An American Perspective - Widening participation and the SAT: talent spotting or talent development?

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There are those in UK access circles, I’m quite sure, who raise or possibly furrow their eyebrows every time they hear of some new higher education theory or practice imported from the US. However, the news that the UK is exploring the use of the American SAT to improve fairness in university admissions and widen participation is perhaps raising one or two eyebrows over here. Seen from this side of the Atlantic, it’s a curious move to say the least. But then perhaps it’s not so much an example of cultural borrowing as borrowing back. After all, the SAT owes at least part of its heredity to Galton and Spearman and the search for a ‘general factor’ of intelligence. Indeed, the notion that you can identify educational talent or potential unconditioned by socioeconomic or educational context has deep roots in the UK. Even now, assumptions about the ‘pool of ability’ continue to bubble to the surface in policy debates and decisions. Could it be, paradoxically, that part of the appeal of the SAT in Britain lies in its essential familiarity?

Recent studies in Britain seem to indicate that the SAT adds a measure of predictive power to traditional ‘A’ levels, and this may well be true. Multiple measures usually have such an effect, after all. Still, there’s not much evidence from this side of the pond to show that the adoption of something like the SAT in Britain would do very much to widen participation. While the opportunity argument was made by early proponents and adopters of the SAT in America, it is not one you hear very much any more. For decades now, there has been a simmering debate in the US about whether the SAT is culturally or statistically biased, or both. It’s a debate that rages in the technical footnotes of psychometric journals but has profound implications when the distribution of opportunity and reward in society is so closely associated with the distribution of access to higher education. Indeed, over 400 colleges and universities in the US - some of them highly selective - no longer require the SAT, in part because of this very concern.

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The problem with 'aptitude' tests as an access measure, of course, lies precisely in the way they tend to reflect rather than challenge the prevailing structure of educational provision in society. To what extent this is an inherent weakness of such measures, or a function of the minor industry of high-priced 'Test-Prep' services that tends to grow up around them, can be debated. But surely the argument for more achievement-based measures is that they do a better job of encouraging student learning on the one hand, and school improvement on the other.

Either way, the real issue surely has less to do with better talent spotting and more to do with improving the quality of pre-college education for disadvantaged students. This is an argument that is certainly being heard in the US, as can be seen in President Bush’s ‘No Child Left Behind’ initiative. To what extent additional ‘accountability’ and parent ‘choice’ will lead to greater equity and achievement in...