

# To What Extent Was the Shift from an Elite System of British Higher Education to a Mass One Successful in the Late 20th Century?

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| 著者  | ITO Eiji  |
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# To What Extent Was the Shift from an Elite System of British Higher Education to a Mass One Successful in the Late 20th Century?

Eiji ITO\*

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to discuss to what extent the shift from an elite system of British higher education to a mass one succeeded in the late 20th century. Although the British higher education system was successful in expanding quantitatively in terms of participation rate, it faced challenges to make a shift from its elite higher education system from a qualitative aspect such as a curriculum structure.

The purpose of this essay is to discuss to what extent the shift from elite system of British higher education to a mass one was successful in the late 20th century. Both quantitative and qualitative aspects of massification of higher education were examined. Expansion of higher education took place in most OECD countries in the late 1990s. In the UK, only 6% attended universities in the 1960s, whereas 33% of the relevant age group access to universities in 1999.

According to Trow (1973) higher education has three phases of development; elite, mass and universal, and there is a shift from elite to mass, or mass to universal as higher education develops. When a higher education system has its participation rate up to 15%, it is in the elite phase and its purpose is to reproduce hierarchies and social divisions. In this phase, higher education is only for a certain part of the population and going to university is supposed to be the privilege of the elite. When over 15% of the eligible population go on to higher education, the higher education system is supposed to be a mass system where its purpose is to provide broader supply of white-collar professionals and technically qualified manpower (Trow, 1973). He states that expansion of higher education system causes not only quantitative change but also qualitative changes, such as academic level, interests, attitude and social class of students.

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\* Planning and Public Relations Section, Kansai University of International Studies

As a result, a mass higher education system is supposed to be different from an elite one in terms of purpose, function, system and structures (Trow, 1973).

Looking at a history of British higher education after 1960s, the UK was behind Japan and the US in establishing a mass higher education system from a viewpoint of participation rate. The expansion was not evenly paced. There were two waves of rapid expansion; one in the 1960s and the other at the end of 1980s and the early 1990s. Five percent of 18-19 population entered universities in the 1960, and in 1972, almost 14% did (Greenaway and Haynes, 2000). In 1988, it was 17%, and it reached 30% in 1993 (Greenaway and Haynes, 2000). The first expansion in the 1960s was met largely by an increase in the number of universities; 33 universities in 1960 and 44 in 1970 (Mayhew, Deer *et al.*, 2004).

The second expansion took place when the binary system of universities and polytechnics ended. Polytechnics were non-university-sector, locally-financed and managed institutions providing technical and practical courses. In 1992, the binary system that had both universities and the polytechnics was officially abolished, as the polytechnics were promoted to become universities. Therefore, the number of universities increased from 48 in 1990 to 89 in 1995 (Mayhew, Deer *et al.*, 2004). According to Scott (1995), this second development made British higher education system what is called “mass system.” Graph 1 shows the participation in higher education by 18-21 year olds. The expansion of higher education was caused mainly by the rise in the full-time education participation of 18-21 years old. Also, more female students came to participate in higher education and they constituted 51% of participants in 1996, compared with 26% in 1962 (Hodgson and Spours, 2000).

