

It's not all about grades: new perspectives on graduate students' academic performance

Citation for published version (APA):

Schwager, I. T. L. (2015). *It's not all about grades: new perspectives on graduate students' academic performance*. Maastricht University.

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2015

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Please check the document version of this publication:

- A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
- The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
- The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

[Link to publication](#)

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

If the publication is distributed under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license above, please follow below link for the End User Agreement:

www.umlib.nl/taverne-license

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at:

repository@maastrichtuniversity.nl

providing details and we will investigate your claim.

Valorization

As part of the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) stated in the Bologna declaration, the objective has been formulated to promote students' long-term employability. This encompasses that students do not solely obtain the content knowledge related to their study field, but also obtain the skills required in a constantly changing world of work. The findings of this dissertation "It's not all about grades: New perspectives on graduate students' academic performance" provide meaningful insights in how to gain a student body that is both academically successful and valuable for the well-functioning of universities and future employers. Whereas Chapter 2 and 3 provide information about the predictive validity of a standardized cognitive test (Graduate Record Examination; GRE) and a noncognitive standardized letter of recommendation (Personal Potential Index; PPI), Chapter 4 encompasses initial empirical findings about the positive outcomes of a personality characteristic (trait mindfulness) having the potential to be trained. This means that universities could think about integrating mindfulness trainings into students' curriculum in order to improve their performance after they have been admitted to their study program. However, before the findings reported in Chapter 4 can be implemented into practice, further research is needed. Thus, in the remainder the focus will be on the two selection tools presented in Chapter 2 and 3 of this dissertation.

Given that ETS (Educational Testing Service) owns the copyright for the GRE and the PPI there is no direct possibility to profit monetarily from their implementation into practice. However, various stakeholders profit indirectly from selection tools covering a broader conceptualization of academic performance. Political stakeholders involved in the formulation of the Bologna protocol have emphasized the importance of noncognitive skills in order to improve students' value for the economy and the society. Likewise, universities in their mission statements stress the importance of both intellectual and personal development and growth. At the same time, students get the opportunity to receive a more complete picture of their cognitive abilities and noncognitive academic skills and can compensate for deficits on one or the other when applying for a master program. Thus, staff members involved in admission decisions at universities are in need of valid cognitive and noncognitive selection instruments that are fair, cost- and time-efficient.

Whereas the usefulness of cognitive admission tests such as the GRE is well-established in North America, findings presented in this dissertation are the first to confirm the usefulness of the GRE in the European context. Results reveal that students with higher GRE scores get better grades in their master program. The use of standardized tests is convenient from universities' perspective since test scores can be compared across applicants from various backgrounds. Especially due to students' increased mobility within Europe this is an important advantage over students' undergraduate grade point average (U-GPA) which is also widely used as an indicator of future study success. In order to predict students' noncognitive academic potential, the PPI provides meaningful information. Former supervisors are asked to evaluate the applicant on six prescribed dimensions such as teamwork performance or ethics and integrity. A written report is provided including the individual assessment per supervisor and an overall mean rating per dimension. Result of this dissertation reveal that students with high PPI evaluations are indeed more likely to engage in favorable behavior such as supporting fellow students and less likely to engage in detrimental behavior such as cheating or bullying.

The PPI as an alternative to traditional letters of recommendation is advantageous from universities' perspective as applicants' PPI evaluations can be easily rank ordered. Furthermore, an evaluation of the same dimensions is available across all applicants. In case study programs require specific noncognitive performance aspects (e.g., working in a team), universities/faculties can put different weight on the different PPI dimensions when taking admission decisions. From staff members' perspective the PPI is advantageous as filling in the PPI is far less time consuming than writing traditional letters of recommendation.

So far the different faculties at Maastricht University do not follow a consistent approach how to select their future master students. Most faculties select their master students based on their former grades, their content knowledge and their language proficiency (English and/or Dutch). Only some programs require standardized test results or ask students to write a motivation letter. However, a focus is clearly set on the assessment of students' cognitive potential. This is somehow surprising as the teaching system applied at Maastricht University (Problem Based Learning; PBL) explicitly requires students to function well in a group setting. During the tutorial group meetings students need to cooperate in order to cover all required study materials. Furthermore, they often have to work in small teams in order to prepare presentations, case studies or small projects. Thus, students showing cooperative instead counterproductive behavior are inevitable for the well-functioning of the PBL system. Students complaining about the PBL system often raise the point of critique that other students are free riding without being disciplined. This means that always the same students do the share of work whereas others are rather passive. By selecting students based on their noncognitive skills this problem could be reduced.

However, the assessment of cognitive skills should not be ignored. Especially in the Dutch higher education system the financial system is based on 'output funding' (that is: universities receive money for those students that have successfully graduated). This means that students who are not able to finish their master program cost a lot of money. Assuming that less skilled students require a substantial share of staff members' time and resources (e.g., they have to repeat an exam several times or need more supervision with their final thesis) this is especially problematic. Although being not skilled enough is not the only reason why students do not finish their study program, it is at least the one that can best be predicted beforehand. Thus, a wise decision should be taken whether quality or quantity is more important when admitting students to a master program. Taken together, we strongly encourage stakeholders involved in admission decisions at Maastricht University to think about a comprehensive selection system asking students to provide information about both their cognitive and noncognitive skills.