

Bureaucratic Market Centralisation and the Training State

A Strategic-Relational Analysis of British Skills Policy under Neoliberalism

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ABSTRACT

This thesis develops a strategic-relational account of British skills policy since 1981 through the lens of **Bureaucratic Market Centralisation** (BMC), building on the empirical material assembled in my monograph, *Skills Policy in Britain and the Future of Work* (Bristol University Press, 2025). Read alongside that book, the thesis provides an explicit state-theoretical and critical political-economy framework for interpreting the UK “training state”, offering an integrated explanation of why successive skills reforms have failed to resolve long-standing coordination deficits in the training regime.

The argument proceeds in five steps. First, an autoethnographically anchored introduction situates my trajectory within the Training State. It frames the motivating puzzle: why, despite decades of institutional churn and reform rhetoric, do market and state failures in British skills policy persist? Second, I elaborate a theoretical framework that synthesises insights from Gramsci, Polanyi, Miliband, Poulantzas, Jessop and Jones, alongside the critical human-capital literature, to conceptualise the state as a **strategic-relational ensemble** whose institutions and policy instruments are selectively structured to privilege particular accumulation strategies and social forces.

Third, I develop BMC as a distinctive mode of socio-political governance under neoliberalism, disaggregated into three sub-variants—workfare BMC (1981–1991), quasi-market centralisation (1992–2009) and product-market centralisation (2010–present). Drawing on original archival research, policy analysis and unstructured interviews reported in the book, I show how each phase reconfigures, but never overcomes, the structural and spatial **strategic selectivity** of the British training state. Fourth, the thesis analyses the crisis-tendencies of British capitalism as they surface in persistent skills shortages, regional disparities and a low-skill equilibrium, arguing that BMC simultaneously reflects and deepens underlying coordination deficits in the formation and deployment of labour-power.

Finally, I explore the implications of this analysis for contemporary policy debates, including the establishment of Skills England, discussing whether it is possible in light of previous academic arguments to pursue a ‘high-skills trajectory’ in Britain under a neoliberal growth model. I then sketch elements of a possible alternative state-led project centred on “triple decentralisation” by calling for more democratic, solidaristic forms of skills governance. The thesis advances knowledge by (a) naming and theorising BMC as an ideal-typical, meso-level, configuration of the UK training state under neoliberalisation, (b) integrating historical-

political analysis of skills governance with autoethnographic insight into the Training State's strategic selectivities, and (c) establishing a new class-analytic, strategic-relational explanation of why technocratic and market-oriented reforms repeatedly fail to deliver a more equitable, high-skill political economy.

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1. INTRODUCTION: WORKING INSIDE THE BIGGEST TRAIN SET IN THE WORLD

‘The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society.’ — C. Wright Mills (1959) pp. 5–6.

This thesis examines how the British ‘training state’ has been remade since 1981 and why, despite near-continuous reform, it exhibits persistent failures of coordination, equity, and productivity. It builds on and theoretically extends my monograph *Skills Policy in Britain and the Future of Work*, which offers a historical-political analysis of skills policy from the late nineteenth century to the present (Bristol University Press, 2025).

Whereas the book’s primary task is to reconstruct the long-run evolution of skills institutions and discourses, this thesis focuses on the specific period since the New Training Initiative (NTI) of 1981. It foregrounds a new conceptual lens: **bureaucratic market centralisation** (BMC) as a way of explaining patterns of state intervention, their commodification, and failures.

In developing this lens, I explicitly draw on Jessop and Jones’ strategic-relational and spatial selectivity approaches, and in Section 3.4, I recast BMC as a particular strategic-relational state form in the skills policy field (Jessop, 1990, 2002; Jones, 1999, 2001; Bewick, 2025).

The metaphor of ‘working inside the biggest train set in the world’ is borrowed from Ewart Keep (2006), capturing the central intuition that the ‘training state’ is less an efficient machine than a sprawling, constantly rearranged network of tracks, rolling stock and control centres. During my time as a political adviser and later as a senior policy practitioner in workforce development (1995–present), I observed at close quarters how ministers, civil servants, quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations (quangos) and social partners continually reconfigured this train set in the name of modernisation, competitiveness and social inclusion (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 9). Yet the fundamentals of *power and coordination* appeared remarkably stable: central government specified the routes, controlled the (price) signalling to the publicly funded ‘training market’ and allocated the rolling stock (qualification products), while employers, colleges, training providers and learners were expected to ‘respond’ to these signals within tightly prescribed (state-led regulatory) parameters.

1.1 From policy pathology to state-theoretical puzzle

Keep's influential diagnosis of 'pathologies' in British training policy framed the system's recurring failures as a chronic mismatch between policy ambitions and institutional design, particularly around employer voluntarism and the low-skill equilibrium (Keep, 2006; 2017; 2020; 2022). *Skills Policy in Britain and the Future of Work* confirms and deepens many of these empirical observations: weak employer investment, fragmented provision, repeated institutional churn and the inability of successive governments to sustain stable organisational arrangements (Bewick, 2025, Ch's 6–11). Significantly, Jones (2023) has documented analogous patterns of governance failure and institutional churn in local economic development, where over fifty changes to the landscape of economic development in forty years constitute what he terms 'spaces of collibration', suggesting these are not domain-specific pathologies but systemic features of the British state under neoliberalism.

However, the thesis contends that these pathologies can only be fully understood within a more explicitly neo-Marxian state-theoretical framework that treats the training state as a condensation of class-based interests and coordination deficits, rather than as an objective technical apparatus in which 'neutral' civil servants simply carry out the democratically elected government's programmes (Poulantzas, 1978; Jessop, 1990). The puzzle is: why do reforms that profess to be employer-led, market-driven, and locally responsive repeatedly produce outcomes that are heavily centralised, bureaucratic, and disconnected from workplace realities and citizens' aspirations? The BMC concept at the meso-level addresses this puzzle. It designates a mode of socio-political governance in which the central state designs skills 'products', sets funding rules and performance metrics, and orchestrates quasi-markets while maintaining political insulation from institutional *failure* through a rhetoric of market choice and partnership (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11).

1.2 Autoethnographic anchoring and the training state

The thesis adopts an autoethnographic sensibility throughout, situating my own experiences as an adviser and quasi-governmental actor within the wider theoretical narrative.

Autoethnography, as articulated by Holman-Jones, Adams and Ellis (2013), emphasises the productive tension between personal narrative and structural analysis; it treats the researcher's trajectory as an additional source of data about institutional cultures and power relations. My positionality—as a policy insider during the early New Labour period and later as a workforce specialist and academic—provides a unique and privileged vantage point on

how human capital orthodoxy, Treasury fiscal discipline and civil service preferences have continually shaped the evolution of skills policy since the NTI (HMSO, 1981). I attempt to elucidate two specific autoethnographic areas:

- What tensions and alignments emerge between my lived experience as a policy insider and the archival/policy record on which the book draws?
- How do my values and institutional locations influence what is foregrounded, silenced, or problematised in the book's account of skills policy change?

Repeatedly, I witnessed officials justifying the central prescription of occupational standards, funding bands, and programme rules as neutral technical necessities. Proposals for stronger social partnership, more substantive decentralisation, or greater inclusion of union and learner voices were often welcomed in rhetoric but materially marginalised. What my research has shown is that for decades, Civil Servants are found in far greater numbers from Oxbridge and privileged socio-economic backgrounds than are to be found in wider society (Sutton Trust, 2025; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 10). Policy discourse consistently emphasised employer leadership, market responsiveness and individual responsibility for skills acquisition. This disjuncture between rhetoric and institutional reality is a defining feature of BMC. Specifically:

Vignette 1: Learning the culture of ‘neutrality’ within the ensemble

When I arrived in Whitehall as a newly appointed Labour adviser in late 1997, I had absorbed the classic-textbook image of the Civil Service: impartial, expert, dutifully implementing the programme of the elected government. The induction sessions reinforced this narrative. Senior officials emphasised “political neutrality” and the enduring conventions that separated policy advice from party politics. To a working-class outsider who had come into public service through the labour movement, after initially leaving school with no qualifications, this sounded reassuring—a guarantee that democratic socialist ambitions would at least be evaluated on their merits. It was an optimism and somewhat naivety forged out of a combination of my relative youth and idealism after the ‘New Labour’ landslide.

The first policy briefing I attended on post-16 reform began to question that naivety. A group of senior officials presented a thick folder of options for addressing what they called “the skills challenge”. Every option assumed that employer voluntarism was sacrosanct, that public spending would be tightly constrained via the TEC contract, and that national vocational qualifications and unemployment programmes, including the New Deal, should be specified in ever finer detail by the DfEE, based in Moorfoot, Sheffield. To be fair, that was also the meta-narrative from ministers at the time: New Labour had won back voters’ trust, in part, on a platform of fiscal conservatism. When I tentatively raised the possibility of stronger sectoral bargaining institutions or levy-funded collective training boards, the response was polite but dismissive: “Ministers tried that in the 1970s, and it failed. The world has moved on.” The discussion did not feel neutral; it felt bounded by a set of implicit assumptions about the role of markets, with fiscal discipline orchestrated to keep

the City of London onside¹, while deliberately downplaying organised labour in coordinating the economy.

Over time, patterns emerged. Proposals that deepened quasi-markets, tightened audit regimes or promised to “make the system more responsive to employers” were fast-tracked and positively framed in submissions. Ideas that implied a stronger role for unions, statutory training rights or robust public provision were greeted with concerns about “deliverability”, “Treasury clearance” or “unintended consequences for competitiveness”. The only exception to this pushback was the introduction of the Union Learning Fund (ULF). Officials supported this move because it (re)cast trade union officials as educators in the workplace rather than political activists out to cause trouble. The move aligned with the Moser Report (1999), which found 7 million workers lacked functional literacy and numeracy skills in the workplace. Apart from modestly funding workplace representatives, via the TUC, the cumulative effect of Whitehall policy framing was to narrow the space of what was politically feasible and deliverable by the Civil Service at the intervention level of the firm. For all the talk of a “classless society”, my daily interactions with senior officials strongly resembled Ralph Miliband’s account of a state apparatus staffed by elites whose social backgrounds, prior educational attainment, and ideological commitments orient them towards preserving the status quo. What autoethnography made possible, for me, was to recognise these interactions not as isolated frustrations but as situated encounters with a particular state form—BMC—operating through the everyday culture and practices of supposedly neutral officials.

