

Recent Tendency in Qualifications Reform in England: Toward Post-Fordist Reform

IIDA, Naohiro
Faculty of Human-Environment Studies, Kyushu University

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Recent Tendency in Qualifications Reform in England

—Toward Post-Fordist Reform—

Naohiro IIDA

Introduction

This study outlines recent education reform in terms of post-fordist theory, and demonstrates the characteristics of the recent qualifications reform by the government and the problems that must be confronted.

Since the late 20th century, many governments have been conducting various education reforms. The background of these reforms includes globalization and marketization. It also includes post-fordist theory. Although this, in general means a shift from conventional standardized mass production to diversification and individualization of products in an economic context, it includes various meanings when we use it in an educational context. Brown and Lauder (1992) describe the characteristics of post-fordist education reform compared with those of conventional education reform¹. Such a tendency in education reform can be seen in England as well as in many other countries. This study, focusing on the situation of the qualifications reform in England, describes two characteristics of post-fordist education reform: 1) the changes in required ability and skill, and 2) the dissolving of the division between academic and vocational study.

Given these two characteristics of post-fordist education reform, it would be appropriate to address two of the qualifications reforms: 1) the introduction of coursework assessment in GCSE examination, and 2) the set of reforms in the 1990s concerned with creating the national framework which includes both academic and vocational qualifications. First, in 1986, coursework assessment was adopted in GCSE. Until the introduction of GCSE, coursework assessment had been the assessment method of vocational qualification. Therefore it assessed ability and skill which was different from the ability and skill assessed by paper exams. The fact that most 16 year-old students undertake the GCSE examination means a policy shift from the highlight of ability and skill which could be assessed by paper exams. Second, in 1997 the national qualification framework was introduced in which academic and vocational qualifications at the same

level were given equal value. In this reform, vocational qualifications, which had conventionally been industry/region specific, were placed in a national framework. To some extent, this meant the integration of academic and vocational qualifications.

This study focuses on the qualifications reform mentioned above, and analyzes the theoretical background in terms of two characteristics. Consequently, problems of the present reform and the direction of future reform are indicated.

Post-Fordist Education Reform

In recent years, especially from the latter 80's, the governments of industrial countries have increasingly emphasized global competitiveness of their own country. In such context, to survive in the global market has significant implications for the existing system of education and training. Brown and Lauder (1992) argue:

it is suggested that advanced Western economies now confront a choice between maintaining the rigid hierarchical division of labour, and low-skill and low-trust relationships characteristics of fordism, or shift to a system based on adaptable machinery, adequate workers, flatter hierarchies, and the breakdown of the division between mental and manual labour and learning.²

In fordist theory, the major characteristics are mass production and consumption of standardized products. In relation to state education, these characteristics had significant implications for the education system, which is quite hierarchical and closely linked to social class. Post-fordist theory, however, includes removal of the hierarchical system and division of labour, leading to social equality. The characteristics of fordism and post-fordism that Brown and Lauder suggested are described on table 1.

They also point out the difference of characteristics between fordism and post-fordism in relation to the three educational waves in socio-historical perspective (see table 2). The first wave occurred in the nineteenth century. This was the introduction of the modern institution of schooling and it had quite hierarchical characteristics. In this time, the governments' main concern was only how to educate the elite. 'However, industrial societies developed the reproduction of the non-manual workforce could not be achieved by restricting 'education' exclusively to middle-class men.'³ And following the Second World War, these changes were linked to the movement of equal opportunity for all. This created the basis of the second wave.

Table 1 Characteristics of fordism and post-fordism⁴

<i>Fordism</i>	<i>Post-fordism</i>
<i>Economy competition and production process</i>	
Protected national markets	Global competition
Mass production of standardized products	Flexible production systems/small batch/ niche markets
Bureaucratic hierarchical organizations	Flatter and flexible organizational structures
Compete by full capacity utilization and cost-cutting	Compete by innovation, diversification, sub-contracting
<i>Labour</i>	
Fragmented and standardized work tasks	Flexible specialization/ multi-skilled workers
Low-trust/low-discretion	High-trust/high-discretion
Majority employed in manufacturing sector/'blue collar' jobs	Majority employed in service sector/'white collar' jobs
Little 'on the job' training	Regular 'on the job' training
Little formal education required for most jobs	Greater demand for 'knowledgeable' workers
Small managerial and professional elite	Growing managerial and professional class/service class
Fairly predictable labour market histories	Unpredictable labour market histories due to technological change and increased economic uncertainty
<i>Politics and ideology</i>	
Trade union solidarity	Decline in trade union membership
Class-based political affiliation	Declining significance of class-based politics
Importance of locality/class/ gender-based lifestyles	Fragmentation and pluralism 'global village'
Mass consumption of consumer durables	Individualized consumption/ consumer choice

