

Beyond 3 'A' grades: selecting the best of the best for competitive places in higher education

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The top UK universities have an excess of applicants with the best predicted grades at A level, particularly for certain courses such as medicine. Proposed solutions usually involve the finer grading of A levels, creating new grades above 'A' or using additional assessments such as aptitude tests in the selection process. Each of these has its pros and cons. The aim of university selection is to choose those who are most likely to do well on the course and least likely to drop out (motivation and suitability for the profession are assessed additionally by interviews and personal statements). Selection criteria should therefore be shown to predict a candidate's chance of success on the course, that is, have predictive validity. In recent years some UK universities have added aptitude tests as part of their selection processes for highly competitive courses. However, these have come under criticism as lacking any proof that they relate to future performance.

Recent work has determined the predictive validity of two higher education aptitude tests currently in use at the University of Cambridge. The BMAT (BioMedical Admissions Test) is a subject-specific test used for medicine and veterinary medicine course applicants. The TSA (Thinking Skills Assessment) is a general test of aptitude for higher education used by most of the Cambridge colleges for various courses. Data from the BMAT and the TSA were merged with the subsequent examination results of students accepted onto the courses and their predictive relationships measured with correlation and logistic regression analyses. Results so far show that both tests relate to future course performance and predict the probability of attaining the highest degree class. This confirms that there are important differences in academic skills between candidates who have the same high A level grades and these differences do predict their chance of success on their course of study. A level grading may change in the future but valid aptitude tests can provide a solution to the problem of choosing between high achievers in the meantime.