

The Transformation, Contradiction and Conflicts Brought by British Degree Apprenticeship

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Abstract:

In terms of the degree system construction of higher VET (Vocational Education and Training), some countries made early exploration around occupational attributes and competence standards. After several stages of development, Britain has established a Modern Apprenticeship System at a level that corresponds to General Education and VET Qualifications, which includes Intermediate Apprenticeship, Advanced Apprenticeship, Higher Apprenticeship and Degree Apprenticeship. British Degree Apprenticeship is a good example of the degree system construction of higher VET. This paper uses the text analysis method to explore the transformation and contradiction brought about by Degree Apprenticeship. It found that Degree Apprenticeship changes knowledge view, learning view, education view and social view. It also brought the conflicts among stakeholders, the contradictions between industrial power and University freedom, and the debates between professionalism and elitism.

Keywords: British Degree Apprenticeship; Transformation; Contradiction; Conflicts

In 2015, the UK officially launched Degree Apprenticeship (DA). Chartered Management Institute launched the 6-level charter Manager Bachelor's Degree Apprenticeship project in the same year as the pioneer. In 2018, the British government launched the 7-level Senior Leader Master's Degree Apprenticeship project to improve the Degree of Vocational Education (CMI, 2019). Since the emergence of European universities, the university Degree has emerged as proof of learning, literacy and ability; and the university Degree was a free and independent degree-granting right which was won by the teacher guild against the secular society and the church's royal power (Jacques Rogoff, 1996). Knowledge is the first attribute of a degree, and academics are the core characteristic of a Degree (Xie He, 2017). But the apprentice's Degree makes technology and skill also become the Degree's core characteristic. Then, under this premise, do these differences lead to some Transformations and debates?

1. Transformation brought by Degree Apprenticeship

Vocational Education and Higher Education co-exist in the Degree Apprenticeship, which means that the integration of General Education and Vocational Education in Britain is further strengthened, which indirectly shows that Degree Apprenticeship is a transformative vocational and technical talent training model.

1.1 Transformation of Knowledge View: recovering technical knowledge

The traditional University knowledge view values academic knowledge, while the Degree Apprenticeship knowledge view values technical knowledge (Jinle Xu, 2018). Therefore, the change of knowledge view has been highlighted in the Degree Apprenticeship. Technical knowledge is a complex process of knowledge recreation and has relatively independent social value and educational value (Ryan. P, 2003). So, in addition to academic knowledge, British Degree Apprenticeship puts technical knowledge, technology cognitive theory and technology tacit knowledge into the knowledge view.

One of the characteristics of the Degree Apprenticeship is to take the workplace practice as a learning subject, and Apprentices spend most of their learning time in the workplace. Their credits and performance are recognized as one of the requirements for obtaining a University Degree. Therefore, Degree Apprenticeship realizes the vision of Higher Education from the traditional "Academy Based" teaching model expand to the apprenticeship "Academy and Technology" teaching model (Morleyd,2018). All in all, Degree Apprenticeship makes the knowledge view become both academic knowledge and technical knowledge are all important.

1.2 Transformation of Learning View: recognizing the value of workplace learning

Fixed learning place originated from Plato, usually in a street corner or an open place, developed into a school, the school became a fixed learning place (Billy Stephen, 2001). But the value of the workplace as a learning place has not been discussed formally and publicly. “In fact, workplace learning such as Internship is only an indispensable ornament or extension of Higher Education, it is still regarded as an “informal learning” and excluded from the formal education system in some countries (Guan Jing, 2019). While the successful implementation of the British Degree Apprenticeship further recognized that the workplace is a formal and effective learning place. “Learning by Doing” in the workplace improves learning enthusiasm, helps to put theoretical knowledge into practice and promotes the learning of technology cognition and tacit knowledge (Yaoyao Zhang, Ming Xu, 2020).

Learning places are regarded as the centre of knowledge production and dissemination and also are regarded as the authoritative place for the formation of knowledge concepts (ROWE L et al, 2016). It is generally believed that knowledge flows in one direction, which always flows from the learning place to the workplace and serves for work. However, the Degree Apprenticeship in Universities proves knowledge's one-way flow becomes the two-way flow. In conclusion, the emergence of Degree Apprenticeship leads to a change of learning view, the value of workplace learning and study anywhere.