1.3 Problem statement and key research questions

The chronological narrative in my monograph documents how, from the early 1980s onwards, the UK has seen an almost continuous reorganisation of training agencies, funding regimes and qualification frameworks: from Industrial Training Boards (ITBs) and the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), through Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), to the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) and now Skills England (Bewick, 2025, Ch’s 5–11; see also Figure 11.5, p. 222, reproduced below).

Whitehall has serially presented each reorganisation as a solution to perceived failures—skills gaps, mismatches or bureaucratic inefficiency—yet the underlying problems of low employer investment, weak coordination mechanisms and stubborn regional disparities remain (Keep, 2022).

¹This became colloquially known as the ‘prawn cocktail offensive’ analysed by Robin Ramsay (2012) ‘How Labour Embraced the City’, Open Democracy UK. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/how-labour-embraced-city/>

Although many of these issues affect all parts of the UK, the analysis focuses mainly on England, unless explicitly applied to skills policy in the devolved administrations (see Bewick, 2025, Ch. 10). This generates the motivating puzzle: why does “devolution” in British skills policy so often result in the creation of *parallel skills bureaucracies* rather than genuine transfers of power? And why do employers, unions and learners remain structurally marginal to decision-making despite their ubiquitous presence in policy rhetoric?

BMC allows the reader to recast these developments not as implementation failures, but as expressions of a deeper state project in which central departments retain meta-governance control while organising supply-side actors into managed roles within a quasi-market architecture (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). Crucially, these spatiotemporal fixes aim to deal with crisis tendencies in British capitalism (Jessop, 2020), in which investment in workforce training has plummeted since the mid-1990s. The contention here is that such interventions have been largely self-defeating, since BMC is also a mechanism for substantially shifting the cost of workforce training and tertiary education onto the shoulders of general taxpayers—hence the Training State moniker. Jones’s (2023) documentation of over fifty changes to economic development governance in forty years—an ‘appalling churn’ (Norris and Adam, 2017)—and his argument that this represents ‘spaces of collibration’ rather than random policy failure reinforces this reading: institutional churn in skills, as in economic development, is best understood as a mode of managing contradictions within late neoliberal parameters and the crisis-tendencies of the advanced capitalist state.

Building from my book, this thesis addresses the following interrelated questions:

Q1. How can the evolution of British skills policy since 1981 be understood as a succession of training state forms embedded within a broader neoliberal transformation of the state?

Q2. In what ways does BMC offer a more precise conceptualisation of the current configuration than other notions, such as the Schumpeterian workfare state or more generic and macro-level accounts of neoliberalism applied to skills (King, 1993; Jessop, 2002; Lloyd and Payne, 2002, 2006)?

Q3. How do the structural and spatial selectivities of the British state, as identified by Jessop (1990, 2002, 2016, 2022) and Jones (1999, 2019), shape the possibilities and limits of skills policy reform under BMC?

Q4. Why do coordination deficits in skills development persist despite repeated policy experimentation, and how are these deficits functionally related to the crisis tendencies of British capitalism (Finegold and Soskice, 1988)?

1.4 Scope, methods and relation to the published work

The thesis focuses on the period from the NTI of 1981 to the present, corresponding broadly to Parts II–IV of the book (Bewick, 2025). The empirical foundation includes archival research in the National Archives and departmental records; secondary analysis of official statistics and inquiries; qualitative interviews with ministers, civil servants, and sectoral actors; and, through four vignettes, autoethnographic reflections as a policymaker, workforce practitioner, and policy consultant. These materials are comprehensively presented and referenced in *Skills Policy in Britain and the Future of Work* (see pages 91–227); the thesis does not reproduce them here (in line with University regulations on avoiding duplication across research outputs). Instead, each section references the relevant chapters, tables and figures of the book and directs the reader to the primary and secondary evidence base.

1.5 Defining bureaucratic market centralisation

Bureaucratic market centralisation (BMC) is defined here as a *mode of socio-political governance* (after Holmes, L., 2007b), within which the neoliberal state acts in and through:

- Central government departments and agencies design or regulate the design of skills ‘products’ (qualifications, standards, funding bands, programme specifications).
- Funding is centrally allocated or tightly constrained through Treasury-compatible rules (departmental expenditure settlements, not hypothecated taxes under social partners’ control).
- Delivery is contracted out to a quasi-market of providers operating under tight audit, inspection and performance-metric regimes.
- Rhetoric foregrounds employer leadership, learner choice and market responsiveness while structural power remains concentrated in Whitehall.
- Coordination deficits are managed through further institutional redesign, shifting spatiotemporal fixes, additional metrics and organisational churn rather than through transfers of substantive power to employers, unions-employees, regions or learners (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11).

BMC thus names a hybrid state form: nominally market-oriented yet substantially bureaucratic, rhetorically decentralised yet operationally centralised, formally employer-led yet effectively civil-service-driven (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11).

Understood in these terms, BMC can be read as a form of skills-domain ‘collibration’. Jones (2023), developing the concept originally proposed by Dunsire (1993) and elaborated by Jessop (2016, 2020), defines collibration as state intervention that uses the tension between opposing social groupings to achieve policy objectives by altering the conditions of engagement without destroying the tension. BMC operates precisely through such collibrative logic: the state deliberately maintains tensions between market rhetoric and bureaucratic control, between employer leadership and central specification, between devolution and centralisation, producing what Jessop (2020) terms an ‘unstable equilibrium of compromise’ that serves the functional requirements of capital accumulation while managing crisis tendencies (Jones, 2023). Explaining this, though, requires theory building from the specifics of skills policy to develop new insights and perspectives on the problems of contemporary capitalism, statehood, and state intervention therein.

2. STATE THEORY AND THE NEOLIBERAL ORDER

This section develops the thesis's theoretical framework by synthesising insights from five traditions: Gramsci on hegemony; Polanyi on the double movement; Miliband on class power; Poulantzas on structural selectivity; and Jessop and Jones on the strategic-relational approach and spatial selectivity. It concludes with a critical assessment of human capital theory and a synthesis of these positions that BMC offers theoretically.

2.1 Gramsci: hegemony, the integral state and education

Gramsci's concept of hegemony illuminates how ruling-class domination is sustained not only through coercion but through the construction of consent within civil society (Gramsci, 1971; Simon, 1991). The 'integral state'—political society plus civil society—encompasses the institutional, cultural and ideological terrain on which consent to capitalist social relations is built and contested. Education and training are key sites of hegemonic work: through curricula, qualifications and institutional cultures, they contribute to the formation of 'common sense' around employability, flexibility and individual responsibility (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 3). Under BMC, this hegemonic function operates through the apparatus of skills products, human capital discourse and audit cultures that naturalise particular orientations to work and learning (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11).

2.2 Polanyi: the double movement and fictitious commodities

Polanyi's analysis of the 'double movement' between marketisation and social protection offers a macro-historical framework for understanding the tensions within skills policy (Polanyi, 1944; Block and Somers, 2014). Labour, which Polanyi identifies as a 'fictitious commodity', cannot be separated from the human beings who supply it; attempts to organise labour markets as self-regulating systems inevitably generate social dislocation and protective counter-movements. BMC can be read as a specific institutional form through which the British state manages this double movement in the domain of skills: it commodifies labour-power through supply-side activation and qualification regimes while containing protest through partnership rhetoric and targeted social interventions such as the New Deal (Bewick, 2025, Chs 3, 11).

2.3 Miliband: class power and state elites

Miliband's (1969) instrumental analysis emphasises the class composition and ideological orientation of those who staff the state apparatus. His empirical observation—that senior state personnel are disproportionately drawn from privileged socio-economic backgrounds and share assumptions compatible with capitalist reproduction—remains relevant to the British skills domain, where the social composition of senior DfE officials and the Treasury's fiscal orthodoxy set powerful constraints on policy (Miliband, 1969, 1970; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 10). BMC operates in part through what Miliband describes: a state elite whose class position and institutional culture orient them towards centralised control, fiscal caution and deference to employer preferences over organised labour (Bewick, 2025, Ch's 9, 10).

2.4 Poulantzas: the state as social relation and structural selectivity

Poulantzas's (1978) late formulation that the state is a *social relation* rather than a thing or instrument provides the ontological foundation for the Strategic Relational Approach (SRA). The state condenses the balance of class forces within its institutional structures, which are selectively permeable to certain interests and strategies. This structural selectivity means that the state is neither a neutral arbiter nor a simple instrument of capital but a terrain on which class struggles are fought out in condensed and displaced forms (Poulantzas, 1978; Jessop, 1990). BMC represents a specific configuration of structural selectivity in which the institutional architecture of the training state—funding rules, qualification frameworks, audit regimes, performance metrics—systematically privileges centralised, employer-oriented, fiscally conservative strategies over solidaristic, decentralised or worker-centred alternatives (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11).

2.5 Jessop and Jones: from strategic-relational approach to spatial selectivity

Building on Poulantzas, Jessop develops the strategic-relational approach (SRA) in which the state is seen not as a subject but as a set of structurally selective institutions within which social forces pursue strategies. As Jessop summarises, the SRA examines “structure in relation to action, action in relation to structure, rather than bracketing one of them. Structures are thereby treated analytically as strategically-selective in their form, content and operation; and actions are likewise treated as structurally constrained, more or less context sensitive, and structuring” (Jessop, 2005b: 48; quoted in Jessop and Morgan, 2022: 92). Jones

extends this analysis geographically and hence spatially, highlighting how state restructuring privileges some spaces and scales over others (Jones, 1999, 2001).

