. Crucially, the government view the STUC's role in learning and skills as a valuable resource and something which adds perspective. The interviews also highlighted the STUC's role in supporting workers, employers and trade unions through their work in union learning. The STUC's interactions around learning and skills were also recognised as having wider benefits in terms of them being able to raise wider workplace issues when taking part in union learning forums. The STUC role in workplace learning has also given them the opportunity to support other government strategies, including digital participation, and broader economic objectives such as the better utilisation of skills. The ways in which the STUC has demonstrated their value in the learning and skills agenda over a number of years have also helped them influence policy on wider workplace issues. One example is their participation on the Working Together Review, and the opportunity that this afforded the STUC to promote the role of unions in creating fairer and more productive workplaces. In the learning policy space, the STUC have also been able to represent the needs of workers in this policy space, as well as on wider workplace issues. The interviews highlighted that this review gave the STUC and unions the opportunity to help government better understand what unions do, and the valuable input they bring across a number of policy areas. It is forums like these that have given the STUC and unions the opportunity to highlight once again the value that they bring to these policy debates. It has also allowed them to build their influencing capacity with government over time, and move towards achieving their learning and skills priorities, a key aspect of the framework for policy influence (Table 1).

Furthermore, data has been produced demonstrating that there is a strong orientation towards social partnership in Scotland but that the constraints of being a devolved nation within the UK - a liberal market economy - shape the extent of what can be achieved. This research has highlighted various examples of voluntary mechanisms put in place by government that help strengthen the STUC and unions'

influencing capacity and their relationship with government. These include observations from government officials that the Scottish approach to policy-making is focused on partnership and collaboration, and on having a more open dialogue with stakeholders in order to develop informed policy. One example of this was the STUC's representation in the Scottish Government's Commission for Developing Scotland Young Workforce, where they played a significant role in developing, influencing, and implementing policy.

10.3 Strengths, limitations and implications for future research

This study has uncovered new insights into the ways in which the STUC and unions have developed an influential role in learning and skills policy and broader policy issues. Although this broader policy influence cannot easily be attributed to the STUC's role in the learning and skills, findings have demonstrated that they have established a legitimate role in this policy space. This has likely helped them to become influential players with government in learning and skills policy and beyond. The research has also highlighted the various tactics that the STUC use to achieve their policy priorities in learning and skills, and the platform that their engagement in the union learning agenda has given them in order to access key decision-makers and achieve broader policy outcomes. The study has also shown that outcomes are not the only proxy for influence (Table 1), and that to understand the complexities and nuances of influence researchers must also take into consideration the nature of the policy process and all the activities and tactics actors use in order to achieve their specific policy priorities, as outlined in the model for assessing policy influence (Figure 3).

The evidence of STUC influence presented in this study comes at a time when there are established funding arrangements in place with government to support union learning and skills initiatives. Government funding plays a key role in maintaining the current levels of union learning activity. Although the STUC and unions have managed to leverage additional funding to support a broadening of the programme of work, for example, in digital skills, leadership and equalities, questions remain as

to whether this activity could continue should government funding be reduced or withdrawn. With this in mind, there is arguably a need to research union policy influence in different policy areas.

One of the limitations of this research is the method of data collection. The expert informants, particularly the STUC and union respondents, presented a very positive picture of trade union influence in relation to learning and skills as well as broader policy influence. Although there may be concerns that respondents are inherently inclined to view their influence positively, most were able to identify both successful and unsuccessful influence. It is also important to highlight that the job of trade unions and other actors such as employers is to pursue a particular agenda; there is nothing unusual in this. This positive perception of influence is understandable when considering the role that the STUC and unions play in supporting workplace learning initiatives and their commitment to unions' role in the union learning agenda. The interviews highlighted that respondents wanted to promote the role of unions and amplify the work and influence of trade unions in this space. However, even those who gave positive accounts of unions' role in learning and skills, acknowledged that more work was needed, particularly around promoting union success stories more widely and improving employer engagement. This study also has the limitation of sample selection bias, where the researcher is able to more readily access those research respondents who are keen to share their experiences of unions and their engagement in skills and learning.