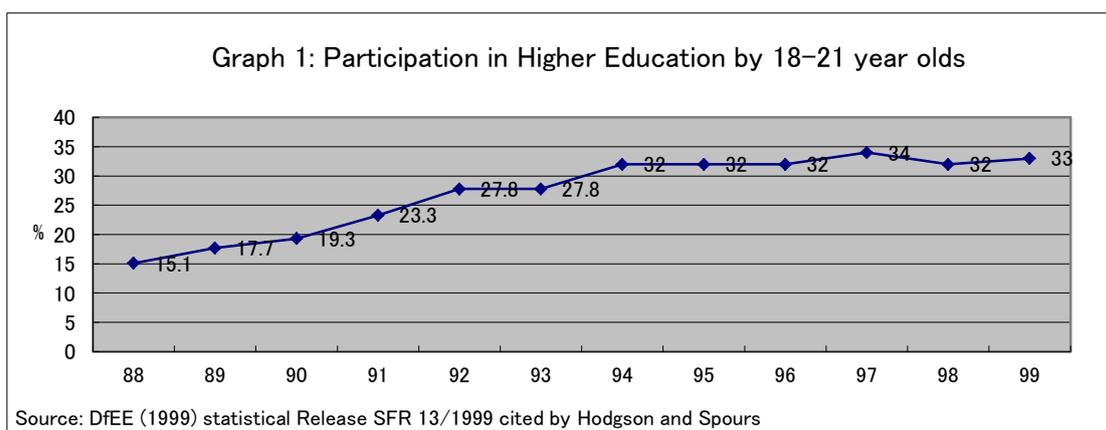


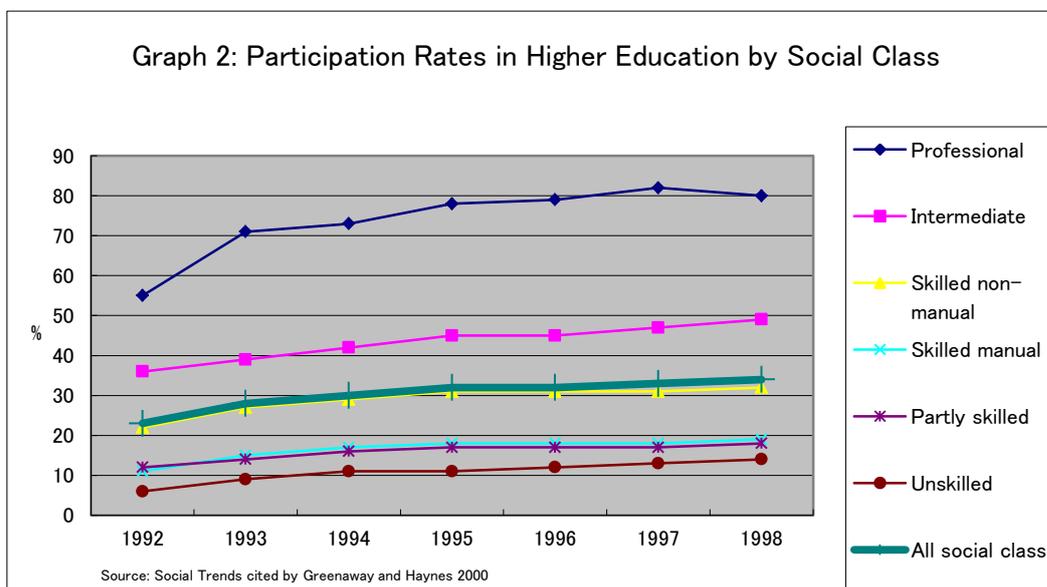
Table 1 and Graph 2 show the participation rate in higher education by different social groups from 1992 to 1998 in the UK. Each social class showed increased participation rate in 1998, compared with 1992. However, the degree to which the participation rate went up is different, depending on social groups. For example, 55% of children in professional groups participated in higher education in 1992, and the proportion went up to 80% in 1998, a 25 percentage point increase during this period. Six percent of those in unskilled family cohort attended higher education in 1992, and in 1998 14% did, an 8 percentage point increase. The difference of participation rates in higher education between 1992 and 1998 for other groups are as follows; 13 percentage point increase for Intermediate, 10 percentage point increase for Skilled non-manual, 8 percentage point increase for Skilled manual, 6 percentage point for Partly skilled, 8 percentage point increase for Unskilled. This indicates that expansion of higher education worked better for the top three social groups (Professional, Intermediate and Skilled non-manual) than for the lower three groups (Skilled manual, Partly skilled and Unskilled).

|                    | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 |
|--------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Professional       | 55   | 71   | 73   | 78   | 79   | 82   | 80   |
| Intermediate       | 36   | 39   | 42   | 45   | 45   | 47   | 49   |
| Skilled non-manual | 22   | 27   | 29   | 31   | 31   | 31   | 32   |
| Skilled manual     | 11   | 15   | 17   | 18   | 18   | 18   | 19   |
| Partly skilled     | 12   | 14   | 16   | 17   | 17   | 17   | 18   |
| Unskilled          | 6    | 9    | 11   | 11   | 12   | 13   | 14   |
| All social classes | 23   | 28   | 30   | 32   | 32   | 33   | 34   |

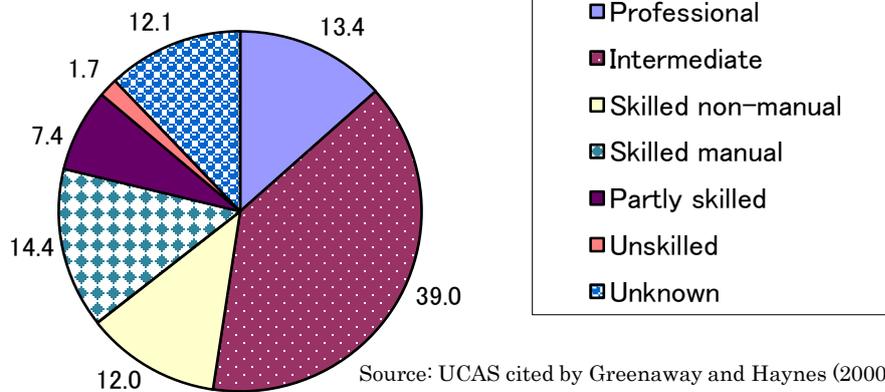
Source: Social Trend cited by Greenaway and Haynes (2000)

The difference in participation rate between Professional and Unskilled was 49 percentage points in 1992. This gap increased to 66 percentage points in 1998. The mean of participation rate of the top three groups in 1992 was 37.7% and 9.7% for the lower three groups while in 1998 those for top three was 53.7% and 17.0% for the lower three. The difference between the top three and the lower three was 28 percentage points in 1992 while it jumped to 36.7 percentage points in 1998. This indicates that the gap in the participation rates of higher and lower social classes widened this period (Greenaway and Haynes, 2000).