Jones's empirical work on TECs, Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), devolved administrations and combined authorities demonstrates how rescaling of skills governance has produced uneven development and parallel bureaucracies (Bewick, 2025, Chs 8, 10). Devolved skills bodies operate within centrally prescribed funding envelopes and product specifications, limiting their capacity to shape local skills ecosystems—a clear instance of spatial selectivity: decentralisation in form, but not in substantive power (Jones, 1999; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 10).

A crucial refinement comes from Jessop's concept of 'contingent necessity'. As he explains: "The concept of 'contingent necessity' with its apparent *contradictio in adjecto* highlights the fact that, while the combination or interaction of different causal chains produces a determinate outcome (necessity), there is no single theory that can predict or determine how such causal chains converge and/or interact (contingency)" (Jessop and Morgan, 2022: 89). BMC is offered as an instance of contingent necessity: the training state form is not predetermined entity but one which emerges from the contingent interaction of class forces, institutional path-dependencies and strategic selectivities, even as the outcome exhibits a determinate and persistent logic.

Jessop's adoption of Luhmann's concept of 'ecological dominance' is also instructive. Rather than positing economic determination in the last instance, Jessop argues that one system can influence others more than they can influence it, though this dominance is contingently maintained (Jessop and Morgan, 2022: 93). In the skills domain, the Treasury's fiscal orthodoxy exercises something like ecological dominance over the training state: funding envelopes, spending reviews and deficit-reduction targets set parameters within which all skills policy must operate, yet this dominance is politically sustained rather than structurally guaranteed—a pattern the BMC framework seeks to capture.

Furthermore, Jessop and Sum's Cultural Political Economy identifies four types of selectivity: structural, discursive, technological and agential (Jessop and Morgan, 2022: 89, 109; Sum and Jessop, 2013). BMC exhibits all four: structural selectivity through funding rules and institutional architecture; discursive selectivity through human capital orthodoxy and employability narratives that naturalise supply-side interventions; technological selectivity through audit systems, performance metrics and digital platforms that shape what

is measurable and governable; and agential selectivity through the class composition of senior officials and the privileged access of employer bodies over unions and learners.

In the Schumpeterian workfare state thesis, Jessop (1995, 2002) emphasises the ‘hollowing out’ of the national state and the rise of multi-level governance. My contribution is to argue that, in the UK case, this hollowing out has been followed by a partial ‘re-centralisation’ or ‘hollowing-in’ of strategic control over qualifications, funding and tertiary education oversight—precisely what BMC seeks to capture (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). Jones (2023, drawing on Goodwin et al., 2012) has strengthened this argument by demonstrating that the state is ‘simultaneously being hollowed-out and filled-in’, and that the hollowing-out metaphor ‘suffers from a lack of spatial sensitivity’: it implies a top-down reading of denationalisation, whereas emphasis on ‘filling-in’ enables examination of the sedimentation of new organisations and strategies at other spatial scales. Jones (2023, p. 58) shows an almost ‘filling-in’ of all horizons—national, regional, local—of state intervention. BMC captures this dynamic precisely in the skills domain: while appearing to devolve to TECs, SSCs, combined authorities and now Skills England, the central state has been ‘filling-in’ its control through product specification, funding rules and audit regimes. Jones’s (2023) concept of collibration—drawing on Dunsire (1993) and Jessop (2020)—provides a further analytical lens: the state uses collibration to manage competing demands, maintaining contradictory objectives ‘kept in tension’ (Hood, 2010) without resolving underlying contradictions. His multi-spatial meta-governance (MSMG) framework, operating through the dimensions of territory, place, scale and network (Jessop et al., 2008), can be applied to extend our understanding of how BMC operates spatially across these dimensions.

The genealogical account of skills policy in my book challenges some standard scholarly interpretations, such as King (1993) that largely took at face value New Right rhetoric of “rolling back the frontiers of the State”: yet, from an active labour market perspective, Whitehall assumed a responsibility for skills policy it had previously had no real competence or capabilities in (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 6).

Jessop’s diagnosis of “the organic crisis of the British state in its Gramscian sense” reinforces the BMC argument. Britain, he observes, “made a poor transition to Atlantic Fordism because of its imperial and financial legacies and the weakness of the British state” and lacks the conditions for effective liberal, corporatist *or* étatiste regimes (Jessop and Morgan, 2022: 110). This organic crisis manifests in the skills domain as persistent coordination deficits: a state form that can neither leave skills to the market nor effectively coordinate collective

provision, producing the hybrid between Exchange (Market) and Command (State) that my work calls BMC (see also Jessop, 2022: 23).

2.6 Human capital theory and its critics

Skills policy in OECD countries has been powerfully shaped by human capital theory, which posits that education and training investments raise productivity and earnings, justifying both public subsidies and private effort (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964). Recent critical work, including work that I co-authored with Gosling, questions the empirical and distributive assumptions of orthodox human capital theory (Bewick and Gosling, 2023; Livingstone and Guile, 2012; Caplan, 2018; Brown et al., 2020). Productivity data actually show a *decoupling* between expanded post-18 participation tertiary education rates and GDP per capita growth since 2010, while wage stagnation and under-employment have persisted despite rising qualification levels (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 7, Figures 7.1–7.3; see also Lloyd and Payne, 2016). These critical observations are important because, until the financial crisis of 2008, neoclassical human capital theorists had generally considered there to be a ‘direction of causality’ between public/private investment in the supply of skills and increased economic growth—also framed as ‘the race between education and technology’ (Goldin and Katz, 2008). It is these latter theoretical insights, also referred to as orthodox human capital theory, that remain the prevailing narrative amongst policymakers today. It’s the idea that the state should engage in only supply-side reform: simply supply more skills to the economy, and the demand for these skills will take care of itself.

The thesis uses this critique to argue that BMC operates as a governance solution for the state to manage the dissonance between the optimistic promises of human capital approaches and capitalist realities: state managers continually refine top-down metrics and standards while avoiding confrontation with underlying suboptimal demand-side labour-market structures, which includes: chronic underinvestment by firms in skills acquisition, poor skills utilisation and socially based forms of direct and in-direct discrimination in the workplace (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 7).

2.6a The political economy of skill: the Lloyd–Payne/Coffield debate and the problem of agency

Between 2002 and 2006, Caroline Lloyd and Jonathan Payne engaged in a sustained academic exchange with Frank Coffield on what it would take for the UK to escape the low-

skills equilibrium first diagnosed by Finegold and Soskice (1988). Coffield (2002) read the Performance and Innovation Unit's work on workforce development as the 'birth pangs of a new policy': official recognition, at last perhaps, that *skill is a derived demand contingent on firms' competitive strategies*, and therefore that supply-side reform on its own could not succeed. Lloyd and Payne (2003a) replied that the field had not yet got past the conception stage. Their charge was less against policymakers than against the academic community itself: having identified the 'City-Bank-Treasury' nexus's short-termism, the absence of coordinated bargaining and a deregulated labour market as the interlocking causes of the problem, Britain's VET scholars had been 'lacklustre' in specifying interventions commensurate with that diagnosis, so that 'can't say and don't know can easily become two sides of the same coin' (Lloyd and Payne, 2003a: 567).

What Lloyd and Payne proposed instead was radical and at the macro-level, at least, quite explicit. A credible high-skills project for the UK would require reform of corporate governance and the capital markets to embed a long-term investment dynamic; an active industrial policy; re-regulation of the labour market so as to shut down low-cost competitive routes; the strengthening of collective bargaining and workplace representation; and, beyond the economic, redistribution of income and wealth, a rebuilt system of welfare provision and a less socially engineered education system (Lloyd and Payne, 2002b, 2003b, 2006). This amounts, as they concede, to 'a distinctively British variant of the North European social democratic model' (Lloyd and Payne, 2006: 474), and they are candid that it is a capitalist state-led project rather than a revolutionary replacement one. Their sharpest analytical point, and the one most relevant here, is that economic and social inclusiveness cannot be bolted on afterwards: unless low-cost-based competition is actively closed off, a high-skills strategy produces at best 'a bi-polar high/low skills economy' in which a professional core coexists with an expanding low-wage service periphery (Lloyd and Payne, 2006: 480; see also Lloyd and Payne, 2016 on skill under-utilisation and over-qualification). The emergence of an 'hour-glass' shaped British labour market in the years since the early 2000s, including what Guy Standing (2021) has called the 'precariat' would appear to vindicate the Lloyd and Payne prognosis.

However, Coffield (2004) rejoined that the programme was a counsel of perfection—'utopian social engineering' and 'a recipe for class conflict'—and that incremental gains won by working alongside policymakers were preferable to radicalism that guaranteed irrelevance. Crucially, he conceded that 'there is no dispute between Lloyd and Payne and myself on the

analysis of the problems, but substantial differences between us both on the appropriate policy to address these problems and on how change is to be brought about' (Coffield, 2004: 738). The disagreement, in other words, was never about diagnosis; it was about feasibility and agency. On agency Lloyd and Payne (2006: 477) accepted that Coffield had identified 'the real sticking point', restating their earlier judgement that it is 'difficult to envisage the political and ideological impasse being challenged without a substantial shift in the balance of power towards labour and a resurgence of the influence of organised labour' (Lloyd and Payne, 2002b: 383–384), while conceding that even such a resurgence would carry no guarantee of a union movement committed to a high-skills project. Their conclusion was one of deep, and explicitly acknowledged, pessimism.

Two things follow from these scholarly debates for the argument of this thesis. The first concerns the state. The debate leaves the state largely *un-theorised*, a limitation Lloyd and Payne (2002a) themselves identify when they observe that 'the state' is rarely theorised within the skills literature and is instead treated instrumentally, as an apparatus that a sufficiently determined government could simply pick up and use in the service of a high-skills strategy.