Although the employers interviewed in the study presented a positive picture of their work with unions around learning and skills, it is important to acknowledge that these respondents are engaged employers, and to note that interviews did highlight some long-standing issues with employer engagement. Certain unions, for example, highlighted the lack of support from employers in addressing skills gaps in their industry. The findings from this study have demonstrated that union learning initiatives have enabled those unions to address this market failure and support the needs of workers and the sector. There is also more work needed to encourage

employers to become more involved in the youth employment agenda, particularly around apprenticeships, and become more engaged with young people particularly when they are still in school or college. The research also highlighted that different types of respondents have agreed/disagreed on the level of union influence.

It was highlighted earlier that meaning is dependent on the setting and approaches to measurement can vary across academic disciplines. In terms of the study of policy influence, Lukes' three dimensions of power help to broaden our understanding of power and influence and how researchers might approach its measurement, where influence is not confined to observable outcomes and instead assesses influence by adopting a broader understanding of what that looks like. There is potential to make further progress in this area of academic research by assessing union influence in other devolved policy areas such as health. This is a key area of policy for the Scottish Government which has been put under the spotlight during the Covid-19 pandemic. It would be of interest to consider whether the voluntary mechanisms identified in this study, which we would typically associate with a CME - strategic interactions with other actors, the sharing of information and expertise and a collaborative approach to policy-making – are also identified in the area of health.

From a personal perspective, it is interesting that some respondents realised they were using tactics to achieve their policy priorities, whereas other did not. This was not recognised as a strategic choice as such, but rather an activity or action used to achieve a specific outcome. I also learned that the influencing process is a long game, and unions' capabilities in this area have been built up over a significant period of time; they are supported by established relationships with government and other key stakeholders in the policy process.

In terms of future research, an area that merits further investigation is union influence in the context of the multi-level governance. This study has highlighted that the voluntary mechanisms put in place by the Scottish Government that we would usually associate with a CME, such as well-established networks within the

policy community, the sharing of information and a commitment to consultation with a range of stakeholders, has given the STUC and unions an opportunity to become bigger players in the policy process. A referendum on Scottish Independence continues to be high on the current political agenda, with the Scottish Government recently confirming its commitment to holding a referendum 'after the COVID pandemic has passed'.[35] Trade unions have continued to influence government policy during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has been a particularly challenging time. The STUC and unions have played a key role in developing the Scottish Government's Covid-19 guidance for businesses and workplaces[36], as well as guidance for specific sectors, such as tourism and hospitality.[37] In the Fair Work Action Plan's annual statement, the Scottish Government also demonstrate a commitment to continued working with unions to progress the Fair Work agenda. This includes working with the STUC on specific Fair Work projects. They highlight that trade unions 'have always been viewed as key social partners…and we have worked closer together than ever before during the pandemic, striving to mitigate the impact on Scotland's workers' (2021b: 22).

Looking ahead, it is likely that the STUC and trade unions are considering the opportunities that an independent Scotland would bring, particularly in terms of increasing their influencing capacity with government and strengthening their status in the Scottish policy landscape.

10.4 Final reflections

Since this research was carried out, the STUC have continued to broaden their union learning work, engaging with unions, employers and other organisations on projects supported by funding from the Scottish Government. Arguably, they have increased their influence on the State. At the time of writing up this research, the Scottish Government has made a commitment to provide funding for Scottish Union Learning from April 2021 until March 2023, which would be approved on an annual

[35] https://www.gov.scot/news/agreement-with-scottish-green-party/
[36] https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-general-guidance-for-safer-workplaces/
[37] https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-tourism-and-hospitality-sector-guidance/

basis. This amounts to £2.26m for the Development Fund (union projects), the Learning Fund (courses) and Core Funding (staff, facilities etc.). The Scottish Government has also committed to support other work streams: £100k for the Fair Work Leadership and Equality Programme, £400k for a COVID-19 Recovery Fund (CRF2) for the Aviation Sector, with potential for another £400k later this year, and £43k for a Cyber Resilience Project.

