

# The Diploma Disease Revisited

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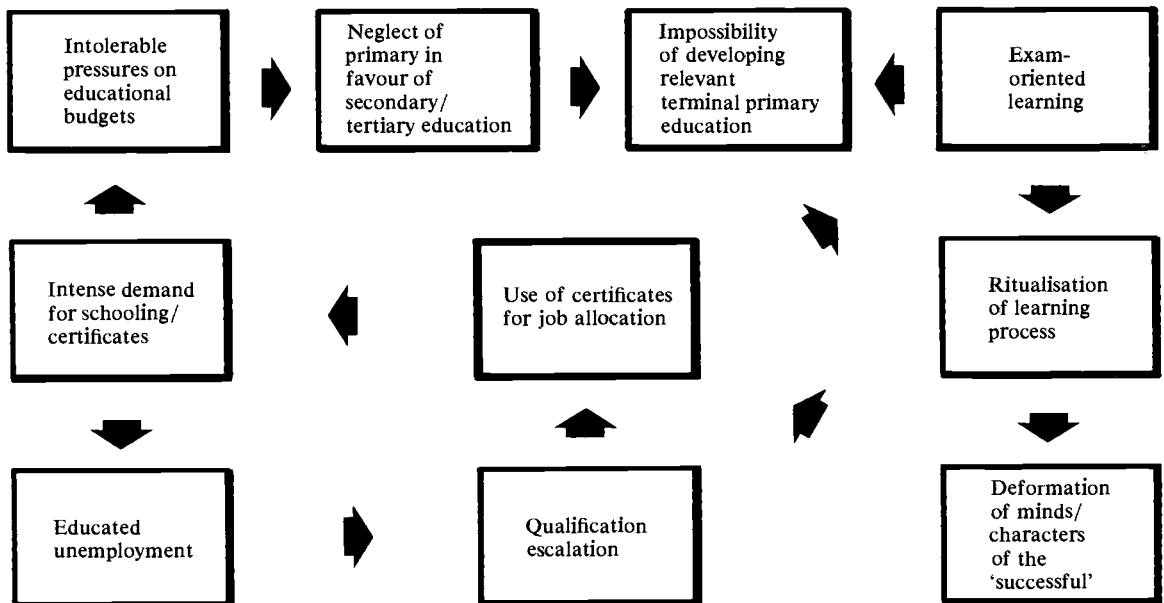
I suppose, if narcissism could overcome boredom, I ought to sit down and read through *The Diploma Disease* [1976] to make sure, but I do not **think** there are many passages which I would blush to read because I now think I got them badly wrong. I am not aware of having undergone any major intellectual conversion since I wrote the book, but I **have** learned things that would make me want to alter some of the things I said, and to put some things differently. I ended the preface by saying that many of the 'conclusions' which I presented in that book were in fact hypotheses which the research of IDS colleagues would doubtless throw some light on. Indeed it has.

Before I explain how, perhaps I should begin by summarising what the book originally tried to say. Briefly, the 'message' was as follows:

the 'bureaucratisation of economic life' in all modern societies is making selection for jobs/careers by educational attainment more and more universal. From this fact flows a variety of consequences diagrammed in the chart below:

First, the level of qualification required for any particular job tends to rise over time, because of overproduction of job-seekers (educated unemployment) and competition between professional bodies and employing organisations to 'tap the pool of talent' at the highest possible point. So there is more and more schooling (over and above the generally desirable extension of basic education) for reasons which have nothing to do with the actual knowledge acquisition necessary for **doing** jobs. Nor does it have much to do with personal development and self-fulfilment, or learning for its own sake, since a lot of the schooling is 'reluctant schooling'—the ritual acquisition of qualifications necessary to **get** jobs. (The triad of alternative educational purposes— a) learning for self-fulfilment, for personal development, for 'its own sake', etc; b) learning to **do** jobs; and c) learning to **get** jobs—plays an important role in the book.)