1.3 Transformation of Education View: forming the type of Vocational Education

After entering the 20th century, higher education in various countries is developing in the direction of popularization. By 2005, the number of countries with a gross enrollment rate of 50% is more than 25%, thus the world's Higher Education has completed the transformation from popular to popularization (Dunrong Bie, et al, 2018). The popularization of higher education brings the development of Higher Education's diversification and type differentiation. Vocational Education has become an indispensable part of diversified and differentiated development, like General Education, which is considered by the British as a complete educational type and an equal educational path.

But, before 2015, the level of British Vocational Education is insufficient and mostly stayed at the level of secondary education, the engineering and application-oriented majors are mainly the horizontal differentiation of Higher Education itself, rather than the upward shift of Secondary Vocational Education. Therefore, the pure Vocational Education type of Higher Education does not exist in Britain before. However, the Degree Apprenticeship that appeared in 2015 is the vanguard of the upward development of Secondary Vocational Education and the vertical development of “Professional Education”. Degree Apprenticeship has changed the education view and made Higher Vocational Education to be a widely applicable education type. It also improves the educational level of the Vocational Education System and shows Higher Vocational Education will gradually become the same path as British Higher Education.

1.4 Transformation of Social View: promoting the process of social democratization

The popularization and differentiation of Higher Education are not only related to the development of Vocational Education but also closely related to the concept of inclusive education, the process of fair education and social democratization. In 2015, UNESCO issued the “2030 Education Action Framework”, which proposed to take “ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and let all people enjoy lifelong education opportunities” as the development vision and proposed “ensuring all genders have access to affordable and equal quality technical training, Vocational Education and University Education” as the specific goal (UNESCO, 2015). However, there are still many young people in the world who are rejected by the expensive University tuition fees and give up their dream of the university. There are still many people who “sniff at” Vocational Education, but “scramble for academic education”.

How to change the social view, realize the popularization of Higher Education and make the society move towards democracy? We need to expand the group of Higher Education, strengthen the educational purpose that Higher Education in serving the public and make it closely connects the ordinary people's life and general social production. British Degree Apprenticeship is a good way to help those teenagers who can't pay tuition and living expenses to realize their university dream. The idea that learning content is closely related to the needs of work also strengthens Apprentices' employment potential.

The value of the Workplace knowledge and experience being recognized provides the possibility to solve the problem of Apprentices' educational background upward. All in all, Degree Apprenticeship conforms to the concept of inclusive education, promotes the process of social democratization, and helps to improve the social evaluation of Vocational Education.

2. Contradiction of Degree Apprenticeship

At present, British Degree Apprenticeship has a good reputation in Britain. Degree Apprenticeship is expected to take a place and become a widespread talent training mode in the Higher Education system. However, while some people support the Degree Apprenticeship, some naturally question it.

2.1 Orientation of Vocational Education: academic education or technical education

As for the orientation of Degree Apprenticeship, the British government regards it as between “higher technical education” and “technical higher education”; it is the preferred way for high-level Vocational Education and an applied professional education at the undergraduate level and master's level (SFA, 2016). However, such orientation inevitably makes people question what the mission of Vocational Education and Higher Education is.

Firstly, after graduation, Apprentices will hold two certificates: a professional-grade certificate and a university degree certificate. Obviously, Degree Apprenticeship brings Apprenticeship qualification closer to university degree qualification, which weakens the effectiveness of traditional university degree. Secondly, Nowadays, employers are more and more interested in graduates with high education, high technology and high skills, and British Degree Apprenticeship just meets this demand. This employment orientation will disturb the balance of the employment market, which leads to the difficulty of university graduates' employment. In addition, the characteristics of “employer-led, work-based” Degree Apprenticeship are far from the characteristics of Higher Education, if Degree Apprenticeship is regarded as academic education maybe be unsuitable. But the characteristics of “academic curriculum learning and degree qualification acquisition” also make the Degree Apprenticeship inconsistent with the characteristics of Vocational Education. Therefore, the orientation of Degree Apprenticeship blurs the boundary between academic education, technical education and vocational education in the new era.

In conclusion, under the background of the Higher Education popularization, globalization and Vocational Education development, how to make “Professionalism” and “Elitism” serve the society in a symbiotic and harmonious way has become the primary consideration when other countries want to carry out degree vocational education. Perhaps the German model can be considered in this aspect, but in countries with traditional elite education concepts such as Britain and China, it seems that there is still a long way to go.