BMC is offered as the missing theorisation for the British case. It does not dispute the demand-side diagnosis—it accepts it—but asks the prior question of why demand-side levers are not merely absent through oversight or timidity but systematically shut-down during the policymaking process. The answer developed in Sections 3 and 4 is that the structural and spatial selectivities of the training state privilege precisely those interventions that leave employer voluntarism, Treasury fiscal rules and the low-cost competitive route intact, while filtering out or marginalising those that would challenge such orthodoxy. Read this way, the puzzle that so exercised all three academics—why does policy keep returning to the supply side after each demand-side epiphany?—suddenly becomes more open and intelligible: the neoliberal human capital parameters set by the City-Bank-Treasury nexus are not an intellectual failure but a *selectivity effect*, and 'failing forward' (Peck, 2010, Jones, 2023) is its characteristic institutional imprimatur.

The second observation concerns agency, and here BMC perhaps deepens the pessimism rather than dissolving it. Because the same institutional architecture that cultivates a neoliberal world view among state managers leads to an expression of behaviours that systematically downplays the need for demand-side reform. In my experience, these state officials actively seek to counter the agents or *social forces* who might call for a radically

different settlement. For example, the workfare phase of BMC dismantled the tripartite settlement anchored in the ITBs and MSC (section 3.1); the quasi-market phase constituted employer-led bodies without labour power parity and abolished or restructured them when they deviated from the prescribed path (section 3.2); the product-market phase specified the levy centrally and narrowed its collection base to avoid conflict with capitalist owner managers (section 3.3); and, as one of my autoethnographic accounts shows (see, Vignette 1), the only union initiative that Whitehall openly embraced after 1997, the Union Learning Fund, was welcomed on terms that recast union officers as workplace educators rather than as bargaining agents in the service of ordinary workers securing high skills and increased productivity in return for higher pay.

Trade union density has fallen from around 30 per cent of the workforce at the time Lloyd and Payne were writing to under a quarter today, with private-sector services barely organised at all despite some recent progress in this regard. It follows that the recommendations set out in section 5.3 cannot be exhaustive: they are institutional preconditions targeted predominantly at the meso-level— a dimension of change in the publicly funding skills system largely absent from the original debates of Lloyd, Payne and Coffield. They include the (re)introduction of statutory sectoral bodies with genuine co-governance, a broader hypothecated levy jointly administered, sectoral bargaining machinery, and statutory rights to information, consultation and training—designed to rebuild the collective capacity that BMC has progressively dissipated since 1981.

Whether such a settlement can be won is, as Lloyd and Payne rightly insist, a question about the balance of social forces rather than about the quality of the evidence or the need to reset the British low-growth model pulled along by the economic gravity of London and the South-East. The contribution claimed here is narrower and prior: to specify with precision the current state form in current skills policy—BMC—and to argue that would have to be dismantled for the questions raised by Lloyd and Payne to even begin to be adequately addressed.

2.7 Synthesis: towards a theory of BMC

Bringing these strands together, BMC can be understood as:

- (i) Gramscian in its hegemonic work, constructing consent around employability, flexibility and human capital;

- (ii) Polanyian in its attempt to resolve the double movement within neoliberal parameters;
- (iii) Milibandian in its class-biased staffing of Whitehall state managers and therefore policy priorities;
- (iv) Poulantzian in its structural selectivity and crisis-management function;
- (v) Jessopian/Jonesian in its strategic-relational, spatially uneven and collibrative architecture, whereby the state manages contradictory objectives through an ‘unstable equilibrium of compromise’ (Jessop, 2020; Jones, 2023) across multiple spatial scales;
- (vi) and critical-human-capital-theoretical in its role in sustaining the ideology of supply-side skills-led growth despite mounting contrary evidence.

On this reading, the British training state since 1981 is best seen, following Jessop, as an institutional *ensemble* with a distinctive pattern of strategic selectivity, rather than as a unitary actor pursuing neutral technical goals (Jessop, 1990, 2002). BMC names the historically specific way in which that selectivity has been (re)organised around centrally specified skills products, quasi-market meta-governance and Treasury-compatible funding rules (Bewick, 2025, Ch’s 7, 11). As noted above, Jones’s work on spatial selectivity helps clarify how this ensemble is territorially structured: successive experiments with TECs, RDAs, devolved administrations and combined authorities create new state spaces and parallel skills bureaucracies, but decisive authority over standards, metrics and core funding remains anchored at the centre (Jones, 1999, 2001; Bewick, 2025, Chs 8, 10). Jones’s (2023) more recent work on collibration in economic development strengthens this reading: he shows how competing socio-spatial strategies coexist as a deliberate state objective, producing an unstable equilibrium that manages contradictions through spatial displacement rather than resolution. BMC represents a particular form of this collibrative governance in the skills domain, where tensions between national standards and local delivery, between employer-led rhetoric and central specification, are maintained rather than overcome.

Of course, it is necessary, however, to position BMC with some humility regarding known critiques and lacunae of the strategic-relational approach on which it draws. First, the SRA’s acknowledged underdevelopment of the agential pole (Stones, 2005; Jessop, 2007: 41) is a limitation that BMC partially addresses through its autoethnographic method: the vignettes presented here show how agents actually navigate strategic selectivities in their daily practice, offering the kind of granular agency analysis that the SRA’s abstract heuristic does not itself provide.

Second, BMC responds to the operationalisation deficit identified by some critics, as Jessop concedes, “you can explain nothing in terms of the general SRA heuristic—it must always be applied in specific cases using the appropriate substantive theories and concepts” (Jessop, 2007: 43). BMC is precisely such a mid-range or meso-level concept, operationalising strategic selectivity in a specific policy domain. Third, the more Marxist form-determination challenge (Bonefeld, 2014) can be acknowledged here: the argument that the capitalist state form itself does the analytical work, rendering strategic selectivity epiphenomenal, has force. BMC does not dismiss this critique but complements it, taking the form of the capitalist state while demonstrating empirically how strategic selectivities operate *within* that form in concrete institutional settings. Fourth, the Foucauldian governmentality insight—that contemporary state power operates through audit cultures, performance metrics and technologies of the self as much as through class strategies (Lemke, 2007)—also applies and is one that BMC already captures empirically, even if the theoretical acknowledgement has not previously been made explicit.

Finally, the Eurocentrism and intersectional blind spots of the SRA must be candidly noted here. BMC analyses a specific British state form and does not claim universality; however, its analysis of how skills policy reproduces gendered, racialised and classed patterns of access and participation opens space for intersectional analysis that future work should develop more fully (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Go, 2013; Fraser, 1997; Robinson, 1983/2000). Of course, I hinted at this in the opening pages of my book by adapting Williams’ (2021) recent work on intersectionality and welfare state regimes to provide a multidimensional framework for skills policy analysis in Figure 1.1. (Bewick, 2025: 6–7).

In Jessop’s terms, BMC is offered as a ‘particular critical realism’—specific labouring work on a specific domain—rather than a general theory of the capitalist state (Jessop and Morgan, 2022). To explain further, Jessop’s notion of particular critical realism draws a deliberate contrast with abstract, trans-historical theorising about *the* capitalist state. Rather than claiming to derive BMC from first principles or to subsume it under a unified law of state development, the framework is positioned as situated, domain-specific labour: a concrete investigation into how British skills development results in constant policy churn and institutional reinvention, which includes tinkering with the apparatus of vocational qualifications and apprenticeship standards, reconfigured across a particular conjuncture and spatial horizon. In Jessop and Morgan’s (2022) reading, critical realism becomes *particular* precisely when it accepts that explanatory adequacy is achieved through patient, mid-range

work on identifiable mechanisms, tendencies, and counter-tendencies operating within a bounded object, rather than through grand synthesis. Following Jessop (2015c), this means BMC is best understood as a strategic-relational lens trained on one segment of the wider state ensemble, i.e. the regulatory-funding-credentialing-awarding nexus; and not as a rival “general theory” to those of Poulantzas, Althusser, or Miliband. The pay-off is methodological humility paired with analytical bite: BMC can speak with precision about how bureaucratic centralisation and marketisation co-produce a specific governance form, while leaving open how those findings might, in turn, inform broader theorisations of the capitalist state and skills policy prescription.

The concept of BMC thus specifies a particular strategic-relational configuration of the training state within a broader neoliberal accumulation regime. It captures a re-centralised variant of the Schumpeterian workfare state in which market rhetoric and multi-level governance coexist with a strong recentring of meta-governance capacity in central Whitehall departments (Jessop, 2002; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). The Training State is not a neutral technical apparatus but an institutional ensemble through which social relations operate, labour is commodified and disciplined, and hegemony over the future of work is constructed within a neoliberal policy paradigm (Jessop, 1990, 2002; Jones, 1999; Bewick, 2025). Jones (2023) provides corroborating evidence from local economic development: his analysis shows the same pattern of apparent devolution masking increased central control through meta-governance instruments, with governance ‘failing forward’ (Peck, 2010) as manifest inadequacies repeatedly animate further rounds of neoliberal institutional invention. I develop this further below.

3. BUREAUCRATIC MARKET CENTRALISATION AS A MODE OF GOVERNANCE SINCE 1981

Section 3 applies the BMC framework to three sub-periods of the British training state: workfare BMC (1981–1991), quasi-market centralisation (1992–2009) and product-market centralisation (2010–present). Drawing on the policy genealogy reconstructed in the book, it shows how each phase adjusts institutional forms in response to crises while preserving a core commitment to flexible labour markets, employer voluntarism and central state control over funding and standards (Bewick, 2025, Ch's 6–11).