Fair work, which was identified as a key policy priority, has also developed significantly since the research was carried out. The STUC played a key role in the creation of the Fair Work Convention in 2015, the development of the Fair Work Framework 2016, and the Scottish Government's response in the form of the Fair Work Action Plan, first published in 2019, which aimed to embed fair work in the architecture of government. Trade unions and government have also co-signed the Fair Work agreement (2018), which outlines a commitment to Fair Work principles across Scottish Government and associated bodies. In 2020, the STUC signed a Fair Work statement with government and other stakeholders on fair work expectations during the transition out of lockdown. The Scottish Government also published the Fair Work First Guidance in 2021, which is designed to encourage and support employers to adopt fair work practices within their organisation. The government's support of the fair work agenda is also evident within the National Performance Framework (NPF). This framework sets out the Scottish Government's commitment to measuring levels of collective bargaining and extending sectoral collective bargaining in key sectors such as social care, which will be achieved by working in partnership with the STUC.

These are all illustrations of how the STUC and the trade union movement in Scotland have continued to broaden their engagement with government and increase their influence in the policy process.

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ANNEX A: Interview Schedule

Interview ref no:

Assessing the influence of the STUC on learning and skills policy

Interview schedule for STUC/unions

Location:

Name:

Job Title:

Date:

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research that I am carrying out at the University of Strathclyde. The aim of the research is to look at how unions engage in and influence public policy around learning and skills. I am doing this through a case study of learning and skills and in particular on union-led learning.

Broadly I'm interested in how trade unions influence public policy and the activities they carry out in order to influence key decision-makers and other stakeholders. I am also really interested in getting your thoughts on learning and skills policy in Scotland, specifically the role and influence of various actors in this important area of public policy.

I'd also like to get your thoughts on what you think are the learning and skills priorities/challenges going forward.

Anonymity:

I'd like to assure you that whatever you say in this interview is to me – not to anyone else. As a researcher at Strathclyde University, I am bound by ethical guidelines, and as a result of this, your views will be kept confidential, and my transcripts anonymous. The transcript will also be available to you on request. I would also like to make clear that I will only use any potentially attributable material from this interview with your full consent.

Do you have any issues, concerns or questions?

Option to terminate interview:

Obviously, you can choose to stop the interview at any point, or you can pass on any questions that you are not comfortable about answering.

I'd like to record – just so that I can concentrate on what you say without trying to write everything down. Is this okay?

Organisational data:

- What does your role involve in general terms?
- How long have you been in your current role?
- What are your organisation's priorities/key objectives in the learning and skills domain? What informs these objectives/priorities? (what they want)

1. Strategy:

In your view, is learning an important part of what unions do? (Be sure to distinguish between TUC education and union-led learning agenda.)

How effective/distinctive is the union voice on learning and skills?

- What are unions saying about learning and skills that is different from other stakeholders?

In terms of your organisation's priorities in the learning and skills domain:

a) Who is involved? Who do you work with on these objectives/priorities?

b) In your view, what does each individual/group bring, for example, money/expertise?

c) What tactics/strategies are used by you and these groups/individuals to achieve this preferred policy position/policy preference(s) around learning and skills?

d) What did you/they get? What were the outcomes of this?

2. Stakeholder:

In your opinion, whose interests dominate, if any, in discussions around learning and skills policy in Scotland? Why do you think this is the case?

Has the union-led learning agenda given unions/STUC more influence in learning and skills at government level, and if so, how?

Who is driving this process (unions/government)?

How much of your activities around learning and skills is a reflection of your priorities?

3. System:

a) *Access*

What channels are in place for you to access key decision-makers in the policy process (meetings etc.)?

How well do these operate?

How much contact, if any, do you have with policymakers and other key stakeholders around learning and skills issues?

How long has this contact been in place?

What issues are usually discussed?

b) *Resources*

What resources are used to enable you to have a voice on learning and skills policy debates (contacts/money/expertise, etc.)?

c) *Tactics*

What strategies do you use when trying to influence key decision-makers around learning and skills policy?