Table 2 Characteristics of second and third wave education⁵

<i>Educational Change</i>	
<i>Second Wave</i>	<i>Third Wave</i>
Early differentiation/ selection/ specialization	Late differentiation/ selection/ specialization
Teacher 'economy of respect' based on academic attainment/ cultural uniformity	Teacher 'economy of respect' based on rounded individual/ cultural diversity
Low-trust relations between teacher/pupil and teacher/parents	High-trust relations between teacher/pupil and teacher/parents
Low-ability system: tap the pool of ability	High-ability system: harness the wealth of talent
Emphasis on individual intelligence/achievement	Emphasis on both individual and collective intelligence/achievement
End of year or course examinations	More emphasis on continuous assessment/Records of achievement
Emphasis on educational standards of a minority	Emphasis on educational standards of all
Rigid subject divisions	Integrated core studies
Education and Training complete during 'teens'	Life-long education and training
Distinction between academic and vocational studies	Academic/vocational distinction no longer appropriate
Selective/comprehensive school organization	Comprehensive school/college organization
<i>Human Ability and Motivation</i>	
<i>Second Wave</i>	<i>Third Wave</i>
The average human being has a dislike of work and will avoid it if possible	The expenditure of physical and mental effort in work is as natural as play or rest
People must be coerced, controlled, directed threatened with punishment to fulfil organizational goals	People will exercise self-direction and self-control to fulfil aims to which they are committed
Most people avoid responsibility, have relatively little ambition, and above all want security	Under the right conditions most people will both accept and seek responsibility
Intelligence is a scarce resource, but can be 'scientifically' identified among children at an early age	Unfolding of human capacity limited by social hierarchy and cultural attitudes
The organization of education and employment corresponds to the normal distribution of talent	The capacity to exercise imagination, ingenuity, creativity, etc., is widely distributed in the population

The second wave was based on meritocracy and includes a hierarchical system. In this time, the education system was seen as a tool of social selection. In England, after the Second World War the tripartite system of schooling was introduced where only the top 20-25% of the whole population could go to grammar schools and gain academic certificates, while most children, predominantly from working class, would go to modern schools and get no certificate until the 1960s.

School and college credentials provided a useful screening device for employers who were concerned that future employees should be inculcated into the appropriate forms of rule-following behaviour, as well as having the appropriate knowledge and skills for their place in the techno-structure.⁶

It is clear that in a hierarchical education system the certificate is quite an important tool for selection.

Finally, the recently emerging third wave ('high-ability system') is reconciled with post-fordism which has had an increasingly great impact on education system especially from the 1990s and is seen to be necessary in order to achieve sustainable economic growth and means the end of the historically existing hierarchical system, while it 'cannot be premised on the "free market" because it represents an inadequate response to the historical challenge confronting industrial societies.'⁷ In this context what should mainly be addressed are: 1) changes in the existing notion of intelligence, and 2) the fostering of 'collective intelligence' while reducing the 'pool of talent'.⁸

Focus

This section focuses on two important features of post-fordism:

- Changes in required ability and skill in industrial societies
- Dissolution of the division between academic and vocational study

These two characteristics were mainly addressed by Brown and Lauder. First, in recent decades, there has been a significant emphasis on the ability and skills which are required by governments and societies. This characteristic is related to the changes in intelligence which Brown and Lauder argued. As seen above, they advocate that in time of significant economic and industrial change the redefinition of intelligence which used to be seen as

unchangeable, measurable, and a scarce resource leads to a 'high-ability' society. In England, academic intelligence has been enormously emphasized in schooling. It could be symbolized by the one-shot written examination. And the participants of this type of exam (GCE O and A level) were middle-class children in grammar schools whereas working-class children who were in modern schools could only acquire 'the next best' (CSE). However in the latter half of the 1980s there was significant change in English examination system with the introduction of GCSE and its assessment. GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) was introduced in 1986 as a 16-plus examination. The GCSE examination includes a unique method of assessment, called coursework assessment. Coursework assessment is the assessment of study through experience, experiment, problem-solving study and research projects, and together with the score of a paper test at the end of the course the final grade is determined. This is clear evidence that indicates a shift toward post-fordist education reform in terms of the changes from a one-shot paper exam which seems to have hierarchical efficiency to more flexible notion of intelligence. In addition to this, continuous assessment and opportunity for problem-solving study are needed to the post-fordist reform⁹. However, this post-fordist education reform has changed from the introduction of GCSE to the present. This will be addressed in the next section.