3.1 Workfare BMC, 1981–1991

The NTI of 1981 and the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) mark the decisive break with the post-war corporatist training settlement anchored in ITBs and levy-funded collective responsibilities (Bewick, 2025, Ch's 5, 6). The Thatcher governments used the MSC to pivot from tripartite workforce planning towards workfare-oriented programmes aimed at managing mass youth unemployment and reshaping labour-market participation norms (Jones, 1999; Mizen, 1994; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 6). Central government designed large-scale youth schemes serving both as statistical devices (removing young people from unemployment figures) and as disciplinary instruments inculcating expectations of flexibility and low-wage work (Finn, 1987; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 6). Early experiments with contracting private providers prefigure later quasi-markets: providers were remunerated for outputs rather than substantive skill formation (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 6). Workfare in this context, as discussed in my monograph—and after examining the archival record—relates to the way the Thatcher governments used an increasingly stricter benefits regime to ratchet up conditionality based on claimants' involuntary participation in centrally prescribed employment programmes. Jones (1999) later calls this era 'trainingfare'. In tandem, benefit levels and the unemployment statistics were artificially manipulated to 'price the unemployed back into work'—a neoliberal mechanism based on the notion: 'these people do not exert any real downward pressure on wages, and the labour market does not clear' (Memo marked 'secret' from Letwin to Thatcher, 16 May 1985: 6; quoted in Bewick, 2025, Ch. 6).

Peck's (2001) analysis of workfare states provides the comparative anchor for this reading. Peck theorises workfare not as social policy but as a mode of labour-market regulation, "concerned with deterring welfare claims and necessitating the acceptance of low-paid,

unstable jobs in the context of increasingly ‘flexible’ labour markets” (Peck, 2001: 6)—a description that maps closely onto the NTI/YTS settlement and the ratcheting conditionality documented above. Crucially, Peck treats the British case as one node in a “transnational regulatory project” whose American exemplars, from Massachusetts to Riverside’s ‘work first’ model, diffused through discursive, economic and policy channels (Peck, 2001, Chs 4, 5, 7). Yet because his account is organised around US federal experimentation and local variation, it under-specifies the institutional mechanism through which *workfare* or *trainingfare* regulation was actually delivered in Britain: not devolved local invention, but a centralising apparatus in which the MSC and its Whitehall sponsors designed, funded and audited schemes directly (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 6). BMC names that mechanism, and in doing so sustains Peck’s insistence that “workfare is a political choice, not an economic necessity” (Peck, 2001: 80)—a claim the archival record of the Thatcher years, and the Letwin memorandum in particular, substantiates for the British case.

From a Gramscian perspective, this period in British skills policy development represents a ‘passive revolution’ in which collective training institutions were dismantled and replaced by top-down schemes that framed training as an individual responsibility rather than a social right (Gramsci, 1971; Jones, 1999). In Milibandian terms, state elites used workfare to weaken trade unions and shift the balance of power, while maintaining the appearance of active labour-market policy (Miliband, 1969). Empirically, YTS did little to raise youth skill levels; longitudinal studies point to labour-market scarring and low-skill pathways (Dolton et al., 1994; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 6). Yet the basic architecture of centrally designed schemes, contracted-out provision and audit-driven performance monitoring laid the groundwork for subsequent BMC variants

3.2 Quasi-market centralisation, 1992–2009

The creation of TECs and later SSCs, alongside NVQs and Modern Apprenticeships, marks the second phase (Bewick, 2025, Ch’s 8, 9). On the surface, this appears to be decentralisation and employer empowerment: TECs were business-led bodies with local remits; SSCs were sectoral partnerships meant to articulate employer demand (Payne, 2008). However, as *Skills Policy in Britain and the Future of Work* shows, TECs and SSCs operated within tight central frameworks. Funding was allocated through national formulae; performance targets and audit regimes constrained local discretion; and core qualification structures were prescribed centrally (Keep and Mayhew, 1999; Bewick, 2025, Ch’s 8, 9).

When TECs or SSCs deviated from central priorities, they were restructured or abolished (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 9).

Gramsci's notion of hegemony helps interpret this period as one in which the language of partnership, innovation and lifelong learning secured consent for continued labour-market flexibility, even as genuine employer and industrial influence over policy remained limited (DfEE, 1998; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 9). This phase held the greatest potential for a more decentralised, neo-corporatist settlement; had TECs and SSCs been genuinely empowered and adequately resourced, they might have formed the basis for enduring sectoral training systems resembling Nordic models (Payne, 2008; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 9). Instead, Whitehall repeatedly reasserted control through performance management and funding levers—a hallmark of BMC. Significantly:

Vignette 2: Witnessing ILAs going through the departmental mincer

The policy discussions that led to Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) were, at least initially, among the most hopeful I experienced in government. The ministerial ambition was simple but radical: to put a modest pot of public money directly into the hands of adult learners and to encourage co-investment by employers and individuals over the career lifecycle. In private conversations with officials, we discussed ILAs as similar in ambition and scope to the reform of private pensions—a small step towards treating learning as a social right backed by shared responsibility, rather than a discretionary benefit dispensed from the centre.

As the design work progressed, however, it became clear that key officials saw ILAs in very different terms. Draft submissions stressed the need to “minimise fiscal risk” and to ensure that the scheme could be “switched off quickly” if take-up patterns looked politically or fiscally inconvenient. Rather than being framed as a vehicle for individual agency, ILAs were recast as targeted incentives to steer people into pre-approved courses offered by registered providers. Discussions about giving learners meaningful choice over how and when to use their accounts, or about building ILAs into a long-term social insurance model, were repeatedly sidelined as “premature” or “too complex to explain to the Treasury”.

The scandal that eventually engulfed ILAs—fraudulent providers gaming a very poorly designed scheme that had been outsourced to inexperienced management consultants—provided officials with the perfect justification to shut the scheme down entirely. Yet from my vantage point, the scandal was less an aberration than a predictable consequence of trying to graft a small pocket of learner autonomy onto a system whose deep structure was BMC. Officials insisted on acting as proxy consumers—specifying approved courses, controlling eligibility and setting prices—while outsourcing delivery to a fragmented provider market and allocating risk downwards. The possibility that ILAs might evolve into a more robust, democratically governed entitlement for post-16 learners was never seriously entertained. In hindsight, this episode crystallised the tension between an empowering, human-flourishing conception of adult learning and a paternalistic, top-down model in which civil servants retained control over what counts as legitimate skill acquisition and who gets to provide it.

3.3 Product-market centralisation, 2010–present

The third phase emerges in the context of post-crisis austerity, further education cuts and renewed concern about productivity (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). Key policies include the Apprenticeship Levy, employer ‘Trailblazer’ standards, the establishment of IfATE, the introduction of T Levels, the rise of Advanced Learner Loans and the creation of Skills England (Department for Education, 2017; IfATE, 2020; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). This configuration intensifies the central specification of ‘skills products’. Apprenticeship standards must meet centrally determined design rules, funding band decisions, and off-the-job training requirements (Fuller and Unwin, 2017; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). The Secretary of State retains the power to amend or create standards (Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022). Levy funds can only be spent on approved products through registered providers (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). As Jones (2023, p. 58) observes of the parallel domain of economic development, the era of building new institutions appears to have slowed, ‘replaced by new ways of controlling the activities of the local state through integrating governmental funding’. This parallels the shift in skills policy from institutional proliferation to tighter product-market control.

From a state-theoretic perspective, this period is marked by strong structural selectivity: the architecture makes centrally specified standards, metrics and funding bands the only viable strategies, while corporatist or solidaristic alternatives are rendered marginal (Jessop, 2002; Jones, 1999; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). Spatial selectivity manifests in the devolution of Adult Education Budget responsibilities to combined authorities within national constraints, creating parallel bureaucracies without genuine democratic control (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 10). Empirically, Trailblazer standards and the Levy have not delivered the promised transformation: apprenticeship starts have fallen since 2017 (Table 11.1 in Bewick, 2025), participation remains uneven, and adult learning has atrophied under loan-based funding (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11).

3.4 BMC as a strategic-relational state form

The three sub-periods can be reinterpreted through the strategic-relational approach developed by Jessop and elaborated spatially by Jones (Jessop, 1990, 2002; Jones, 1999, 2001). As noted above, Jessop emphasises that state theory must be conjunctural: “the idea of conjuncture indicates the current situation in Lenin’s sense, that is, the need to explore the concrete analysis of the concrete situation as overdetermined by the structural configuration,

its current crisis-tendencies, and the prevailing balance of forces” (Jessop and Morgan, 2022: 94). BMC is offered as just such a conjunctural analysis: it identifies the historically specific configuration of the training state as overdetermined by Britain’s post-imperial economic weaknesses, the dominance of Treasury fiscal orthodoxy, the institutional legacy of Thatcherite restructuring, and the prevailing balance of class forces in which organised labour has been structurally marginalised.

In the workfare BMC phase, strategic selectivity operates primarily through the centralisation of programme design in the MSC, privileging activation-oriented schemes that manage unemployment statistics and discipline young workers into accepting low-wage conditions (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 6). Alternative strategies—rebuilding levy-based collective training or strengthening trade union co-governance—are rendered institutionally difficult (Mizen, 1994). Quasi-market centralisation modifies these selectivities rather than overturning them: TECs, SSCs and related bodies create new institutional spaces, but their strategies remain strongly conditioned by national funding formulae, performance targets and qualification frameworks (Bewick, 2025, Ch’s 8, 9). The product-market centralisation phase crystallises BMC’s strategic-relational form: IfATE, Trailblazer standards, the Levy, T Levels and Skills England extend multi-actor governance rhetorically but embed it within an architecture where central departments and the Treasury set decisive parameters (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11).

BMC is thus offered as an instance of what Jessop terms ‘contingent necessity’: the training state form is not a logically necessary outcome of capitalism but the determinate product of converging causal chains—class struggles, institutional path-dependencies, fiscal constraints, discursive framings—whose combination produces a persistent yet contingently maintained pattern (Jessop and Morgan, 2022: 89). From this angle, BMC is not merely a descriptive label for an administrative style; it denotes a particular strategic-relational state form combining a high degree of structural selectivity around centralised product design and quasi-market delivery with a spatial pattern in which sub-national ‘state spaces’ are continually created yet remain constrained by national rules (Jones, 1999, 2001; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 10). This distinguishes the UK trajectory from generic accounts of a hollowed-out Schumpeterian workfare state: in the skills domain, the evidence points to cycles of hollowing-out and subsequent re-centralisation of meta-governance capacity (Jessop, 1995, 2002; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). Jones’s (2023) multi-spatial meta-governance (MSMG) framework illuminates how BMC operates through competing socio-spatial strategies that coexist as ‘a deliberate policy objective of producing an unstable equilibrium of compromise’ (Jessop, 2020; Jones, 2023, p.