What tactics do you use to achieve your preferred policy position?

How do you communicate your ideas/initiatives/policy preferences around learning and skills? Who is this information passed on to?

d) *Relationships/Influence*

How good or otherwise are your relationships with these groups or individuals?

Who are your allies/opposition to your preferred policy position around learning and skills?

Are there any ways that these relationships could be improved?

In your opinion, are there any key players that should be involved in learning and skills policy debates that currently don't have a voice?

4. Outcomes:

Is the "system" open to your engagement, or would you say there are barriers to you having a voice on learning and skills policy debates?

How do you think the system could be improved in terms in terms of you maximising your influence and the influence of others in this policy area?

Do you think policy in this area would benefit from a broader range of distinct voices in terms of developing policy in this area?

Do you think that unions' engagement in the learning and skills policy sphere has generated broader policy influence?

It has been suggested that the unions' role in workplace learning has not led to influence over policy outcomes, but rather, is evidence that they are merely performing the administrative work of government? To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Ranking Influence:

Who would you say are the key players in terms of influencing learning and skills policy? (Ask interviewee to give their top four from their list and then ask them to comment on other key players from the list below that they haven't mentioned)

__Employers
__STUC
__Trade Unions
__Scottish Funding Council (SFC)
__Skills Development Scotland (SDS)
__Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)
__Further and Higher education institutions
__Sector Skills Councils
__ Employers' Organisations
__Professional Bodies or Institutes

Other issues:

I am interested in the key challenges facing Scotland in learning and skills policy – what are your thoughts on this? What do you think the priorities should be going forward?

In terms of your priorities around learning and skills, what are you able to/not able to do?

To close:

Do you have any questions or are there any other comments you would like to make?

Thank participant.

ANNEX B: Policy Context - Overview of union engagement in the Scottish learning and skills landscape: 1999-2015

DATE	GOVERNMENT POLICY/ DEBATE	UNION ACTIVITY/ INVOLVEMENT
1999	**Skills for Scotland: a Skills Strategy for a Competitive Scotland** Inviting organisations and individuals to inform Scotland's skills strategy. Meeting market needs for skills training through programmes such as Modern Apprenticeships; improving access to FE to develop core skills and qualifications; improving employability and job prospects Developing employability by improving standards in school education, FE and HE; improving prospects of young people (16-18 year olds); making adult education more effective – use of pre-vocational training to develop core skills.	**STUC Lifelong Learning Unit (LLU) is established** Working with unions, employers, governments, and other bodies to help unions access training and development opportunities and create more strategic approach to lifelong learning.
2000		**Scottish Union Learning Fund (SULF) is established** Funding used to promote and develop trade union learning.
2001	**A Smart, Successful Scotland** Improving the operation of the Scottish Labour Market and addressing skills shortages; giving all young people in school the skills they need make the most of lifelong learning opportunities; offer of	

	vocational and technical skills; meet 20,000 Modern Apprenticeship target; developing training that meets new demands; improve workforce training and foster lifelong learning culture.	
	Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland (ALNIS) Focus on improving the quality and quantity of literacies provision in response to the needs of individual learners.	
2002		**STUC Adult Literacy Pathfinder Project** STUC gained Pathfinder status. Funding for Adult Literacy Coordinator from Scottish Executive. Targeted employees with low levels of literacy and numeracy through workplace literacy supported by trade unions.
	Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Scottish Executive and the STUC The was the first MoU between the former Scottish Executive and the STUC and was signed during the Labour-led coalition of 2002.	Signaled the Executive's commitment to work with the STUC across a wide range of public policy issues. Genuine partnership around areas of shared priorities: economic development in Scotland; modernisation of public services; and social partnership.
2003	**Life Through Learning Through Life: The Lifelong Learning Strategy for Scotland** Lifelong learning: personal fulfilment and enterprise; employability and adaptability; active citizenship and social inclusion and includes formal and informal learning and workplace learning.	

