

Brief Report

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Sports Participation is Worth Two Letter Grades in Undergraduate Admissions Decisions

<https://doi.org/10.1515/edu-2019-0003>
received June 7, 2019; accepted August 13, 2019.

Abstract: The current study aimed to assess the impact of sports participation on undergraduate admissions decisions at universities, colleges, and conservatoires in the United Kingdom. A between subjects, experimental design was employed. Participants from providers of undergraduate courses completed an on-line experiment that required them to make a decision on one of three randomly assigned undergraduate applications written for the study: one without sport participation included (control) and two modified versions with sport participation included (one for team sports and one for individual sports). Participants were asked to decide whether to make an offer or reject the application. Significant differences were found between the control and sport-modified applications for one and two grade differences overall, as participation in sport elevated the undergraduate application. As this study was delimited to sport participation, the findings cannot be generalized to other extra-curricular activities. Future researchers could extend this investigation by examining the economic and social impact of participation in sports at secondary school post-University.

Keywords: sport; extra-curricular; higher education; admission; tariff.

1 Introduction

Extra-curricular activities form an important part of university undergraduate applications. Previous research has focused on identifying the relationship between educational attainment and participation in extra-curricular activities, including volunteering, sports, performing arts, and wider school involvement (Blomfield

& Barber, 2009; Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999). However, surprisingly little research has been conducted on to what extent extra-curricular activities are taken into account in the decision-making process. The purpose of this study is to assess the impact of sports participation on undergraduate admissions decisions at higher education providers.

2 Methods and Results

A between-subjects, experimental design was employed. Participants from providers of undergraduate courses in the United Kingdom (courses from providers outside the UK were excluded) were invited to complete an on-line experiment that required them to make a decision on one of three randomly assigned undergraduate applications written for the study: one without sport participation included (control) and two modified versions with sport participation included (one for team sports and one for individual sports). Each application was prepared in line with the United Kingdom Universities and College Admissions Service guidelines (United Kingdom Universities and College Admissions Service, 2019a).

For each of the three versions of the application, participants read a personal statement and reference for an application written in English for a degree course in their university, college or conservatoire. All three personal statements included 8 paragraphs (including information on work history, career plans, hobbies and interests, skills and achievements, why applying for the course, why the course is of interest, suitability for the course and whether current studies relate to the course) within a 4000 character and line number limit, and words varied depending on subject and sport (+/- 20 words). All three references included 7 paragraphs (including information on academic performance, a statement that they are suited to chosen subject and career path, a statement on attitude, motivation and commitment, skills, work experience and extracurricular activities) within a 4000 character and line number limit, and the

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numbers of worked varied depending on subject and sport (+/- 20 words).

The applications were written in English and made no mention of age, gender, residency, or any protected characteristics in the statement or reference (e.g., only a generic sport was mentioned; not 'Men's A team'). The undergraduate application was to commence in the 2019-2020 study year, and data was collected in January-March 2019.

All participants were asked to select one of 21 subject areas and then provide the name of a course they would decide on as part of the study. A software program then inserted relevant subject-specific information plus information on a randomly selected individual (e.g., judo) or team (e.g., volleyball) sport into a generated statement and reference for the purpose of this study. The subject areas were: Agriculture and related sciences; Architecture, building and planning; Biological sciences; Business, management, and administrative studies; Computer science; Creative arts and design; Education; Engineering and technology; English; Historical and philosophical studies; Languages; Law; Mathematical sciences; Medicine and allied subjects; Music; Physical sciences; Psychology; Publishing, media, and information management; Social studies; Sport; and Veterinary science.

Participants were asked to assume it was a first sitting (not clearing) for the applicant (Universities and College Admissions Service, 2019b), a "very strong field this year" and that all admissions requirements were achieved, including grades for a typical standard offer at their institution for the program they selected (i.e., the candidate met all other requirements, plus desirable/required subjects), minus either 1, 2, or 3 letter grades for the highest grade (e.g., AAB would be ABB for one letter grade, etc.). If an institution only used University and College Admissions Service Tariff Points (Universities and College Admissions Service, 2019c), participants were asked to translate this accordingly (e.g., for three A level grades, five SQA Highers, etc.). Based on the information provided, participants were asked to decide whether to make an offer (or interview/audition) or reject the application.

Pilot work demonstrated no difference between the control and sport-modified applications in: study options (full-time, part-time, distance/blended, accelerated degrees, and work-based learning); whether decision was made by central admissions staff or academic admissions tutors; gender, age, education level and experience of participant; qualification (combined course, bachelor, foundation or HNC/HND); for UK resident or overseas

applicant; country (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales); International Baccalaureate (composite parts); and predicted or actual grades.

A total of 1246 applications were assessed by participants with six years' average admissions experience. Significant differences were found between the team sport and control applications overall for one-grade ($P=0.0028$; 95% CI = 4.14, 19.65) and two-grade ($P=0.0348$; 95% CI = 0.57, 15.29) changes, while significant differences were also found between the individual sport and control applications overall for one-grade ($P=0.0126$; 95% CI = 2.15, 17.67) and two-grade ($P=0.0421$; 95% CI = 0.29, 15.57) changes. No significant differences were found for three letter grade changes overall.

3 Discussion

The aim of this study was to assess the impact of sports participation on undergraduate admissions decisions at universities, colleges, and conservatoires. There are over 50,000 undergraduate courses at more than 395 providers (universities, colleges and conservatoires) in the United Kingdom (United Kingdom Universities and College Admissions Service, 2019d). Here it is shown that including participation in sport in an undergraduate application elevates the application by two letter grades. The study extends previous research on the relationship between educational attainment and participation in extra-curricular activities (Blomfield & Barber, 2009; Cooper et al., 1999) by examining the extent extra-curricular activities are taken into account in the decision-making process. A limitation of the study is that only admission experience was collected among participants; however, the pilot study showed no differences between the control and sport-modified applications with regard to gender, age, education level, and experience of participants.

Given the positive impact on admission decisions, it is important for evidence to be provided in the personal statement and reference regardless of whether the applicant participated in individual or team sports, as both were found to be significantly different to the control for one and two letter grades. As this study was delimited to sport participation, the findings cannot be generalized to other extra-curricular activities. Future researchers could extend this investigation by examining the economic and social impact of participation in sports at secondary school post-University.

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