Coaching has a ‘significant result’ on SAT scores says Oxford study

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Candidates taking SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test), the standard primary entrance exam for college admissions in the US, should consider the benefits of coaching or, at the very least, familiarise themselves with the style and content of the tests, suggests an Oxford University study.

It shows that pupils who had received coaching had significantly higher test scores in verbal and maths tests for the SAT, and ultimately a better chance of gaining a place at a university or college, than those who had not received any form of coaching.

According to the research paper, published in the International Journal of Social Welfare, students who had some form of coaching for the SAT gained, on average, an extra 23 points in the verbal test and 33 points on the maths test – a combined score of 56 points.

This suggests an even greater effect of coaching on the improvement of SAT scores than previous research has shown.

The researchers reviewed ten existing studies which used randomised controlled trials to look at effects of coaching on SAT performance.

The studies had been conducted over a 30-year period and involved a total of 1,355 pupils who took the maths tests and 1,208 pupils who took verbal tests.

In the case of verbal tests, the researchers found that the length of time spent in coaching did not have any significant effect – short coaching sessions of less than eight hours and a longer coaching programme of more than eight hours have broadly similar results in terms of the gain in test marks.

However, for maths the longer coaching programmes were found to be far more beneficial – with pupils gaining an average three times the increase in points as compared with those who had taken short coaching sessions.

The study also reviews the different coaching styles on offer, but found no significant gain in test scores for those who paid for classroom-based sessions as compared with pupils who opted for a free online coaching course.

The research paper concludes that all three coaching methods – in school, commercial classroom-based and online – yielded significantly higher average scores for coached students compared with their peers did not undergo any coaching.

Poorer pupils were found to benefit as much from coaching as those from more privileged backgrounds.

The study points out that coaching has become a central focus of SAT test preparation and argues that as students do not have equal access to coaching opportunities, higher-income families have an unfair advantage in being able to prepare for the admissions tests.

It suggests that familiarity with the style and format of the tests was the main advantage gained by candidates who had been coached.

Lead author Paul Montgomery, Reader in Psycho-Social Intervention at the University of Oxford, said: ‘The effects of coaching show a significant improvement in test scores over those who had not received coaching and yet SAT performance determines who gets a place at college or a scholarship.

The system is patently unfair if some pupils have coaching opportunities while others don’t for financial reasons.

We therefore urge universities to reconsider the weight given to SAT scores in the undergraduate admissions process.

The findings suggest that admissions policies should be reviewed and redesigned as they currently seem to penalise those who cannot afford coaching.

Yet universities are depending more and more on standardised reasoning ability examination scores, particularly when determining who is eligible for scholarship funding.

The SAT is designed to measure general aptitude and skill, qualities that allegedly can’t be coached, but this study suggests coaching increases test scores in a significant way.

‘This evidence suggests that students should at the very least familiarise themselves with the test formats generally, and they ought to know that coaching for an examination specifically has been shown to have a significant effect on examination scores.

The studies in this synthesis analysed coaching sessions of varied duration: the shortest courses were just four hours in a classroom but the longest coaching programmes extended to 45 hours.

Most of the trials were set in high schools in the Eastern United States, primarily along the East Coast.

For more information or the full study, contact the University of Oxford Press Office on +44 (0)1865 280534 or email press.office@admin.ox.ac.uk

**Notes for editors**

 ‘Systematic reviews of the effects of preparatory courses on university entrance examinations in high school-age students’ by Paul Montgomery and Jane Lilly is published in the International Journal of Social Welfare. See it online at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-2397.2011.00812.x/abstract>  
For more about the University of Oxford’s Department of Social Policy and Intervention, go to <http://www.spi.ox.ac.uk/research/centre-for-evidence-based-intervention.html>