All this reluctant schooling is very expensive to society. And it may well produce people at the highest levels who—because of the reluctant and ritual nature of their prolonged schooling—have



attitudes towards work, and towards self-advancement by competitive conformity to external (rather than internalised) authorities, which are far from likely to transform them into productive, innovative, public spirited managers and administrators. It also has 'incapacitating' consequences at lower levels because, as graduating final certificates become more and more important for life chances so, too, do selection exams within the educational system. The crucial selection exams which track people and determine what sort of final diplomas they can get may be postponed under egalitarian pressures (as from 11+ to 16+ in Britain), but somewhere in the system they remain and their importance is steadily enhanced. As they come to dominate the curriculum, there is a 'backwash' effect: the preparatory functions of primary and junior secondary schools—preparing the 'successful' minority for selection exam success and further education—tends to dominate their terminal educational functions—preparing the 'unsuccessful' majority for life and entry into work. This increases the problems of 'relevance' of the basic educational cycle.

All these tendencies, found in all societies, are exacerbated in developing countries for a number of reasons: because the stakes in the diploma competition are so much higher (greater scarcity of wage/salary jobs and vastly greater income differentials); because of the lack of resources necessary for styles of education which combat rote-memorising and exam-centred ritualism; because there are less certain learning-for-its-own-sake traditions; because the wide cultural gap between rural traditions and the imported modern sector culture is greater, and so on. In fact a comparison of Britain, Japan, Sri Lanka and Kenya suggested a systematic 'late development effect': the later a country starts its push to modernisation, the more quickly and the more seriously the diploma disease takes hold.

### Biased Sample?

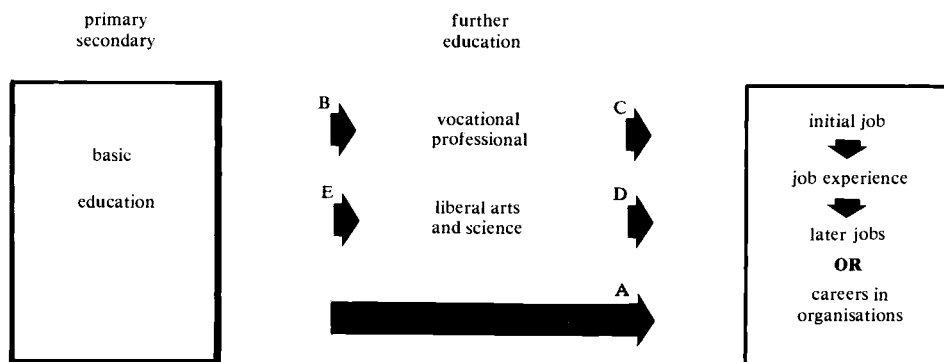
A number of the points that follow can be subsumed under one general observation. My diploma disease model was very much abstracted from a certain type of educational system. The British and the British-legacy systems of Sri Lanka, Kenya and Tanzania were my chief examples, together with those of Japan and China. Those systems have in common the following features:

- a high proportion of higher education in general arts and science rather than in professional subjects;
- quite strict rationing by ability, rather than by the purse, for higher education opportunity;
- a system of national examinations with universal standards to use for that ability selection;
- well developed systems of career bureaucracy (at least in government, and to varying degrees in the private sector) and a tradition of the 'generalist' administrator.

The inclusion in our study of Mexico which does not share these features was therefore highly instructive.

### Vocational and General Schooling

In the first place, the case of Mexico showed—particularly the comparative labour market studies with Sri Lanka—that my discussion of the use of certificates in the job market did not distinguish clearly enough between vocational qualifications and certificates of competence in general education subjects. A diagram will help to clarify the matter. It oversimplifies somewhat; sometimes there is a two-stage selection process, at junior and at senior secondary level, instead of the single link between 'basic' and 'further' education pictured here, but the simplified scheme will suit our purposes.



Implicit in the diploma disease model is the assumption that employers use educational certificates primarily as 'screening' devices—as measures of general ability (intelligence and powers of application) which indicate a person's likely 'trainability' over a whole range of skills, rather than as indicators of the cognitive and other skills which he has acquired as 'human capital' through his schooling. Clearly, this is more likely to be true at links A and D in the diagram, when people come into the job market with certificates of competence in general education subjects—basic literacy and numeracy, history and geography or a university training in arts or science—than when they come with clearly career-relevant qualifications in engineering or accountancy or nursing or pharmacy at link C. At C, employers are much more likely to be interested in acquired human capital, in **what** a person has studied and how much he knows than in measures of his general 'trainability'.