66). The tension between national standards and local delivery, between employer-led rhetoric and central specification, between devolution and audit, constitutes a form of collibration in which contradictory objectives are maintained rather than resolved. As Jones (2023, p. 66) demonstrates, attempts to collibrate the relative weight of socio-spatial configurations have ‘intensified uneven development’; BMC similarly intensifies uneven development in skills across regions, as combined authorities and devolved administrations operate within nationally prescribed parameters that limit genuine local responsiveness.

It is important to acknowledge what BMC, in its current formulation, does not yet fully capture. A systematic intersectional analysis of how skills policy reproduces gendered and racialised patterns of access and outcomes—drawing on the insights of racial capitalism scholarship (Robinson, 1983/2000; Bhattacharyya, 2018) and feminist political economy (Fraser, 1997)—remains a task for future research. Similarly, a postcolonial comparison of training-state forms (Go, 2013) would test and extend the BMC framework beyond the British case. These are not weaknesses to be concealed but directions in which the ‘particular critical realism’ represented by BMC should be developed. I progress this further below.

3.5 BMC as a distinct ideal-type

While Jessop’s Schumpeterian workfare state concept captures important aspects of post-Fordist restructuring, the UK’s training state exhibits a more centralised pattern than much of the literature anticipates (Jessop, 2002; Peck, 2001). My contribution is to propose BMC as a distinct ideal-type meso-level construct characterised by:

- strategic re-internalisation of control over standards and funding at the centre (running counter to the neoliberal notion of less state, more market);
- preservation of quasi-markets and partnership rhetoric;
- and continued subordination of skills policy to fiscal orthodoxy and labour-market flexibility priorities.

All three sub-variants share core features: central government designs or regulates the design of skills products; funding is centrally allocated or tightly constrained; providers and learners operate in quasi-markets; rhetoric emphasises employer leadership and individual responsibility; and coordination deficits are managed, not resolved (Bewick, 2025, Chs 6–11). BMC thus names the hybrid form that characterises the contemporary British training state: market rhetoric masking bureaucratic reality, employer involvement constrained within

centrally defined parameters and genuine power devolution or decentralisation remaining elusive (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). Jones (2023) provides independent evidence from economic development governance that corroborates this thesis: his analysis of collibration shows that the same pattern of central control masquerading as devolution, the same institutional churn, and the same management of contradictory objectives operates across multiple policy domains, not just skills. Paraphrasing Peck and Tickell (2002), ‘rolled-forward’ shifts in skills governance—quasi-markets, employer Trailblazers, the Levy—have occurred alongside ‘rolled-back’ changes to public provision, mirroring the dynamics Jones identifies in local economic development. This suggests BMC identifies a more general feature of British neoliberal statecraft, though my thesis focuses on its specific manifestation in skills policy. Specifically:

Vignette 3: From policy architect to delivery agent — BMC vs SSCs

Leaving Whitehall in 2004 to help design and then lead a Sector Skills Council (SSC) for the creative and cultural industries felt, at first, like a liberation. On paper, SSCs were employer-led, sector-specific bodies charged with articulating skill needs from the demand side—an ambition that aligned with my own conviction that meaningful reform required decentralisation and genuine stakeholder co-governance. In practice, the reality of operating inside the BMC architecture soon became apparent.

Every major decision—from the structure of occupational standards to the allocation of budgets—was subject to approval by the SSDA (later the UKCES) and ultimately by DfES/DIUS officials. Our “sector skills agreement,” which was supposed to be a negotiated compact between employers, unions and government, was in reality a compliance exercise against centrally prescribed templates. When we attempted to introduce innovative, flexible qualifications tailored to the creative industries—where project-based, portfolio careers are the norm—we were told that the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) required unit-based, modular structures that bore little resemblance to how skills were actually developed and deployed in the sector.

The most revealing encounters came in “performance review” meetings with officials, where the language of partnership gave way to the reality of principal–agent accountability. KPIs focused on the number of qualifications approved, the volume of National Occupational Standards reviewed, and the speed of response to ministerial priorities—not on the quality of employer engagement or the relevance of provision to sectoral labour market needs. When our SSC published research showing that many publicly funded qualifications in the creative sector were poorly aligned with employer needs, the response from officials was not curiosity but anxiety: “This is unhelpful messaging.” The SSC’s role, it became clear, was not to challenge the system but to legitimate it—to provide the employer-led veneer that BMC requires while operating within parameters set by Whitehall. My trajectory from policy architect to delivery agent crystallised what the thesis theorises: BMC creates institutional spaces that appear to empower new actors, but the fundamental coordinates of power—product design, funding, accountability—remain at the centre.

4. CRISIS TENDENCIES OF BRITISH CAPITALISM AND COORDINATION DEFICITS

Section 4 turns explicitly to the crisis tendencies of British capitalism as they manifest in the skills system, arguing that BMC both reflects and reinforces structural coordination deficits. These deficits are not merely technical; they are integral to a state project that prioritises fiscal restraint in supporting adult skills and lifelong learning, flexible labour markets and the ideological primacy of orthodox human capital.

4.1 Market failure and state failure in skills formation

Classical accounts of skills policy emphasise market failures: poaching externalities, information asymmetries and under-investment in general skills (Stevens, 1994; Crouch et al., 1999; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 7). Under BMC, these market failures *intersect* with distinctive state failures. Central control over funding and programme design creates confusion over responsibility: employers and unions are cast as customers of a state-managed market rather than co-governors of collective training (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). Providers face conflicting signals between throughput, quality and local needs, producing perverse incentives to ‘game’ metrics (Wolf, 2011; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). Governance churn—frequent rebranding and restructuring of agencies—adds uncertainty without altering fundamental power relations (Figure 11.5 in Bewick, 2025). These state failures are hard-wired into BMC’s design: central departments seek to steer complex markets at low fiscal cost, but the very instruments they use undermine sustained coordination and value-for-money (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). As Jones (2023, p. 61, drawing on Bakker, 2010) observes, ‘market failures, state failures and governance failures coexist’ and are used to justify ongoing state intervention. In the skills domain, this means that BMC continually generates its own justification: the failures of previous BMC iterations are used to legitimate the next round of centralised institutional redesign, in a pattern of governance ‘failing forward’ (Peck, 2010).

4.2 Apprenticeships, adult skills and coordination problems

The apprenticeship system provides a clear illustration. Levy revenues have been substantial, yet starts have fallen, participation is skewed by age and level, and completion rates vary widely (Table 11.1 in Bewick, 2025; National Audit Office, 2019). Large firms often treat the Levy as a tax to be minimised. In contrast, small firms struggle to navigate the system (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). Standards developed by Trailblazer groups must fit central

templates, leading to compromises that satisfy neither employers nor providers fully (Fuller and Unwin, 2017). Combined authorities lack power to reshape the underlying ‘product’ or funding rules (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 10). Adult skills show similar patterns: Advanced Learner Loans have seen low and uneven uptake, with concerns about debt aversion (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). FE colleges have experienced significant funding cuts and increased performance pressures, including deteriorating workforce morale with FE lecturers, on average, paid 20 per cent less than their secondary school counterparts since 2010 (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2019; National Foundation for Educational Research, 2024; 2026).

4.3 Why BMC exacerbates coordination deficits

Drawing on Miliband and Poulantzas, the thesis argues that BMC exacerbates coordination deficits by focusing on managing crises within neoliberal parameters rather than transforming the underlying political economy. State and business elites benefit from Treasury fiscal rules that keep public spending in check while channelling increasing taxpayer funds through quasi-markets to avoid imposing collective training obligations on capital (Miliband, 1969; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). The Treasury’s fiscal orthodoxy pushes towards tightly controlled, measurable, financially constrained schemes—precisely the opposite of what long-term sector-specific skill development requires. The state uses its relative autonomy not to challenge employer voluntarism but to reorganise agencies in ways that maintain flexibility and cost control (Poulantzas, 1978; Offe, 1984; Bewick, 2025, Ch’s 7, 11). BMC’s preferred solution to coordination problems is usually *more central coordination*—additional metrics, oversight bodies, and frameworks—rather than rebalancing labour-employer power through strong sectoral institutions, individualised purchasing power via skills accounts, or robust public provision based on the principle of subsidiarity (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11).

4.4 Empirical manifestations: shortages, inequalities and low-skill equilibrium

Skills Policy in Britain and the Future of Work presents extensive data on chronic skills shortages in health and social care, construction, digital occupations and advanced manufacturing, despite the availability of domestic labour and rising qualification levels (Bewick, 2025, Ch’s 7, 11, 12). These shortages are often addressed through mass immigration or short-term initiatives rather than systematic sectoral strategies (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 12). Regional inequalities are stark: London and the South East enjoy higher participation and stronger institutional capacity, while many northern and coastal areas face entrenched

educational disadvantage (Pike et al., 2015; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 10). Productivity and wage data underscore the low-skill, low-wage equilibrium: UK productivity growth has lagged peer economies, and real wages have stagnated since the financial crisis and post-Covid (Finegold and Soskice, 1988; OECD, 2023; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 7).

4.5 Structural, not merely technical, deficits

Building from the book, the thesis concludes that coordination deficits in British skills policy are structural to BMC as a predominantly state-manager-driven project in which class interests, such as meaningful trade union engagement, have been marginalised (Herbert, 2026). Addressing them would require:

- fairer and more stable public investment in FE and adult learning;
- an expanded, more universal training levy and robust sectoral institutions with real co-governance powers;
- stronger worker and learner voice in skills governance;
- and a reorientation of economic strategy towards job quality, inclusive growth and long-term productivity rather than meeting short-term fiscal targets (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 12).

