

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



Brian Spittle
Assistant Vice President, Enrolment Management,
DePaul University, Chicago

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 (1) 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 (2). Indeed, the notion that you can identify educational talent or potential unconditioned by socioeconomic or educational context has deep roots in the

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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

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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

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America’s schools remains to be seen. But if there is one voice in Washington that deserves an audience in the UK, if he doesn’t already have one, it’s that of Clifford Adelman, the senior researcher at the Department of Education (the US equivalent of the DfES). In 1999, Adelman produced his now celebrated Answers in the Toolbox study which built on one of the massive longitudinal data sets of American high school students. In an exhaustive analysis of high school records, test scores and surveys, Adelman found among other things that of all the ‘academic resources’ that account for college success (not just access), the quality and intensity of the high school curriculum was by far the most significant. Indeed, so much so that it essentially outweighed the effects of low socioeconomic status. A couple of months ago, Adelman released a follow-up study, The Toolbox Revisited, which much the same conclusion (3).

Over the past five years or so, the Chicago school system has implemented a couple of projects that speak directly to Adelman’s point. First is the establishment of International Baccalaureate (IB) programs in a dozen or more

neighbourhood high schools as well as the development of a middle years IB program to feed into them. The second is the implementation of the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program in about 30 schools (4). The program, which started in California in the early eighties, takes ‘average’ students and essentially places them with appropriate support in a higher level of coursework. These have to be two of the more intriguing and promising developments in American education today given the challenges facing Chicago public schools in which 85% of the students are from low-income families and over 90% are minority. Indeed, so far as I am aware, the Chicago IB initiative is the only one of its scale in a large urban school system. And both projects are starting to show dramatic results. The vast majority of Chicago IB and AVID high school graduates are going on to college, and if preliminary findings of an IB tracking project at DePaul University are any indication, they are likely to do very well indeed.

The search for ‘Spearman’s g’ (2) will no doubt continue. And there’s always work to be done to ensure that the admissions process is as fair as it can be. But measures of potential and attainment beg the question of how prior educational opportunity is distributed in society. If there’s any borrowing or re-borrowing to be done, perhaps it should focus on how best to extend a high quality curriculum to all.

NOTES

1. The SAT or Scholastic Aptitude Test is one of two standardized college entrance tests in the United States, the other being the more achievement-based ACT administered by American College Testing Inc.
2. ‘Spearman g’ – According to Spearman’s two-factor theory of intelligence, the performance of any intellectual act requires some combination of “General Intelligence” or “g”, which is available to the same individual to the same degree for all intellectual acts, and of “specific factors” or “s” which are specific to that act and which varies in strength from one act to another. If one knows how a person performs on one task that is highly saturated with “g”, one can safely predict a similar level of performance for another highly “g” saturated task. Prediction of performance on tasks with high “s” facts are less accurate. Nevertheless, since “g” pervades all tasks, prediction will be significantly better than chance. Thus, the most important information to have about a person’s intellectual ability is an estimate of their “g”.
3. The full report can be accessed at the US Department of Education website: <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/toolboxrevisit/index.html>
4. For more information on the AVID program go to <http://www.avidonline.org/>