Whether the **bulk** of certificate-using recruitment goes through link C, or through links A or D, is therefore very likely in any given society to colour general perceptions of the meaning of certificates as signals. In that regard, there is a striking difference between Mexico and Sri Lanka. Mexican education is much more vocationally oriented at all levels than the Sri Lanka system. The latter is much more influenced by the aristocratic emphasis on 'for its own sake' education (humanities and 'pure' science, plus social science as bastard latter-day humanities rather than as disciplines-for-use) which was derived from the British model. At the junior secondary level in Mexico, only a little over 50 per cent of students were taking general courses in 1973, many of the remainder being enrolled in those of the 8,000 private institutions in Mexico offering training in all kinds of occupations—technical and commercial—that accept primary school graduates. At the senior secondary level there are a variety of technical institutions, most notably the vocational school which also prepares students for entrance to the National Polytechnic. In the National University, the country's largest, in 1974 fewer than 10 per cent of the students took courses in general arts and humanities. In Sri Lanka, on the other hand, although the very brightest students are creamed off into the two prestige faculties of engineering and medicine, the bulk of students at the tertiary level (some 86 per cent in 1967) are taking general arts or science degrees, and at the secondary level vocational training is practically nonexistent.

These differences are clearly reflected in the institutional rules which govern recruitment in the two countries. Mexican employers seem to take note only of what a person has studied and to what level—secondary, senior secondary or university—he or she has studied it. Technical and business studies are preferred. General education is rarely sufficient for clerical posts, and, at executive levels, is likely to be interpreted as showing a lack of motivation and orientation towards work. In Sri Lanka, on the other hand, one frequently comes across rules which discriminate between people who have been educated to the **same** level, favouring, for instance, honours graduates over general degree holders, science specialists over arts specialists (only the highest scorers are allowed into science streams in secondary schools), those with credits and distinctions over those with passes (at the same level of education), those with passes or credits in notoriously 'difficult' as opposed to 'easy' subjects, or those who have accumulated a certain set of subject passes in fewer rather than more sittings of the examination—all rules which, not being concerned with the substantive content of what has been learned, only make sense if the certificates are being used as some measure of 'general ability'.

This is a point of striking importance for the academic debate between the proponents of 'human capital theory' and the advocates of 'screening theory' which has enlivened discussion of the economics of education in recent years. I did make the point in my book that these debates are too often conducted—given the mixture of evidence (for example, a study in the US, regression analysis in France and a survey in Guatemala)—as if they were debates about **the** role of **the** school system in **the** economy—as if the whole world were the same. Even so, I had not realised that the effects of variations in institutional practices could be as striking as they proved to be between Mexico and Sri Lanka. In the one case, assumptions of 'human capital' operated obviously. In the second, screening theory offered a better explanation of what happened.

### **Standardised National Examinations**

The other major difference between the two countries lies in the fact that Sri Lanka has, and Mexico does not have, a national system of examinations. There are levels of achievement: 'Ordinary' and 'Advanced' school leaving certificates, and ordinary, honours and masters university degrees. There are also gradations within each level: pass, credit, distinction. The levels and gradations are supposedly standardised across

schools and universities. For employers, then, they provide stable reference points for the reliable measurement of abilities. In Mexico, graduating examinations (and in primary schools grade-promotion examinations) are all internal to the school so that grades achieved have little universal meaning: no employer can be sure that a 60 per cent mark from one school is worse or even better than a 70 per cent mark from another. At best, he can make the assumption that someone who has passed all the promotion and leaving examinations to get into a university is likely to have an average or above-average mix of ability and persistence. Competitive entrance examinations for the 'best' universities—and for the 'best' high schools which prepare for them—are only just beginning, and the competition is not yet very intense: hence there is no ability-ranking significance generally attached to the university or high school attended as happens in other societies (where those who 'make it' into Tokyo University or Oxbridge or the Grandes Ecoles must, it is thought, be bright to do so). Rationing of higher-education opportunity is chiefly by the purse (or, because there is a good deal of part-time study-while-you-work, by strength of determination).