Jones's (2023, p. 67) argument that failure 'can be construed as a form of success, especially when the state is faced with the unresolvable problems' is pertinent here: in the skills domain, BMC's apparent failures—institutional churn, persistent skills shortages, low employer investment—may be functional from the perspective of maintaining the existing balance of class forces and the collibrative management of contradictions. Such a shift would move beyond BMC towards a different training state—a more democratic, solidaristic and decentralised configuration. Building on the concluding part of *Skills Policy in Britain and the Future of Work*, Section 5 briefly sketches the contours of this alternative.

5. CONCLUSION: CHALLENGING SKILLS ENGLAND — TOWARDS A NEW POLICY PARADIGM

The establishment of Skills England, with a remit to rationalise and coordinate the skills system, is the latest institutional expression of BMC (Department for Education, 2024; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 12). From the vantage point of this thesis, such reforms are unlikely to succeed if they remain within the internalised logic of bureaucratic market centralisation.

5.1 Summary of the thesis argument

The thesis has argued that, since 1981, British skills policy has been organised through three sub-variants of BMC: workfare, quasi-market and product-market centralisation. Each reconfiguration has responded to crises—mass unemployment, deindustrialisation, globalisation, austerity—but has preserved centralised product design, quasi-market delivery and the ideological primacy of orthodox human capital approaches (Brown et al., 2020; Bewick, 2025, Ch's 6–11). By synthesising Gramsci, Polanyi, Miliband, Poulantzas and Jessop–Jones, and by drawing on *Skills Policy in Britain and the Future of Work*, the thesis conceptualises the training state as an **institutional ensemble** through which class power operates, labour is commodified and disciplined, and crisis tendencies are managed rather than resolved (Jessop, 1990, 2002; Jones, 1999; Bewick, 2025). This analysis is corroborated by Jones's (2023) parallel findings in economic development governance, where collibration and meta-governance failure produce analogous patterns of institutional churn and persistent policy failure, suggesting that BMC identifies a systemic feature of British neoliberal statecraft rather than a skills-specific anomaly.

5.2 Contribution to knowledge

The thesis, then, makes three main bold contributions:

First, it offers BMC as a new ideal-type for understanding the UK training state, extending and refining existing concepts such as the Schumpeterian workfare state by emphasising the re-centralisation of strategic control alongside the maintenance of market rhetoric (Jessop, 2002; Peck, 2001). Whereas Jessop and others emphasise 'hollowing out' and devolution, BMC captures the paradox of the contemporary British configuration: more central specification, more intensive audit and tighter fiscal discipline, all wrapped in the language of employer leadership and local partnership

(Bewick, 2025, Ch. 11). This identification of re-centralisation is independently corroborated by Jones's (2023) finding that 'filling-in' of state governance accompanies 'hollowing-out' in economic development, and that collibration—the deliberate maintenance of contradictory objectives in tension—operates as a systemic feature of British neoliberal statecraft rather than a skills-specific anomaly. In Jessop's own terms, BMC represents the kind of 'particular critical realism' he identifies as necessary: specific labouring work that takes the general heuristic of the SRA and operationalises it for a concrete policy domain, producing the mid-range theoretical concepts that the SRA itself cannot generate but requires if it is to do explanatory work (Jessop, 2007: 43; Jessop and Morgan, 2022).

Second, it integrates historical and political policy analysis with autoethnographic insight, demonstrating how policy insiders' experiences can deepen our understanding of institutional cultures and ideological commitments within skills governance (Stone, 2002; Holman-Jones et al., 2013; Bewick, 2025, Ch's 1, 9). This methodological innovation bridges macro-level state theory, meso-level organisational capacity, and micro-level institutional ethnography.

Third, it reframes persistent coordination deficits as structural consequences of a new class-based project, opening analytical and political space to imagine alternative training states that, in turn, can offer a radical alternative to the excessive commodification of education and training in Britain. This context has been brought about both here and elsewhere by the *integral state* and its current policy preferences for the neoliberalisation of skills stratified by class (Miliband, 1969; Poulantzas, 1978; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 12).

5.3 Elements of an alternative training state: 'triple decentralisation'

While a full blueprint lies beyond the scope of a critical appraisal and presents itself as my next project, the thesis suggests elements of a different policy paradigm. In my book, I refer to this as 'triple decentralisation': institutional, fiscal and democratic decentralisation combined (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 12).

Institutionally, this would mean stable sectoral and regional bodies with statutory powers over standards, funding priorities and training volumes, resembling German chambers or Swiss training organisations (Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012; Thelen, 2014; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 12). **Fiscally**, it would imply a broader training levy or social insurance model, with pooled resources governed jointly by employers, workers and public authorities established

both locally/spatially and rooted in sectoral bargaining mechanisms (Gospel, 1998; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 12). **Democratically**, it would require much stronger worker, union, learner and community representation in skills governance (Rainbird, 2000; Bewick, 2025, Ch. 12). In policy terms, I go beyond the suggestion of so-what and add new insights.

5.3a What a high-skills economy looks like in practice

Triple decentralisation is a set of means. The end it serves is what I have called throughout this thesis and in my original monograph an inclusive high-skills economy. Since Lloyd and Payne (2003b) rightly complain that such visions are almost always left sketchy and implicit, it is necessary to state plainly what is meant by it in this thesis.

An inclusive high-skills economy is a new political-economic settlement that satisfies three tests. The first is closure: the low-cost, low-wage competitive route is progressively shut down by binding institutional pressure—raising wage floors, improving licensing, introducing social value procurement conditions, and enforcing training obligations—so that competing on quality becomes the rational strategy for the average firm rather than an exceptional one. The second is breadth: good jobs are generated across the whole occupational distribution, so that the settlement is judged by the skill content, security and discretion of work in social care, retail, logistics and hospitality rather than by graduate numbers or the size of a knowledge-intensive core. The third is distribution: the productivity gains are shared through sectoral bargaining, a rising wage floor and social investment, sustaining the broad high-income consumer base on which demand for quality goods and services depends. On these tests, the present British settlement fails not narrowly but comprehensively, and what it produces instead is the bipolar high/low-skills economy that Lloyd and Payne (2006) anticipated prior to the crisis of Atlantic capitalism in 2008.

In practice, such an economy would be recognisable by four institutional features, each corresponding to an element of triple decentralisation. First, statutory sectoral bodies with real co-determination among employers, unions and public authorities, empowered to set occupational standards, licence practice where appropriate, and levy enforceable contributions from firms within their scope—the function performed by German chambers, Danish sectoral committees and Swiss training organisations (Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012; Thelen, 2014). Second, a fiscal base equal to the task: a broader hypothecated levy or payroll-insurance contribution, pooled at sectoral and regional levels and jointly governed rather than administered as a departmental budget line, coupled with portable adult learning

entitlements controlled by individuals rather than providers (Gospel, 1998). Third, job quality and skill utilisation treated as explicit policy objectives rather than as residuals—job redesign and work reorganisation supported at sectoral level, licence-to-practise arrangements extended where they raise standards, public procurement conditioned on training and employment quality, and the public sector acting as an exemplary employer rather than as a source of outsourced low-wage work. Fourth, worker voice with statutory teeth: rights to information, consultation and paid time for learning, union learning representatives with bargaining standing over training decisions rather than a delivery role, and worker representation on the bodies that allocate training funds (Rainbird, 2000). Alongside these, as set out in section 5.4, migration and industrial strategy would be aligned with domestic training obligations rather than used as substitutes for them.

This vision responds directly to the debate reviewed in section 2.6a. It refuses to treat qualification supply, employer engagement or the diffusion of high-performance work practices as sufficient in themselves, a scepticism Lloyd and Payne (2006) show to be well founded. It answers the demand-side critique institutionally, by foreclosing the cost-based route rather than exhorting firms to abandon it voluntarily. And it addresses the agency problem in the only way a governance reform can: not by assuming an agent of change into existence, but by constructing the existing institutions through which collective agency could be rebuilt—co-governed sectoral bodies, jointly administered funds and statutory workplace rights are, precisely, the machinery through which organised labour and learners might acquire the capacity to realistically press for more.

To that extent the recommendations of this thesis address ‘the skills problem’ in the UK as it has actually been diagnosed since 1988: not as a shortfall of qualifications, but as a self-reproducing settlement in which neither employers nor the state face pressure to escape a low-skill, low-wage equilibrium.

Two limits should be stated candidly. First, the reforms proposed here govern skill formation; they do not by themselves reform the capital markets, corporate governance or the macroeconomic policy and welfare regimes that Lloyd and Payne (2002b, 2006) rightly place at the centre of the causal complex. The claim advanced here is narrower, though not trivial: BMC is the specific socio-political state form through which those wider structural constraints have been translated into a durable, self-reproducing neoliberal skills settlement, and dismantling BMC is therefore a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for an inclusive high-skills economy. Second, and following from Section 4, none of this follows

automatically from good argument. Without a shift in the balance of social forces, and without breaking the ‘collibrative’ fixes through which BMC displaces rather than resolves its contradictions (Jones, 2023), an inclusive high-skills economy remains an ongoing academic project rather than a prediction. That was Lloyd and Payne’s conclusion two decades ago, and the intervening period has done nothing to refute it. This thesis adds a precise account of the state form that would have to be dismantled for a new radical project such as the new accord set out here to even begin.

5.4 Implications for Skills England and current policy

The creation of Skills England provides an opportunity to reflect on whether the new body will replicate BMC logics or open space for transformation (Department for Education, 2024). Early indications suggest continuity: Skills England is tasked with coordinating existing structures but remains accountable to central government, operates within Treasury spending envelopes and lacks statutory powers to compel employers or challenge the underlying product-market architecture (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 12). For Skills England to represent a genuine departure, it would need to:

- be constituted as a genuinely independent statutory body reporting to Parliament with multi-stakeholder governance;
- be empowered to raise and allocate hypothecated fiscal training funds through an expanded levy, payroll insurance or tax-credit mechanism;
- have the authority to negotiate and enforce sectoral training agreements with employer associations and trade unions;
- be explicitly able to link the issuance of work and study visas to priorities that prioritise domestic workforce training;
- and be given the remit to set strategic priorities based on long-term industrial strategy, labour-market equity and environmental sustainability, not just short-term employer demand signals (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 12).

