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The coming qualifications revolution [1]

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A new generation of qualifications has recently emerged in the global IT sector, which operate very differently from our traditional GCSE?s and A Levels. For example, Microsoft Learning is now a global leader in IT qualifications and they offer a wide range of Microsoft Certifications which provide individuals with technical expertise and prove their ability to design and build innovative solutions across multiple technologies. Due to the rapid rate of change in this sector, new Microsoft qualifications are continuously being introduced and existing qualifications revised. Some certifications are retired when Microsoft ends its support for the related technology and others must be updated every three years by taking a refresh exam. This generates additional income for the company, enables students to keep up to date on the latest developments in the field and ensures that potential employers have confidence that someone who holds a Microsoft Certification is current and engaged with Microsoft technologies. In short the value and the relevance of the qualification are maintained over time.

The branding of these new qualifications is also significant because the quality and reputation of the qualification is now inextricably linked with the quality and reputation of the parent company. Therefore any criticism of the Microsoft Certification will have a negative impact on the corporate image of Microsoft itself, which places pressure on the company to continuously maintain and improve the quality of its qualifications by investing in research and development and experimenting with new and better ways of delivery. Further pressure comes from existing and any future competitors from around the world which may introduce a superior alternative at any time. Again, all of these pressures help to maintain the value and the relevance of the qualification.

Because the government uses examination results as a key measure of a schools performance, schools respond by teaching to the test and by choosing the exam board which has the highest pass rate, i.e the easiest exams. You therefore end up with a race to the bottom with each private exam company competing to provide the easiest exams. Children continue to get better exam results, schools continue to climb the league table and the government can boast of helping to improve standards across the board. And when people begin to highlight the blatantly obvious, that despite increasing grades, children appear to be less educated than half a century ago, the private companies which provide the curriculum and the exams can simply hide behind the cover of the government and its generic GCSE qualification, which now attract most of the criticism. As a result the branding of the company remains intact, while the value of the GCSE continues to decline, until it becomes worthless.

Thankfully, a new generation of specialist qualifications may soon begin to appear in more traditional subjects across the curriculum, as a variety of world class companies and organisations begin to offer their

own branded certificates, in the subject areas in which they specialise. For example, Pfizer could provide qualifications in the sciences, Khan Academy on maths, Pearson on English, Adobe on web design, Virgin on entrepreneurship, Google on utilising the internet, National Geographic on geography, the British Museum on history, the Economist on economics, Fitness First on sport, Jamie Oliver on home economics, Office Angels on how to get a job, Marks and Spencer on customer service and Greenpeace on the environment. The list is endless.

This unbundling of the school into different subject areas helps to redefine the school as a mechanism that provides students with an assortment of services instead of delivering an indivisible package of education. We can then start to disentangle the components of that package and customise them to fit specific student needs and abilities. Choice, variety and specialisation will therefore begin to increase within each school, and each school will now be in a position to offer their students a variety of different courses and qualifications. With the use of online technology this increasing variety and customisation of children?s education is now much more affordable and this will also encourage a new blended style of learning that combines the classroom with an online experience.

This unbundling of the school will certainly appeal to those parents who live in areas where there is a lack of alternative schools to choose from or who may not want to disrupt their children?s education by transferring them to a different school. Instead, if they are not satisfied with their child?s progress in a particular subject then they will now have the opportunity to choose between a variety of different educational programmes and qualifications within the same school. Therefore the goal for customised, unbundled school reform is not to develop a new model of what a good school should look like but to create a flexible system that enables schools and a variety of specialist content providers to meet a variety of needs in increasingly effective and targeted ways.

The end result is that children would not simply graduate after 11 years of schooling with a single certificate which lists the subjects studied and the corresponding A-F grade. Instead they would graduate with a portfolio of branded qualifications which have real meaning in the outside world and which provide useful information concerning the knowledge and skills acquired by each student. However, unlike traditional qualifications these branded qualifications will not hold their value for ever but will expire after a certain period of time unless a refresh exam is taken. This is the only way to guarantee that the qualification holds its value and remains relevant over time, thereby protecting the brand image of both the qualification and the parent company.

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