2.2 Mission of Academic Education: change society or comply with industrial development

The orientation of British Degree Apprenticeship also causes people to think about whether Degree Apprenticeship should be included in the traditional Higher Education system, and whether universities should respond to the call of the government to carry out Degree Apprenticeship.

On one hand, for the mission of university academic education, traditional scholars and Degree Apprenticeship advocates hold different opinions. In 2015, British Prime Minister David Cameron said that through Degree Apprenticeship, the business world and the education world will become more closely connected, and the Degree Apprenticeship will cultivate high-level skills and technical apprentices for future work (Gov.UK, 2019). Such Degree Apprenticeship advocates are more concerned about whether the talents trained by universities meet the needs of the industry or not. On the other hand, traditional scholars worry that Degree Apprenticeship in universities will erode the “Democracy”, “Freedom and Civic” and “Political Ideas” of university academic education (Ryan. P, 2003). They believe that “universities must spend more time and energy on their teaching and research, and their interests rather than adapt to various sharp social contradictions and problems (Derek Bock, 2001). In one word, too many additional tasks besides academic work will affect the high-quality standards of universities.

Traditional Higher Education broadens students' intelligence, stimulates students' imagination of human wisdom and potential, and pays attention to the self-development of “human” rather than adapting to specific work (Williams. G, 1985).

But Degree Apprenticeship makes traditional Higher Education betray these educational functions and academic values. If University focuses on Apprenticeship courses to comply with industrial development, then this is contrary to the mission of traditional universities to transform society.

2.3 Power of Curriculum: employer lead or academic freedom

Since the emergence of medieval European universities, “academic freedom” has been regarded as the soul and inherent symbol of universities, the “academic freedom” is mainly reflected in the “power over the curriculum”, which means that university teachers can decide the teaching content and teaching methods according to the opinion of Academic Committee of Higher Education (Jing Guan, 2019). However, the emergence of Degree Apprenticeship threatens the “power over the curriculum”, which leads to a debate on whether the power of curriculum is dominated by universities or employers.

First is the debate about curriculum design. The characteristics of “employer-led, work-based” Degree Apprenticeship mean that employers play a dominant role in the curriculum design. So, what apprentices learn, what teachers teach and how teachers teach will be decided by employers. British Higher Education's white paper “The Success of The Knowledge Economy” also says that to meet the standards of Degree Apprenticeship, universities should change the way they design and carry out courses (Powell. P, Walsh. A, 2018). As a result, universities lose the freedom of autonomous teaching, which conflicts with the “power over the curriculum” of traditional universities.

Secondly, the debate on standard-setting. In the past, the employers indirectly influenced the university's “power over the curriculum” by providing recruitment requirements, participating in consultation and becoming University consultants, but the Degree Apprenticeship gives employers the power to formulate the training standards. In fact, although employers know the knowledge and technical skills required for a specific job and specific talents, universities can best understand the Higher Education qualifications requirements, the personal quality requirements in the 21st century and the importance of learning academic theoretical knowledge. British Government hoped that through Degree Apprenticeship, employers will be placed in the “driver's seat” of Vocational Education so that employers have a full sense of ownership of Degree Apprenticeship (Department for Education, 2018). So, in terms of the time and learning arrangement of Degree Apprenticeship, it is naturally more inclined to the needs of employers. This deviation has once again impacted traditional universities' running principle of “academic freedom and university autonomy”.

3. Conflicts of Degree Apprenticeship: among stakeholders

The leader of British Degree Apprenticeship is enterprise, which shakes the balance between social governance, government governance and university governance of Higher Education. However, government, universities, enterprises and apprentices are stakeholders in Degree Apprenticeship. Therefore, the pull between interests and accountability will lead to the controversy regarding governance model and employment security.

3.1 Governance Model: university autonomy or public accountability

The degree-granting right and degree autonomy complement each other. The quality of a university degree represents the university's level and reputation, which also means that the “university is responsible for maintaining and designing the academic standards and degree awarded quality. Therefore, British universities attach great importance to the degree autonomy and degree-granting right” (QAA, 2015). But the apprentice is not a regular university student, and Degree Apprenticeship is independent of the university. So, is it reasonable for Degree Apprenticeship to obtain the degree through affiliation with the university? Does it violate the cherished degree-granting right and degree autonomy of the university?