Graph 3 shows the share of university entrants by social class in 1999. 13.4% of university students come from the professional family cohort, while only 1.7% come from the unskilled family cohort. The top three groups account for 64.4%, whereas the lower three groups account for 23.5%. The difference is 40.9 percentage points. This indicates that universities are largely attended by students from the top three social groups, and the participation by the lower groups was still limited. This shows that the expansion of higher education did not benefit all social classes equally.



Graph 3: Shares of University Entrants by Social Class (1999)



When there is a shift from elite to mass, not only quantitative change, but also qualitative changes such as purpose, function and structure take place (Trow, 1973). In this essay, curriculum structure was examined as an example of qualitative change. Then, it would seem sensible to take an example of American higher education system, since US achieved mass higher education system the earliest in the world and often it is referred as a model of higher education system.

Scott (2002) argues that general education is required in mass higher education systems because it is expected to cater for diverse students and the job market environment stresses the need for adaptable and transferable skills. The undergraduate curriculum in the US mainly consists of specialised education and general education. Specialised education is limited to advanced knowledge of a specific academic discipline whereas general education is broad and not limited to a certain academic subject. Most of the general education is supposed to be completed in the first and second year in the undergraduate curriculum. Students are required to study a wide range of subjects, humanities, social science and natural science. Specialised education is conducted mainly in the third and fourth year.

General education in US universities and colleges is not necessarily at a higher level than that in European countries or Japan (Tachi, 1997). One of the reasons why general education is a part of curriculum in the US higher education is that the academic standard of secondary education in the US is lower than that in Europe (Tachi, 1997). Therefore, higher education has been expected to play the role of secondary education

to some extent. General education enables students with moderate academic achievement levels to study at university. If higher education provides only specialised education, students have to complete general education in secondary school, which would make it difficult for students with lower academic attainment to enter universities. Therefore, it would appear that the structure of higher education curriculum in the US is designed for mass participation.

In Britain, because of its unique system of Single Honours Courses, students earn bachelor's degree in three years. The single honours course is believed to be superior to other courses in the UK (Perkin, 1998). He says that this single honour course makes merits and demerits in higher education system. Both merits and demerits come from its highly specialised curriculum structure where it is possible to provide students with specialised skills and knowledge in short periods. A-levels exams enable this specialised undergraduate curriculum. Perkin (1998) advocated that British higher education should cease this highly specialised education and introduce broadened education.

Bourner (2004) describes the changes of higher education curriculum from 1970s to the late 1990s. He states that the 1970s was characterised by a 'traditional' curriculum. The paradigm was based on the delivery of knowledge and the development of critical faculties, which were regarded as the key factor for both the development of academic subjects and also the basis of sound judgement. This was contested in the 1980s when transferable skills were emphasised. In the 1980s, the traditional curriculum was challenged by unemployment of new graduates. So particular attention was paid to decrease unemployment of the graduates and the curriculum became based on skills needed for readiness for graduate employment. In the 1990s, the paradigm shifted to preparation for lifelong learning. Learning how to learn became a learning outcome in itself and the need to develop the capacity to plan and manage one's own studies were emphasised. Then in the late 1990s, reflective learning became a topic of higher education curriculum. General education was not a part of university education curriculum in most British universities.

According to Trow (2000), the US had developed the structure appropriate for mass higher education system before it actually achieved it. It just waited for the

quantitative expansion to take place. In terms of curricular structure, general education is included in universities in the US, but not in most European countries (Trow, 2000). Also, modular systems, which are supposed to be appropriate for mass higher education system were well developed in the US (Rothblatt, 1999), but not so until only recently in the UK. In addition, single honours degree programmes, which are prevailing in the UK, seem to fit into an elite higher education system where a small proportion of students who are well-prepared study for a first degree.

In conclusion, although the British higher education system succeeded in expanding quantitatively in terms of participation rate in the late 20th century, it faced challenges to make a shift from its elite higher education system into mass one from a qualitative aspect such as a curriculum structure.

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## 抄 録

本稿では 20 世紀後半においてイギリスの高等教育制度がどの程度大衆化に成功したのかを論じる。進学率など量的な側面においては確かにイギリスの高等教育制度は大衆化したと言えるかもしれないが、カリキュラムの構造など質的な面においては課題が残る。