Second, especially since the earlier 1990s, it has been the strong intention of the government to introduce a qualifications framework. It began with the introduction of GNVQ. GNVQ was introduced partly in order to satisfy the economical requirement for a labour force that have a wider range of ability and skills in the competitive global economy. This also indicates a shift toward post-fordist education reform in terms of changes from a hierarchical academic track, where only a few could acquire academic qualification and go on to higher education to a flexible and interchangeable qualifications system. Indeed, the characteristics of the 'third wave' include the elimination of Academic/vocational distinction (see table 1). However, there are some problematic aspects in this reform. This will be addressed in the next section.

The Introduction of GCSE and Coursework Assessment

As mentioned above, the adoption of coursework assessment was a significant event in the historical examination system. Coursework assessment is based on the ability and skills which have rarely been addressed in the 'main' examination by the previous government for example: problem solving, practical skills, application and communication. And the policy background of the adoption of coursework assessment was partly based on economical factors. In the process of the adoption of it there was increasing emphasis on

the needs to educate those who can survive international economic competition. And in this context, practical skills and problem-solving skills have been given greater importance. In other words, this means a shift in government policy from the traditional leaning toward knowledge and understanding in academic subjects measured by paper tests to a respect in view of human capital for abilities and skills which could not be assessed sufficiently by paper tests.

However, is there any change in this context? In order to find it, the changes in the percentage of coursework assessment compared with paper exams are shown below. In order to demonstrate the above points, national criteria¹⁰ of the GCSE examination and syllabuses¹¹ issued by an awarding body (Edexcel) are analyzed. First, national criteria show what the awarding bodies should obey and standards for coursework assessment weight in each subject. Analyzing national criteria leads to clarifying the changes in national standards for coursework assessment. Second, analysis of syllabuses demonstrates the change in assessment objectives and assessment standards. In the above ways, it is possible to demonstrate the national policy intention. Here, the changes particularly in English and Science (including Biology, Physics and Chemistry) are examined. The reason for examining these two subjects is that they tend to place greater importance on communication skills and practical skills which should be assessed by coursework assessment. These subjects show the changes in coursework assessment more markedly than the other subjects.

First, the national criteria (1985) stated that coursework in English should account for at least 20% of the total score in all syllabuses. However regulations for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (1995) stated that the final exam should account for at least 60% and coursework shouldn't account for over 40%. There is clear evidence that shows a shift of the government's negative attitude to coursework assessment. In addition to this, in science there was a similar situation. Whereas the national criteria stated that all assessment schemes should distribute 20% of the total score to practical skills and skills for conducting experiments, 1995 regulations state that the final exam should account for at least 70% and coursework assessment shouldn't account for more than 30%.

In the syllabuses of GCSE examination by an external examining body, a similar shift toward reduction of the percentage in GCSE English and science is shown. In the 1988 English syllabus, it could be possible to assess with only coursework, however in the 1999 and 2005 syllabuses, coursework is distributed 20% to each of speaking, listening, reading and writing. However, although in science syllabuses the percentage of coursework assessment has been changed more or less, no significant change is seen.

As seen above, the percentage of coursework has been reduced from the introduction of GCSE to the present and the 'restriction of the amount of assessed course-work in GCSE

and A levels marks an end to the process of reforming and diversifying the academic track'¹². Finally, the government has recently decided to abolish coursework assessment.

The National Qualifications Framework

In this section, the process of development of the national qualification framework is to be argued. As mentioned above, recent government policy concerning qualifications had serious implications for the existing system. This was based on the context of economic demand in knowledge-based societies in which there's a lack of young people who can enter the labour market. The government white paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (1991) suggested the introduction of a new vocational qualification – GNVQ (General National Vocational Qualification) in the context of enforcing global competitiveness of the country. And it also suggested a framework in which academic and vocational qualifications should have equal value¹³. This was a significant change in the existing qualifications system in which vocational qualifications had been seen as 'the next best'. And this was the basis of creation of the national qualifications framework. Following this, in 1995, part-one GNVQ was tentatively implemented. This is intended to provide the opportunity to 14-16 year-old students to acquire vocational qualifications. And recently, GNVQ was replaced with GCSE vocational subjects.

In 1996 the report, *Review of Qualifications for 16-19* was submitted by Sir Ron Dearing. This report suggested that there was little flexibility in the post-16 curriculum and that curriculum and qualifications reform was needed in order to develop the international competitiveness of young people. Based on this report, the National Qualifications Framework was introduced, and NCVQ (National Council for Vocational Qualifications) and Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority were merged into QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority). In addition to this, BTEC and University of London Examinations and Assessment Council were merged into Edexcel in 1997. Wolf (2002) argued that integration 'of vocational awards with academic ones is administratively easier than at any time in the past because, under direct government pressure, further amalgamations of the examining and awarding bodies have taken place'¹⁴.