This difference is, of course, intimately related to the human capital/screening difference. One reason why Mexican employers do not use educational certificates as proxy measures of relative 'trainability', while Sri Lanka employers do, is that the Sri Lankan, but not the Mexican, certificates represent a currency of known value; the information they signal is more precise.

The extent to which national examination systems do provide overall ability-ratings, and the segments of the ability range for which they do so, vary from country to country. Britain, for example, provides some kind of age-sixteen grading for the whole age group, marks off the 15 per cent or so who get the two A levels necessary to enter a university, and within them, the small proportion who get into Oxbridge (competitively rather than on the old boy network, though there is no certain means of telling), those who get firsts, etc. The Japanese system only provides a rough division at the lower end of the range between the lowest 10 per cent or so who do not enter high school, the 40 per cent or so who cannot get into a public or 'good private' academic high school and are relegated to the vocational and 'spillover private' high schools, and the 15 per cent or so who go no further than high school. But above that level, it provides a highly refined ranking of the top 35 per cent who

go to the universities. For the universities themselves are openly ranked by the difficulty of the competitive examination that each sets to select its students. France has a similar ranking (based on the assumption that everyone would get into the Grandes Ecoles if they could) for a tiny minority at the top of the ability spectrum. And so on. Whether, and over what range of jobs, certificates are used for ability screening, depends very much on how far the certificating system lends itself to being so used. (To another kind of screening, social class screening, we will return in a moment.)

### **Bureaucracy**

Part of my failure to give enough weight to the difference between vocational qualifications and general-education selection was a failure to put enough stress on the 'bureaucratisation of economic life' as a precondition for the latter. I did recognise it implicitly when I argued that one of the reasons why late-developing countries get a worse bout of the diploma disease is that a higher proportion of their modern sector employment is in highly bureaucratised organisations. Nevertheless, it has more importance in the genesis of certificate selection in **industrial societies** than I gave it. The chart below suggests a rather crude outline scheme. That I have in mind in suggesting a transition from the middle capitalist to the bureaucratic (either Japanese capitalist or Russian socialist) type of system, is this. It was not an accident that in Britain it was the East India Company and the civil service which, whether willingly or not, pioneered the practice of using general education attainments to select recruits. They were the most bureaucratic organisations in contemporary society in the sense that a) their operations were rule-bound and prescribed by a range of regulations designed to check favouritism, and b) they took people not just for jobs but for **careers**, and hence were interested in the lifelong development potential of a man, not in his specific ability to do a particular job over the next six months. They alone were Stage 5 organisations in my scheme, whereas outside them, most of the rest of the population was in Stage 4—preparing for apprenticeship and institutional training to earn their living in fluid markets—directly selling services or goods (carpenters, doctors, masons, barbers) or selling their labour to employers interested in filling certain job functions for relatively short periods.

Gradually, however, Stage 5 organisations have increased in importance: not only the vast educational, social service, medical bureaucracies

<i>type of society</i>	<i>mechanisms of occupational selection</i>	<i>form of occupational training</i>	<i>how individuals gain incomes</i>
1 Feudal/tribal 'natural economies'	inheritance	informal family training	family subsistence loosely reciprocal exchange
2 Proto-industrial	inheritance plus sending to apprenticeship	Some general education: apprenticeship training as extension of family training	sale of goods and labour services in the market
3 Early capitalist	ditto	formal vocational training to supplement apprenticeship	sale of goods and labour services in the market
4 Middle capitalist	ditto, plus acquiring pre-apprenticeship qualifications	formal institutional training <b>before</b> career entry, plus work experience	sale of goods and labour services in the market
5 Bureaucratic (late capitalist and socialist)	certificated levels of general education	pre-career vocational training for technical, in-career training plus work experience for administrative careers	by entry into work organisations for careers

