



Selecting undergraduate students : what can the UK learn from the American SAT?

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Endnote

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What can the UK learn from the American SAT?

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Abstract

This short paper explores the contribution or otherwise that could be made by using a test akin to the American Scholastic Assessment Test or SAT to select students for undergraduate degrees in the UK. It examines the political context to the debate about the potential value of such a test, before outlining how SAT results in America vary along dimensions related to social background and how American universities have adapted their admissions procedures in response to these differences. From the research examined it cannot be assumed that the introduction of a test such as the SAT would be any more equitable than the current use of public examinations in England. It is suggested that profiling students along the lines used by some American universities may assist with making access 'fairer'.

Introduction

The recent political debate in England about ‘top-up’ fees for undergraduate degrees has been accompanied by a debate about university admissions. As reported in the recent White Paper, ‘The Future of Higher Education’ (DfES, 2003) young people in the UK from professional backgrounds are over five times more likely to enter higher education than those from unskilled backgrounds. University entrance, in general, is dependent on performance in General Certificate of Education Advanced (GCE A) level examinations (or their equivalent). More 18 year olds from higher socio-economic backgrounds (43%) gain two or more A levels (the traditional minimum university entrance requirement) than those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (19%) (DfES, 2003). Given that A levels are, for many institutions (and in particular those that might be construed as being more prestigious), the key selection tool, there have been suggestions that the use of a test along the lines of the American SAT (formerly known as the Scholastic Assessment Test and prior to that the Scholastic Aptitude Test) could identify student ‘potential’ more effectively (see Sutton Trust, 2002). In this paper, we outline some of the American evidence relating to the SAT and ask whether a test similar to the SAT would replicate or transcend the socio-economic and ethnic differentials found with GCE A level outcomes. We examine the political context in the next section, before outlining the experience with the SAT in the US and then concluding the paper.

Political context

The debate about the use of a test akin to the SAT by UK higher education institutions has been spearheaded by the charitable foundation, the Sutton Trust, which has argued that a test of ‘potential’ in addition to ‘achievement’ (i.e. GCE A levels) is needed. Such is the influence of

the Trust that the Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) was asked by the Education and Skills Select Committee why HEFCE had not:

listened to Sutton Trust research...on SATs where the American experience seems to suggest, and the pilot that has been carried out, that the SAT actually identifies and cuts through the glossy process and identifies potential in a better way, or certainly a good supplementary way, to the way that A levels do? (House of Commons, 2003).

It is noteworthy that the interpretation of the findings of the research on the SAT commissioned by the Sutton Trust, and undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) is rather nuanced. A pilot study using a short version of the SAT (SAT I: Reasoning Test) (McDonald et al., 2001) found that the test assessed ‘somewhat distinct constructs’ (p. 36) from A levels and may therefore be of value in predicting university performance, and so have benefit for the UK selection process.¹ However, socio-economic factors and prior educational experiences were found to affect students’ test scores; for example, both SAT I scores and mean GCE A level grades were highest in independent schools (which are academically selective) and lowest in the low-achieving schools. It is not clear that the use of a test akin to the SAT would provide admissions’ tutors with results that did not have socio-economic and ethnic differentials, similar to those of selection tools already being used (McDonald et al., 2000; Mau and Lynn, 2001). Nevertheless, McDonald et al. (2001) do note: ‘Using SAT scores in addition to A-levels increases the number of students selected for all samples. However, the percentage increase is greatest for students from low-attaining schools’ (p. 38).

The SAT and university admissions in the US

At this juncture it is important to explore the American evidence on SAT performance. The SAT is used by the majority of American higher education institutions in the admissions process (US

Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR), 2002). It is crucial to point out that in the US there are no public examinations along the lines of GCSEs or GCE A levels during secondary education, so the SAT, in many ways, can be seen to serve an equivalent purpose to A levels. The SAT is a three-hour test measuring verbal and mathematical reasoning skills. Possible scores on the SAT range from 200 to 800 for each part of the test. Its value is contested by academics and hotly debated in the US media and it has attracted serious criticisms from those who ‘call into question the viability of selection for higher education based on the measurement of ‘intelligence’ (Black and William, 2001).

