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The A* grade at A level in England: An evaluation of its use as a selection tool for Higher Education courses

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Abstract

One of the many challenges facing those involved in admissions decisions for Higher Education (HE) courses is being able to differentiate between students with exceptional performance at school, whilst ensuring fairness on entry and equality in the probability of successfully completing a course. This is perhaps more relevant at certain HE institutions, where fair and effective discrimination amongst students with the highest levels of attainment is needed due to great competition for places. In response to this problem, policy makers and examination awarding bodies in England introduced a new A* grade at A-level. This new grade, first awarded in summer 2010, demands performance above and beyond that required to achieve the previous top grade (historically, the highest grade awarded for A-level qualifications, the principal measure of attainment for 18 year-olds in England, was a grade A).

At the point of implementation, there was uncertainty over how the A* grade would be used by university admission officers. There were fears that it would disadvantage applicants from state schools or from lower socio-economic groups because many top grades would usually come from the independent sector, where students from privileged backgrounds are over-represented, and therefore its use could hinder efforts to widen participation and increase social mobility.

The main aim of this research was twofold: firstly, to provide evidence of the validity of the A* grade as a predictor of university performance; and secondly, to assess whether its use could disadvantage state school students applying for HE courses. Overall, this study investigated whether the new A* grade could be used with confidence as a selection tool in HE without interfering with the widening participation agenda.

The data covered full-time graduates who started a first degree in the academic year 2010/11 in a UK HE institution and completed it in 2012/13. These students were the first who could have achieved A* grades in their A-levels and for whom sufficient time had elapsed to assess their HE achievements. Multilevel logistic regression analyses were carried out in order to look at the relationship between the outcome at university and performance at A-level (number of grades A*; average A-level grade), accounting for students' socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. gender, previous institution type, socio-economic background).

The key findings of this work are highlighted below:

- When prior schooling and other background characteristics were accounted for, the number of A* grades was a good predictor of achieving a good university degree.
- The number of A* grades had a positive and statistically significant effect in predicting the probability of attaining a good degree in some subject areas. However, this was only the case when the A* grades were achieved in specific A-level subjects. For example, the number of A* grades in STEM subjects was a good predictor of performance in most degree subject areas, particularly in science-orientated ones. Similarly, the number of A* grades in humanities subjects increased the probability of attaining good outcomes in biological sciences, social studies, law, linguistics and historical and philosophical studies.
- For a given performance at A-level, students from independent schools were less likely to achieve a good degree than students from state schools. This result is particularly relevant if we consider that the implementation of the A* grade, more prevalent among students in independent schools, was thought to affect admission policies and hinder efforts to widen participation.
- The results of this research highlight the importance of a grading system that allows greater differentiation among students, as this can be beneficial for effective and fair HE admissions, particularly on the most oversubscribed courses.

Full paper

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03054985.2015.1090967#abstract>