in the public sector, but also the ICIs, the Shells in the private sector, organise systematic 'talent searches' for the recruitment of the young for 'careers'. It is this which makes 'general ability', 'trainability' a central concern of a steadily increasing proportion of hirings. Again it was the Mexican and Sri Lanka comparison which highlighted the importance of the link between the organisation of work and the use of diplomas. Sri Lanka—or rather Sri Lanka's modern sector—is firmly in bureaucratic Stage 5, particularly since state corporations are responsible for such a large proportion of manufacturing. The Sri Lanka study estimated that nearly a half of all non-agricultural wage and salary employment in Sri Lanka was accounted for by the public sector or 'permanent employees' in the medium-to-large private modern sector (in which the old merchant houses, much imbued with old East India Company bureaucratic traditions, played a large role).

In Mexico, by contrast, not even the central administration is properly bureaucratised. With every sexennial change of President, the whole civil service is turned upside-down. Careers are far from secure. So, too, in the private sector; labour markets remain extremely fluid and the mobility of labour is brisk. Fewer hirings are therefore seen as career hirings; immediate job capabilities rather than long-term potentialities and trainability are a more dominant concern.

### **Class**

I did mention at one stage, in discussing the determinants of the diploma disease, that it tended to be worse in the 'classless' societies of Africa—where everyone was in the race for success—than in class societies where aspirations and perceptions of mobility possibilities were likely to be lower for the subordinated lower orders. But having mentioned it, I promptly forgot about it.

Again the comparison between Mexico and Sri Lanka or Ghana shows that one must not forget about it. Mexico is a society with historically deeply rooted class divisions. I shall never forget my astonishment when (in 1976, not several decades ago) the Mayoress of a little town in Guanajuato produced her draft for a publicity brochure describing the town: 'San Jose', it said, 'has two classes, the middle class and the humble class. The middle class has three meals a day and the humble class two. . . . As for the relations between the classes, it seems to be one largely of indifference, since the humble class shows little sign of wishing to better itself'. By contrast, even in Sri Lanka, which was traditionally a caste society, one would be hard pressed to find such matter-of-fact acceptance of class differences in a public document.

These differences do have considerable consequences for the extent to which the village school becomes predominantly defined as the place where one gets the exit visas from the village, and the extent to which the so-called primary leaving certificate exam is seen **only** as a competitive secondary entrance exam. They affect the extent to which those who leave the school system with such a certificate are thought of, not as carrying with them some celebration of their accomplishment, but as being 'drop-outs'—with all the backwash effects of examination-orientation, the problems of 'relevance' etc, which naturally result from these conceptions of the purpose of schooling.

In Ghana, Kwasi Boakyee found these features present to a high degree. The present generation of leaders started in the village and the present generation of village children see no reason why they should not follow in their footsteps to become leaders. Where everyone is in the race, the 'updraught' in the system is strong. Not so in Mexico. Nigel Brooke's villagers, and especially those of Tarascan Indian culture, often men and women who still bore the bruises of unpleasant experiences in trying to make their way in the city, were not prone to see much prospect, in their class society, for the advancement of their children by means of certificates. They did want their children to read and write and to be able to stand up to officials. But there was little competitive pursuit of academic success, little backwash from mobility aspirations.

The other aspect of the class society syndrome was the discovery, in the Mexican labour market survey, of a different form of screening from the ones discussed above—not ability screening, nor attitude screening ('if a man opted for business studies it shows he's got the right motivation'), but class screening. The correlation between class status and university attendance has until recently been sufficiently close for employers to be able to assume that graduates have a much higher probability of being congenial and loyal, of 'fitting in', of having a good presence, a good way with customers, etc. One or two employers deplored the 'democratisation' of the university which reduced the certainty that graduates would have such qualities.

### **The China Cure**

Brooke found that, although there was little diploma disease backwash from selection examinations spoiling the chance of 'good and relevant' village primary education, there were plenty of other factors which ensured that village

children had poor quality education, of little relevance to their future lives, and giving them little beyond the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. That, of course, is a finding highly relevant to my argument about 'delinking' the school from occupational selection. I suggested that, unless recruitment patterns were altered so that the schools were relieved of the difficult balancing job of trying to combine the function of educating children with the function of sorting and labelling them, improving the quality of education would be an impossible task. I specified this as a necessary condition. I was at least careful not to claim that it would be sufficient.