As in the case of GCSE and GCE A level results, SAT results vary along various dimensions related to social background. Students from families where the income is lower gain, on average, lower scores. For example, in 2000-01, students where the family income was less than \$10,000 gained on average a verbal score of 421 and a mathematical score of 443, whilst students from families earning more than \$100,000 gained on average 557 and 569 respectively (see NCES, 2001). Scores were also lower for students whose parents had lower levels of educational attainment. Thus, in 2000-01 students whose parents had no high school diploma gained a mean verbal score of 411 and mathematical score of 438, whilst those whose parents had a graduate degree obtained mean scores of 559 and 567 respectively.

Average student scores also vary according to race/ethnicity. As noted by Nettles et al. (2003):

‘Alarming racial gaps are consistently found on the SAT, which plays an important role in the quality of access to higher education and in turn, to social and economic mobility’ (p. 215).

Thus we find that the mean verbal and mathematical scores for Black students in 2000-01 were 433 and 426 respectively whilst for White students the comparable scores were 529 and 531, and

for Asian American students 501 and 566 (see NCES, 2001). Significantly, the research by Nettles et al. (2003) reveals that: ‘The largest single factor explaining the black-white achievement gap is the socioeconomic backgrounds of students’ (p.236).

Whilst the debate over the value of SAT results is not new, recent loss of confidence appears to be gathering pace. Use of the SAT has been abandoned by some colleges and universities due to the effect that preparation undertaken by schools for the test is believed to have (Black and William, 2001).

A recent report (USCCR, 2002) reported that many universities are moving away from relying on the SAT (and similar tests) and ‘have made efforts to take a more holistic approach to admissions, giving consideration to students’ talents and extraordinary accomplishments’. Thus, concerns about equal opportunities led the University of California to discontinue using the SAT in 2001 in favour of a ‘bonus’ points system, for applicants who have overcome ‘extraordinary life challenges’ in order to try and equalise opportunity (USCCR, 2002). Many other universities have introduced other ways of assessing students’ potential. So for example, Columbia University now uses a combination of different measures, including an essay, extracurricular activities, references, grade point averages from high school and SAT scores (USCCR, 2002). The USCCR also reports that ‘nearly 300 other institutions have made the SAT optional, relying instead on student portfolios, essays, interviews, grades and class ranks’. It is noteworthy that one research study (see USCCR, 2002) compared two admissions strategies, one relying on students’ high school records and the other using school records and SAT results. This revealed that although the decisions on admissions were broadly similar, ‘the SAT-based strategy resulted in a greater number of rejections of otherwise qualified minority and low-income applicants’.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it cannot be assumed that the introduction of a SAT-like test would be any more equitable than the current use of the current public examination results in England and Wales. The American evidence clearly indicates that SAT scores are stratified along race and income lines.ⁱⁱ The American SAT, like GCE A levels, measures achievement, although unlike the latter it is not designed to be closely related to curriculum content. Given that achievement at any point in time is affected by factors in an individual's environment, at home and at school, it is hardly surprising that differences between different groups of students exist. Universities are left in a dilemma: they may wish to assess 'potential' but it is difficult to separate potential from actual test performance since tests supposedly measuring potential in fact measure achievement at a particular point of time. Universities are thus seeking new ways of trying to establish potential. It may be that profiling students along the lines used by certain American universities should now be tested out. However there are no easy solutions to the problem of making access 'fairer' and less dependent on attainment, which is so clearly related, in both America and the UK, to social background.

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Biographical note

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ⁱ Interestingly, mean GCSE scores were more closely associated with the SAT I scores than A levels.

ⁱⁱ In addition there are differences between males and females, with males, on average, obtaining higher scores than females