Without such fundamental reforms, Skills England is likely to become another iteration of BMC—a rationalisation of central control within a top-down neoliberal state-based regime rather than a transformation towards a decentralised training state built on more social democratic principles (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 12). One way to avoid such a fate would be to learn

from comparative best practice and shift towards a tripartite *skills ecosystem* approach, discussed further below.

5.5 Testing BMC in the policy arena: the TUC Skills 2050 project

A further test of the analytical purchase of BMC arises from work I undertook while completing this thesis. In June 2026, I was independently commissioned to write a paper for the Expert Advisory Group of the Trades Union Congress's Skills 2050 project (Bewick, 2026a). The commission is methodologically significant to the argument developed here. It placed the thesis's central concept in a policy-facing arena where the labour movement—the social force most systematically marginalised by BMC, as Sections 3 and 4 argued—was actively seeking an alternative account of why four decades of reform have failed. Consistent with the autoethnographic sensibility set out in Section 1.2, this episode is reported not as external validation but as another instance of the insider positionality through which this thesis has been produced.

The paper's organising distinction is between a skills system, which each of the four UK nations operates, and a skills ecosystem, which the highest-performing comparators have built and sustained (Australia, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Singapore and Sweden). The distinction draws on Finegold's (1999) account of self-sustaining high-skill ecosystems and on Keep's (2022) diagnostic work for the Skills and Productivity Board, which established that skills are a derived demand: unless policy also shapes business strategy, product-market position, work organisation and job design, supply-side upskilling yields limited and potentially sub-optimal effects. A system supplies centrally determined skills 'products'; an ecosystem coordinates that supply with demand for skills and with the institutions that determine how skills are used. Table 5.1 contrasts the two across eight dimensions of institutional design.

That table is, in effect, BMC presented as a policy-design specification. Each left-hand cell restates a feature theorised in the preceding sections: central steering with employer-consultative and token union involvement (structural selectivity); demand assumed rather than shaped (the orthodox human capital assumption critiqued in Section 2.6); absorptive capacity and skills utilisation absent as policy objects; entitlement rendered as loan-financed and credential-bound; and skills treated as inputs to a labour market rather than as one variable in a jointly governed industrial strategy. The comparative evidence assembled in the paper—from Singapore, Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden—

establishes that these are not universal features of advanced capitalist skills formation but determinate features of a particular British state form. This matters for the thesis's claim to contingent necessity (Section 3.4): if comparator states with comparable exposure to global competition have sustained tripartite, sectorally anchored ecosystems, then BMC cannot be read as a functional requirement of neoliberal accumulation in general.

The paper's four proposed pillars—statutory sectoral skills councils with guaranteed union seats and industrial-strategy alignment; combined-authority commissioning of post-16 technical and adult skills; a revived Union Learning Fund; and a rights-based individual entitlement layered on a reformed Lifelong Learning Entitlement, financed through a consolidated UK Workforce Investment Fund under an independent statutory tripartite board—can be read as an operationalisation of the 'triple decentralisation' sketched in Section 5.3. The statutory sectoral councils provide the institutional dimension; the consolidated fund and the entitlement provide the fiscal dimension; and guaranteed union seats and the revived Union Learning Fund provide the democratic dimension. Each pillar targets a specific coordination deficit identified in Section 4, rather than the organisational churn through which BMC habitually manages such deficits.

Two qualifications should be registered. First, the diagnosis is no longer confined to critical scholarship: the government's own Industrial Strategy Advisory Council (2026) has concluded that the central problem is not the level of funding but market fragmentation, weak coordination and the absence of mechanisms for collective action. An official advisory body reaching a cognate conclusion is itself a BMC phenomenon of the kind Jones (2023) describes, in which failure is acknowledged and then metabolised through further institutional redesign. Second, the OECD's (2026) skills-first agenda, on which the UK is classified as a front-runner, is an allocative-efficiency argument before it is a distributional one; absent collective institutions, skills-first hiring risks eroding occupational wage structures. The pillars are therefore offered as a strategy for altering the structural selectivity of the training state, not as a technical fix within it. Whether such a project can be prosecuted from within a state form designed to absorb it remains, as Section 5.4 argued of Skills England, an open question—and the central one for the research programme this thesis opens.

Table 5.1 Skills system and skills ecosystem compared

Dimension	“Skills system” (UK, England currently)	“Skills ecosystem” (comparator model)
What it coordinates	Supply of qualifications and training programmes (outputs only)	Supply of skills with demand from firms, sectors and localities (shift to outcomes)
Governance	Centrally steered, provider-led, employer-consultative, token union involvement	Tripartite by design; social partners co-own decisions. Skills ecosystem is driven by the demand-side, not supply or government-led initiatives
Business demand	Assumed; not actively shaped by policy. Neoliberal view of human capital (Becker, 1964, 1993)	Actively shaped through sector strategy, product-market and job-design interventions
Absorptive capacity	Off the radar; treated as a firm-level issue, “leave it to the market”	Explicitly supported (Keep, 2022); often through FE/business-support fusion and sectoral frameworks implemented at the firm level
Workforce voice	Consulted where politically expedient	Statutory seat at every level (national, sectoral, local, workplace)
Skills utilisation	Not a policy target	Live policy focus (OECD, 2026); driven at sector/local level, underpinned by national legislation
Individual entitlement	Loan-financed, credential-bound (LLE), restricted to HEIs	Rights-based; paired with sectoral delivery infrastructure; universal, avoiding “postcode lottery”
Object of policy	Skills as inputs to a labour market	Skills as one variable in a decentralised and jointly governed industrial and productivity strategy

Source: Bewick (2026a), Rebuilding a Skills Ecosystem in the Four Nations of the UK, paper commissioned for the TUC Skills 2050 Project, Expert Advisory Group, 3 September 2026, Table 1, p. 8. Reproduced by the author.

5.6 Final reflections and where next

Ultimately, the thesis invites policymakers, practitioners and scholars to view the UK skills system not as a malfunctioning machine in need of periodic technical adjustments, but as an expression of deeper political and economic choices (Stone, 2002; Bewick, 2025). To change outcomes, those choices—and the social and class relations they embody—must enter democratic debate.

By theorising BMC and situating it within a historical dialectic of British skills policy, this thesis aims to contribute to that debate and to equip future research and practice with a clearer understanding of the training state’s institutional logics and their limits (Bewick, 2025; Jessop, 1990, 2002, 2022; Jones, 1999, 2001). The challenge ahead is not merely to design better policies within the existing paradigm, but to construct a new training state capable of

advancing skills, dignity and social justice in an era of technological disruption, AI and ecological crisis.

Jessop's late turn towards the critique of political ecology—and his argument that “the principal contradiction in the capital relation is now that between capital and nature” (Jessop and Morgan, 2022: 111)—underscores the urgency of linking skills policy to the ecological crisis and to a fair, decarbonised transition for working people. A training state oriented towards green industrialisation, community energy systems and sustainable livelihoods would require exactly the kind of democratic, decentralised governance structures that BMC has systematically prevented (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 12).

As Jones (2023) shows through the concept of collibration, managing contradictions through spatial and institutional displacement is a recurring feature of neoliberal governance; breaking free from BMC requires not only skills-specific reform but also a transformation of the broader state form and its collibrative management of competing demands. If the British training state is to break free from the coordination deficits and crisis tendencies diagnosed here, it will require not only institutional innovation but also a fundamental shift in the balance of social forces and the democratisation of skills governance. Such a project is ambitious and contentious, but it is also necessary if skills policy is to serve the interests of the many rather than, as currently, the interests of elite policymakers and fractions of capital situated at the apex of a BMC regime (Bewick, 2025, Ch. 12). Thus:

Vignette 4: Out in the cold — from skills insider to policy dissident

Since 2011, I have not occupied positions within the formal apparatus of the training state. My roles—as CEO of the Federation of Awarding Bodies, consultant, researcher and public commentator—have placed me at the boundary between pluralistic policy communities and the wider field of providers, employers and learners. In these roles, I have continued to engage with ministers and officials, but the texture of those engagements has changed. Invitations to sit on advisory groups, join roundtables, or contribute to government-commissioned reviews have become more sporadic, and some opportunities have simply evaporated without explanation after I've published a critical report or a Substack journal piece.

It would be easy, but analytically lazy, to frame this as a story of personal grievance or “cancellation”. From an autoethnographic perspective, what matters is not the hurt pride of a former insider but what these experiences reveal about BMC's tolerance limits. My public work has increasingly foregrounded the argument that the current skills settlement is not merely inefficient and socially regressive, but structurally geared towards managing a *low-skill, low-wage equilibrium*, and that meaningful alternatives would require redistributing power away from central departments and towards sectors, regions, workers and learners. It would also require an end to employer voluntarism in training. These claims cut against a powerful official human capital narrative in which every new agency

or strategy is presented as evidence of a system becoming more “employer-led” and “joined up”—capable of delivering the “skills revolution” the country needs. In meetings where I have raised uncomfortable questions—about the decoupling of post-18 participation from productivity, the narrow base of the Apprenticeship Levy, or the democratic deficit in bodies such as Skills England—the atmosphere has shifted perceptibly. Officials who were previously relaxed and open become guarded; officials I’ve known for years show reluctance to debate the substantive policy issues with me; follow-up contact is delegated to junior officials or quietly dropped. From the vantage point of BMC, this makes sense: a state form that relies on centralised meta-governance and the constant rebranding of quasi-markets has little room for critiques that question its foundational logics rather than its surface-level organisational concerns. Autoethnography, in this context, becomes a way of documenting how dissent is managed—not only through formal exclusion, but through more subtle practices of distancing, deferral, selective engagement and shadow banning. To be considered, therefore, a policy dissident, in this context, is a badge I wear with pride.

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