**The** great question when I wrote, of course, was how far the Chinese attempt to 'delink' would succeed in making education more generally effective as a preparation for life as it has to be lived in China. I was favourably, if in some respects sceptically, disposed, though perhaps the most blush-making sentence in the book is the one in which I say that the Chinese system seems to have changed so fundamentally that it is likely to stay changed! I was sceptical—and Jonathan Unger had already fed me a great deal of information on the problems of Chinese education in the period 1970–74—on two grounds: first that the absence of the objective achievement test standard was leading to selection by favouritism; secondly that there were enormous functional difficulties in systems of selection which refused to recognise differences in human talent and developed skills, which recruited people for engineering courses on the basis of their devotion to approved political ideals without checking whether they could add two and two to make four.

Unger's work, and subsequent discoveries since the 'mess in education' has been exposed as not the least of the Gang of Four's crimes, show that there were, indeed, **very** serious problems. Favouritism was apparently rampant at both the crucial points: first when children were allocated on graduation to their initial work units (the favoured to the town factories, the disfavoured to the country), and, secondly, when they applied—as they could after two years—for admission to a tertiary institution. Attempts to enforce standards either at the point of entry to, or within, higher education institutions were very much liable to be denounced as capitalist-roaders' plots.

There appear to have been two other problems. First, the teachers were demoralised. Liberated as they were from examination pressures, they

did not know what to do with their freedom. A large proportion of them, having had the humiliating experience of being denounced—and perhaps physically maltreated—by one or other faction during the Cultural Revolution, were in no mood to risk an initiative. It was safer to concentrate loyally on encouraging the memorisation of Mao's thoughts.

Secondly, it seems that higher education institutions never were (with few exceptions) transformed into in-service, career-development institutions. The small number of exceptions included engineering departments which took technicians from factories, upgraded their skills, and sent them back to their factories. But the vast majority remained what they had been before: institutions for **pre-career** qualification. The Normal Colleges in Shanghai and Peking, for instance, did not take, say, experienced primary teachers and upgrade them into school principals or senior secondary teachers. They continued to be places where youths at the start of their career could get a ticket of entry to a middle class occupation and so escape from traditional sector work in the communes. The reforms only meant that one had to wait out two years of hard labour on the farm before one could apply for entry; secondly that entry was supposed to depend on 'redness' (but often depended on favouritism), and thirdly, that you did not need actually to know anything to graduate, provided that you could make vociferous and sincere political speeches. At least that is how the reforms are described nowadays in China, though doubtless with a touch of exaggeration.

Presumably it had to be like that. To have revamped the higher education system entirely on the lines of the engineering departments just mentioned—making all tertiary education a means of furthering the education and training of people in careers they had already started—would

have condemned the millions of young urban secondary leavers 'sent down' to the country, to staying in the country all their lives. The chance to apply for a university after two years and so get back on track for an urban professional occupation—the mere existence of that chance—was perhaps necessary to reconcile them to the vast sending down operation.

At any rate, the China chapter is one in the book which I suppose I should certainly rewrite if I had the chance. Not many people have asked me with *schaden freudlich* glee: 'so what price your modest proposals now, when even China has admitted its error?' But I suppose what I would want to say would be an implicit answer to that question. The fact that the 1970–76 Chinese system collapsed with few regrets is not proof of the unviability of a real 'delinking' effort on the lines I proposed in the book, viz:

- genuinely revamping higher education on recurrent, in-service lines;
- developing criteria which take account of the range of clearly relevant differences in human achievement and potential in selecting people for initial career experience and for subsequent upgrading;
- eliminating, or at least vastly reducing, the importance of selection in the processes of schooling and education; and, finally,
- engaging creative teachers in the development of a new, workable pedagogy which might get children learning either from interest or from a conviction of the substantive worth of what they are learning.

Is it really impossible to create schools without the goal of the bread-and-butter, certificate-seeking, lifelessly instrumental motive for learning which, I persist in believing, is steadily eroding the quality of schooling throughout the world?