2004	**A Smart, Successful Scotland** Sets out the Scottish Executive's strategic direction for the Enterprise Networks. Key to increasing growth and productivity are three key objectives: growing businesses, learning and skills (making the best use of our human capital for the future labour market) and global connections.	
		Skills and Lifelong Learning Team established at the STUC This was an expansion of the STUC Lifelong Learning Unit (LLU) which was established in 1999.
2005		**Everyday Skills Project** Supporting workers with the Everyday skills needs. These can be described a wide range of skills required in the workplace and at home, and include completing rotas and timesheets, reading customer orders, helping kids with their homework, writing letters, and understanding written and verbal job instructions.
2006		**Findlay, P. *et al*. (2006) 'Evaluation of the Scottish Union Learning Fund (SULF) (2000-2005) - STUC commissioned research** Key finding is that SULF is delivering on its intended purpose: to support unions in the delivery of workplace learning initiatives. This includes both formal and informal learning, but crucially, does not replicate learning and training that should be provided by the employer. The learning was

		identified as both job-related and non-job-related, accredited and non-accredited, and was shown to attract those sometimes hard to reach non-traditional learners and support lifelong learning as a whole.
2007	**The Government Economic Strategy** Focus on sustainable economic growth, with learning, skills and well-being as a key strategic priority. This includes the supply of skills and education that is both responsive to, and aligned with, actions to boost demand. Also, a focus on the school education system to enable all young people to gain the skills they need to contribute to the wider economy.	**Modern Apprenticeship Group (MAG)** STUC key stakeholder within this group. This work has continued to develop and resulted in the Modern Apprenticeship Project in 2010.
		Joint SFC/SDS Skills Committee STUC representation. Working with partners to develop a learning system that is accessible to all, enhances the employability of individuals and increases the demand for skills among employers and learners.
	Memorandum of Understanding between the Scottish Government and the STUC The MoU was renewed following the election of the new SNP minority government. Shared priorities: solidarity, cohesion and sustainability within the context of economic growth; social partnerships; and partnership working with civic Scotland.	

2008	**Skills Utilisation Leadership Group is established** This championed effective skills utilisation in the workplace. One of the main remits was to inform the development of government policy to help create highly skilled and productive workplaces.	**Scottish Union Learning (SUL) is established** Funding by government, SUL brought together the work of the STUC Skills & Lifelong Learning Team, and TUC Education in Scotland. It administers SULF and can be described as the dedicated learning arm of the STUC and aims to give strategic direction to union-led learning in Scotland.
		STUC representation on UKCES Grahame Smith, STUC General Secretary, becomes a UK Commissioner at the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES).
2010	**Skills for Scotland: Accelerating the Recovery and Increasing Sustainable Economic Growth** Refreshed skills strategy has a renewed focus around the skills required to accelerate economic recovery and to sustain a growing, successful country with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish. It has a clear focus on providing the opportunities for skills to be developed and for these skills to be used effectively.	**Modern Apprenticeship Project** Project with SDS aimed at supporting trade unions to promote the Modern Apprenticeship Programme in workplaces and to provide example of good practice in relation to employing workers from a range of backgrounds.
		Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) Project between STUC and Strathclyde University

		Project aimed at developing and embedding a sustainable evidence base on union-led learning and skills in Scotland.
2011	**The Government Economic Strategy** Update to Government Economic Strategy (2007) with a focus on accelerating economic recovery and measures that address unemployment and promote employability.	**The Role of Trade Unions in Effective Skills Utilisation** Research produced case studies of skills utilisation in practice, and the key role that unions play in this.
	Memorandum of Understanding between the Scottish Government and the STUC MoU was renewed when the SNP were returned with a majority. Shared priorities: maximise opportunities for jobs to give stability to households; solidarity, cohesion and sustainability within the context of economic growth; and social partnership.	
	National Strategic Advisory Group Unions, government, community organisations, employer representatives and the third sector coming together to promote benefit of literacies learning for the workplace.	
2013	**Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce** Commission tasked with developing recommendations that would improve young people's transition into	Grahame Smith (STUC) appointed member of the Commission.

