

## **University entrance - time for change?**

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Right. I have done enormous amounts of work, as many colleagues in the audience know, on vocational provision, 14 to 25 including a great of transnational comparative work. I am incredibly strongly committed to the promotion of a high quality, high volume, mass participation vocational route. It therefore seems somewhat odd that I don't follow fashion in attacking A-Levels, in fact I staunchly defend them. I think we abandon the high quality, refined qualifications represented by A-Levels at our peril.

In terms of the themes in Simon's presentation, are A-Levels fatally flawed? No, they are not fatally flawed. Have they been damaged by some changes? Yes. They continue to be enhanced and could be enhanced further, and in particular, not just enhancing the form and content of the qualifications themselves, but actually improving how we use the outcomes from them. This is going to be my theme this morning.

There have been a lot of scattered assertions this morning about this being a problem, that being a problem, GCSEs, A-Levels and so on. Rather, we must adopt an holistic view. We must consider how a qualification like A-Levels sits in a complex system, in a complex set of arrangements and we must look upwards in terms of whether it feeds high intensity, 3 year higher education – something which is internationally incredibly attractive to other countries – and look downwards as to how it actually functions as a beacon in the system in terms of academic and educational excellence.

In particular, I want to pick up Mike's point, namely admissions processes and universities are sophisticated in their consideration of a broad range of outcomes that students derive from education. There is no magic bullet. In many of the statements that were made about 5-10 years ago, one finds a notion that a single test would do the job of discriminating between the full range of young people in respect of higher education. That's a misguided notion. Mike also mentioned the fact that he was interested in using other things and that was immediately interpreted by some members of the audience that it would be those things rather than A-Level to which they would then pay attention. No, no, no, attention should be paid to all the measures, it's all of those bits of information on an individual you have to consider. Sorry that it's complicated, but that's what has to be done – as a measurement expert that's what I am particularly interested in. Forget this reductivism. Regarding a single measure NFER's Chris Whetton and the team there have done incredibly good work on looking in detail at whether a single test, like an American SAT, will perform an additional function within the system, i.e. add incremental validity, and in terms of a single generic test like the SAT the conclusion is that it won't.

People say '... in America, of course, they use just the SAT, of course they do...'. Only they don't. They don't use just the SAT; they use grade point average, the SAT score, an essay or a paper in many cases, testimonials and most significantly, they use something like A-Level, called the Advance Placement Award – people take between three or four subjects in the AP, and my goodness it looks like A-Level.

Now, the Finnish education system: everybody thinks that's the best in the world. Oh look... how many examinations do they do at the end? Four. Do they look like A-Levels? Yes. Are they about the same sort of duration in terms of the time the examinations take? Yes, in fact they are slightly longer.

Okay – all this is blowing some of these myths out of the water. In fact, what we need is sophisticated consideration of fine grained information, understanding with more precision the requirements for high performance in individual courses.

So if we need sophisticated consideration of fine grain information, just look at this for a second. Person 1 is just over the boundary between A and B grades and gets an A. We give this person an A and we give person 2, at the top of the B range, a B. Person 3 is a long way from person 2, and sits at the bottom of the B mark range. Like person 2, they get a B. But in fact, candidate 1 and 2 are more alike, even though they have got an A and a B respectively. They are more alike than candidate 2 and 3, both of whom have been given a B. Grades, unlike scores, are beginning to look pretty uninformative. Now from previous research many people make the claim – and repeat the assumption – that in the English system A-Levels do not predict performance in higher education. That's true if you use grades because grades are so coarse, but if you go digging around in the marks you will find very high levels of correlation between performance and A-Levels in universities.... university performance, university outcomes and degree outcomes. They are very good in terms of preparation for higher study, the preparatory value to which Isabel referred, but they are also very good in predicting success in higher education. The point is you just have to be very sophisticated in respect of the evidence that you take into account and how you look at it. Which is exactly what some universities now are doing.

That gives rise just to these very quick points.

A single generic test to replace robust qualifications? No evidence of merit in the English system. By contrast, A-Levels do predict; there is no replacement, single measure that would be helpful in the complex system we now have and will have in the future of highly competitive entrants. In admissions, we need careful scrutiny of complex information and that's the approach we should take. We need clarity from higher education in terms of the requirements of individual courses, so we can examine the predictive validity of specific qualifications in specific subjects. Those carefully designed analyses of scores from general qualifications need validation effort, lots of people looking in detail at research on who is doing well at university, with which scores in A level and other qualifications. Admissions tests in specific subjects do have their place. We need carefully designed tests which add incremental validity. It is sensible to have tests for medicine or for specialist courses which require particular abilities or dispositions. Validation evidence on all of our qualifications is vital in terms of what they are intending to measure and what they do measure. Greater sophistication and scrutiny of information is essential and possible, and for goodness sake, stop adding things up! The important information is there in the detailed, separate scores. Indeed, the UCAS tariff doesn't work because it combines in an inappropriate fashion all of the detailed evidence that we really should be looking at in order to make selection decisions.