In 1998, the British government abolished the tradition of free Higher Education, the tuition fees have been rising, and students have gradually become the main consumers of British Higher Education (Blanden. J., Machin. S., 2013). To obtain school running funds through enrollment, Universities must bear public accountability and explain the rationality of university tuition fees. However, the employer has the dominant power in Degree Apprenticeship funds, and the tuition fees of apprentices are borne by employers, so University needs to deliver apprenticeship courses and services to the employer. This makes the public accountability turn to employer accountability, but whether this accountability model is suitable for universities is controversial.

And in this way, who bears the accountability for the quality and academic standards of Degree Apprenticeship? Employers or Universities?

3.2 Employment Security: apprentice undertake or university-enterprise responsibility

The student trained by traditional Higher Education is difficult to adapt to the current needs of enterprises their professional adaptability is weak. Degree Apprenticeship put vocational skills into Higher Education, this is beneficial to cultivate high-level application and academic knowledge talents. And it improves apprentices' educational background, career development potential and employability. Under such a banner, British Degree Apprenticeship has attracted a lot of apprentices, but universities cannot ensure that every apprentice can obtain employment security.

Firstly, in the process of the implementation of Degree Apprenticeship, the delay in the apprenticeship standards formulation, the non-cooperation of enterprises and other factors will affect the delivery of Degree Apprenticeship. The failure of apprentices to get their university degrees on time means that employers may not continue to employ employees who need time for off-duty study or off-job study. Secondly, some enterprises, especially small and medium-sized enterprises have faced many irresistible factors in the huge economic competition market, which may lead enterprises unable to accept apprentice numbers as expected in the end. In addition, once apprentices accept Degree Apprenticeship means that they show loyalty to the enterprise, but it does not exclude the possibility that apprentices enter other enterprises in breach of contract after completing a Degree Apprenticeship.

Therefore, the issue of employment security will lead to the following debates: apprentices employ difficulty because of their personal factors, so this situation is the apprentice or the school, or the enterprise responsible? Apprentices finished their Degree Apprenticeship on schedule, but the employer could not continue to employ them, which led to a huge psychological gap among apprentices. So, should the apprentice find a university or enterprise to be responsible for it? If the apprentice is unable to get a job because the university fails to deliver on time, should the apprentice and enterprise find the university responsible? If the apprentice breaks the contract, which causes the enterprise's manpower, energy and financial capability loss, should the enterprise find an apprentice or university to be held accountable?

Summary

Under the social background of economic globalization, talent elites, population ageing and the surge in immigration, each country presents a trend of diversification in the choice of vocational education (technical education and vocational education and training) models. These choices are based on national values, social, educational, intellectual, learning, tradition and cultural differences. Nowadays, the development of vocational education in various countries is generally faced with problems such as schooling scale reduction, quality decline and insufficient employability of students. These countries are also actively taking new measures to deal with emerging problems. Modern Apprenticeship has proven to be an effective way to train high-level skilled and technical workers on a large scale. As a higher technical and skilled talent training mode in British Vocational Education and Technical Education, Apprenticeship has never been out of the historical stage, although it has experienced ups and downs in the historical waves. Whether the Degree Apprenticeship in 2015 or the T-level in 2017, it showed that the exploration of Vocational Education in Britain is gradually moving towards parallel with Academic Education. As a Modern Apprenticeship, British Degree Apprenticeship combines practice knowledge in the workplace and degree level knowledge in the university, which is close to the German "dual system" vocational education. German vocational education has achieved remarkable results, especially "dual system" vocational education. Germany is also willing to export the "dual system" model and concepts to other countries, but the results are not significant (Dieter Euler, 2013). Facing this development limitation, maybe we should consider whether the German technological culture accompanied by the "dual system" model and concepts has conflicts with the technological culture of other countries, which should not be ignored.

Under the background of industry 4.0 and industry-education integration, the penetration of Vocational Education in the field of Higher Education has become one of the development trends. China and other countries are gradually eliminating the exclusion situation of Vocational Education from Higher Education. British Degree

Apprenticeship has shaken the status of the traditional university and the connotation of the traditional degree, which sets a good example for these countries where the traditional elite and academic education ideology are deeply rooted. It also has a great impact on the education view, knowledge view, talent view and society view, which has caused great controversy. Although the contradictions and discussions will exist along with the implementation of the British Degree Apprenticeship, the Degree Apprenticeship will guide people, especially from these countries that have value academic over vocation traditions, from all around the world to pay attention to the impact of educational change, to think about the future development direction of different education types and the balance between Higher Vocational Education and Higher Education.

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