	employment.	
2014	**Education Working For All: Developing Scotland's Young Workforce** Final report. Commission made 39 recommendations and highlighted the crucial role that union can play in employee engagement and supporting the skills and training needs of young people.	One of the key recommendations was that trade unions should be involved in the strategic development of the Modern Apprenticeship programme and help promote it to industry. The role of union learning representatives is also highlighted and the crucial role they play in creating training opportunities for young people.
	Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy Sets out how the Scottish Government will implement the recommendations from the Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce. To help tackle youth unemployment, gov't announced expansion of MA programme and college regionalisation to support more young people into work.	Union representation (including STUC) in review process.
		Work, Employment, Skills and Training: Where Next for Scotland? Explored employment and workplace issues in the run up to the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum. STUC and union representatives were consulted as part of the research and were asked to reflect on some of the key

		challenges facing Scotland.
	The Working Together Review Independent review set up by Scottish Government with representatives from trade unions, employers and academics. It investigated industrial relations throughout Scotland and sought to determine the manner in which greater engagement between employers, trade unions, and government could have a positive effect in workplaces, sectors and nationally.	STUC played a crucial role in establishing the review and informing the work of the Working Together Review.
2015		**The Fair Work Convention is established.** This convention was set up to provide independent advice to Scottish Ministers. Its remit is to drive forward fair work in Scotland, which supports the broader, fundamental principles of good work, and it developed a Fair Work Framework to support this. This independent body brings together employers, trade unions and academic expertise. The Fair Work Convention has representation from both the STUC and trade unions.
	Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Scottish Government and	This MoU also outlined the STUC's commitment to work with the Scottish Government and other civic organisations

	the STUC A new MoU is signed between the Scottish Government and the STUC. Shared priorities: creating a wealthier and more equal society.	to oppose the UK Government's austerity policies.
2016-present	** Since the data collection and initial data analysis was completed in early 2016, there have been further examples of STUC and unions engagement with Scottish Government on areas of shared interest.	The Fair Work Convention published a Fair Work Framework in 2016, setting out what it means by fair work, why it is important, who can play a part in making Scotland a world leading nation in fair work and how this might be achieved.
2018	**Fair work: agreement between Scottish Ministers and the recognised civil service unions**	Trade unions and government have also co-signed the Fair Work agreement (2018), which outlines a commitment to Fair Work principles across Scottish Government and associated bodies.
2019	**Scottish Government Fair Work Action Plan** This document sets out the strategic approach the Scottish Government is taking to help achieve the 2025 vision for Fair Work.	This plan sets out how the Scottish Government will work in partnership with employers across all sectors, with workers, the Scottish Trades Union Congress and the Fair Work Convention to ensure Scotland remains at the forefront of progressive policy thinking and action around Fair Work.
2020		In 2020, the STUC signed a Fair Work statement with government and other stakeholders on fair work expectations during the transition out of lockdown. These are all illustrations of how the STUC and the trade union movement in Scotland have continued to broaden their engagement with government and increase

		their influence in the policy process. **Apprentice Approvals Group (AAG)** The Apprenticeship Approvals Group (AAG) has responsibility for approving all Scottish apprenticeships from 1 April 2020. It is an employer-led group aimed at ensuring Scottish apprenticeships meet the needs of employers. A project worker from the SUL team is a member of the Group.
2021	**Fair Work First: Guidance to Support Implementation** This guidance is designed to encourage and support employers to adopt fair work practices within their organisation.	This guidance reflects the Scottish Government's commitment to work with trade unions and employers to pioneer new ways of embedding fair work practices in all workplaces.

The Governments of Scotland: 1999-present

1999-2007: Coalition of Scottish Labour and the Liberal Democrats

2007-2011: Minority SNP Government

2011: Majority SNP Government

2016: Minority SNP Government

2021: Minority SNP Government

** On 20 August 2021, the SNP agreed a power-sharing partnership with the Scottish Green Party. This move gives the minority SNP Government a majority to pass legislation.