However there is some problematic aspect of this reform. It is concerned with 'parity of esteem' of these two types of qualifications. Historically, there has been relative low status of vocational qualifications compared with academic qualifications. For example, GCE-O level and CSE were interchangeable in theory because they have a uniform grade scale—for example grade A to C of GCE-O level are equated to grade 1 of CSE. However, it

was quite difficult for these two types of qualifications to be recognized not merely in theory but in practice as of the same value. Therefore it is an inevitable requirement to create a system which can ensure the interchangeability and also change social awareness. Dyke (1996) argued that the new qualifications framework would be the reproduction of the tripartite system¹⁵ and suggested a modular system in order to eliminate the academic—vocational divide which has existed historically¹⁶. And he also noted that ‘parity of esteem’ is an important factor for post-fordist education¹⁷. The former requirement would be ensured by the module system which was suggested by Dyke and also in the Dearing report. However, unless the social recognition is changed, this qualifications reform toward post-fordism would have no effect.

Conclusion

The major findings of this study are below.

- Given the reduction of the weight of coursework and abolishment of it, there has been the intensification of hierarchical aspect of fordism which needs ‘valid and reliable’ credentials predominantly adopting a one-shot paper examination.
- The introduction of the National Qualifications Framework may lead to reproduce the academic—vocational divide, unless effective measures are taken by the government for ensuring ‘parity of esteem’ by teachers, parents, students, academics and employers.
- According to all the evidence above, Post-fordist education reform seems to be extremely restricted and it is crucial to create ‘parity of esteem’ in order to achieve it.

Notes

- ¹ Brown, P. and Lauder, H., 'Education, Economy, and Society: An Introduction to a New Agenda', in Brown, P. and Lauder, H. (eds.) *Education for Economic Survival—From fordism to post-fordism?*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, pp. 1-44.
- ² *ibid.*, p. 3.
- ³ *ibid.*, p. 10.
- ⁴ *ibid.*, p. 4.
- ⁵ *ibid.*, p. 28.
- ⁶ *ibid.*, p. 12.
- ⁷ *ibid.*, p. 27.
- ⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 27-34.
- ⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 35-36.
- ¹⁰ Department for Education and Science, *General Certificate of Secondary Education: National Criteria*, HMSO, 1985, School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, *Regulations for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and Regulations for Other Syllabuses Designed for Pupils of Compulsory School Age*, SCAA, 1995.
- ¹¹ 'English', London and East Anglian Group, *General Certificate of Secondary Education: Syllabuses for Schools and Colleges only*, 1987, pp. 227-248. 'Biology (Syllabuses A and B)', London and East Anglian Group, *General Certificate of Secondary Education: Syllabuses for Schools and Colleges only*, 1987, pp. 61-97. 'Physics (Syllabuses A)', London and East Anglian Group, *General Certificate of Secondary Education: Syllabuses for Schools and Colleges only*, 1987, pp. 347-368. 'Chemistry (Syllabuses A)', London and East Anglian Group, *General Certificate of Secondary Education: Syllabuses for Schools and Colleges only*, 1987, pp. 152-173. London Examinations, *GCSE Syllabus 1999: English*. London Examinations, *Science: Biology—1998 Syllabus*. London Examinations, *Science: Physics—1998 Syllabus*. London Examinations, *Science: Chemistry—1998 Syllabus*. Edexcel, *Specification: Edexcel GCSE in English A (1203)*, 2002. Edexcel, *Specification: Edexcel GCSE in Biology A (1520)*, 2000. Edexcel, *Specification: Edexcel GCSE in Physics A (1540)*, 2000. Edexcel, *Specification: Edexcel GCSE in Chemistry A (1530)*, 2000.
- ¹² Richardson, W., Finegold, D. and Woolhouse, J., *The Reform of Post-16 Education and Training in England and Wales*, Longman, 1993, p. 77.
- ¹³ Department of Education and Science, Employment Department, and Welsh Office, *Education and Training for the 21st Century*, Vol. 1, HMSO, 1991, pp. 24-27.
- ¹⁴ Wolf, A., 'Qualifications and Assessment', in Aldrich, A. (ed.), *A Century of Education*, RoutledgeFalmer, 2002, p. 221.
- ¹⁵ Dyke, M., 'The New Qualifications Framework: towards post-Fordist reform?', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 1996, p. 266.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 267, 271.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 270.

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¹ Brown, P. and Lauder, H., 'Education, Economy, and Society: An Introduction to a New Agenda', in Brown, P. and Lauder, H. (eds.) *Education for Economic Survival—From fordism to post-fordism?*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, pp. 1-44.