



Evaluating intake variables for a teacher education programme: Improving student success and process efficiency



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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the effectiveness of intake variables used by a Canadian post-degree teacher education programme over the period of three years to select candidates for entry into the programme. Using a mixed-methods approach, comparisons were made between intake variables (GPA, written response, work experience, reference letters, academic preparation, and interviews), and post-practicum ratings completed by faculty mentors. Post-practicum ratings were gathered on 14 programme goals (e.g., classroom management, communication, professionalism, etc.). In addition, qualitative analyses of the scoring tools and focus group interviews with involved faculty were completed. Results over three years revealed variation that led to changes in variables and scoring tools. Implications for altering future intake procedures, especially in relation to procedural efficiency, are examined.

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1. Purpose

This paper shares results gathered over three years regarding the effectiveness of intake variables used by a post-degree teacher education programme when selecting applicants for entry into the programme. The examination of intake variables was undertaken to evaluate whether: (a) students gaining entry into the programme were successful in completing the programme and (b) the degree of efficiency when completing the admissions process. Information on student success in relation to admission scores and admission process efficiency results in the best information possible for making decisions regarding entrance to a teacher education programme. Results indicated that changes were needed to improve opportunities for student success and minimize inefficient procedures within the overall process.

2. Literature review

The importance of intake variables in relation to student success within the context of a teacher education programme (TEP) is examined in research literature in a variety of ways. A review of the relevant literature focuses on three main areas: (a) the value of researching the admission process, (b) the correlations between admission variables and student success in a teacher education

programme, and (c) the identification of the best outcome measures for evaluating admission variables. We examine each of these in turn.

2.1. The value of researching the admission process

Pratt (1977) stressed that, as a result of the low failure rates in teacher education, it is important to exclude potentially weak teachers from the profession before they are admitted into a programme. Thomson, Cummings, Ferguson, Miyuki Moizumi, and Sher (2011) supported this argument for the importance of research examining the intake procedures within the admission process in teacher education programmes. They summarized that, “the decision regarding which applicants to admit into an initial or pre-service teacher education programme is critically important because it determines who has the possibility of becoming a teacher” (p. 1). In addition, Falkenberg (2010) notes that evaluating the admission process is a critical component to the design and responsiveness of a teacher education programme. While intake variables for Canadian teacher education programmes vary from GPA, to written responses, to reference letters, to work experience (Casey & Childs, 2011; Caskey, Peterson, & Temple, 2001; Crocker & Dibbon, 2008), consistent results regarding the value of these intake variables are hard to find.

2.2. Correlations between admission variables and student success

Mikitovics and Crehan (2002) argued that many B.Ed. programmes use GPA as the predominant intake variable. This

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can be related to the size of the institution and the work commitment of faculty, as the volume of applicants may prohibit a more differentiated model of intake variables (e.g., interviews, spontaneous writes, etc.). While GPA is the easiest, most efficient, and most commonly implemented criteria to select candidates for entry (Lawrence & Crehan, 2001; Mikitovics & Crehan, 2002), there are many questions regarding its validity as a measure of future success in the programme (Byrnes, Kiger, & Shechtman, 2003; Salzman, 1991).

The second most used and reported on variable is a written response; however, this provides the added challenge of qualitatively evaluating these responses (Casey & Childs, 2011). As noted by Casey and Childs, the evaluation of these written responses often falls to faculty (or sessionals) thereby creating the need for additional time. Additional time is further needed when intake variables involve interviews of applicants or the evaluation of references and work experiences (Pratt, 1977).

Pratt (1977) asserts that a preadmission interview with trained interviewers and a supportive environment, can predict *teacher survival* in the profession. In addition, this process can provide a basis for the counselling of unsuccessful candidates so as to either guide them into another professional field or help them develop additional capacities prior to their re-application. Research in health-care programmes provide some additional information regarding the value of interviews as an intake variable. For example, Goho and Blackman (2006) note that research on highly structured admission interviews for the health profession programmes indicate modest predictive power in determining academic and clinical performance in health-related programmes.

According to a review of Canadian teacher education programmes, while 11 of the 40 programmes used GPA as their only indicator, the other 29 programmes utilized combinations of written essays, work experience, references, and interviews (Crocker & Dibbon, 2008). As such, the majority of programmes in Canada often require increased time and involvement of evaluators (may or may not be faculty) to determine entry into the programme. Given this potential expansion of time and cost, examining the ability of intake variables to correlate with student success is of critical importance in a time of budget restraints and public criticism. For example, Calder Stegeman (2014) completed an evaluation of admission variables and the ability of those variables to predict student success in practicum. A number of the variables examined (e.g., GPA, interview, spontaneous write) were redundant. As a result, Calder Stegeman concluded that it may be best to eliminate one or more of the admission variables to reduce the time and cost of admission process. Consequently, while there are strong incentives for educational institutions to ensure high retention rates, the time required for the procedures is also an important consideration.

An area that has not yet been examined in detail in relation to intake variables relates to teacher identity development. Research recognizes that, throughout a TEP, there is an ongoing formation of teacher identity that is affected by the personal and emotional mindset of applicants (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). This mindset exists in teacher education applicants and, as a result, may impact their successful development through the TEP (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Bransford, Berliner, & Cochran-Smith, 2005). Olsen (2008) alludes to the “holistic dimensions of beginning teacher development” (p. 38) being hidden from view in more technical and academic orientations to intake variables. As noted by Mayer (1999), this mindset may have even come from experiences that are removed from the realities of teachers’ work. Walkington (2005) supports the notion that many applicants establish for themselves that, “they have the necessary attitudes and dispositions... and expect university will assist them with subject knowledge, pedagogical aspects and, most importantly

behaviour management strategies...” (p. 58). There may be value in identifying this type of mindset in the admissions process. In this way, intake variables could provide an opportunity to challenge students’ distinct perceptions and assumptions, through reflection, as per Walkington’s suggestion. However, intake variables are challenged to address an applicant’s capacity to engage with and reflect on the teaching context and their own role within it, prior to their acceptance into a TEP.

2.3. *The identification of the best outcome measures for evaluating admission variables*

As discussed at length by Casey and Childs (2011) and Fenstermacher and Richerardson (2005), the challenge when evaluating the effectiveness of intake variables emerges when researchers have to decide what counts as student success. A variety of factors can influence student success in post-secondary environments, and predicting this success is a very complex endeavour (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993).

Casey and Childs (2011) note that the best measure of success in a TEP would involve the measurement of teacher performance in the field once students have successfully completed their certification. While it may be the best measure, it is often unrealistic given the difficulty new teachers have in acquiring full time teaching positions and remaining within a single school district. As a result, studies often rely on evaluations of student teacher performance during their field experience or practicum. As noted by Millman and Darling-Hammond (1990), this also poses challenges as these evaluations are often completed by teacher mentors or associate teachers in the field. These mentors are usually quite disconnected from the university, resulting in a different perception regarding what determines success (Wideen et al., 1998). Consequently, any investigation of intake variables requires attention to the validity of the measures used to evaluate student success.

3. Data sources

At this small university the TEP is guided by five programme values: social justice, critical mindedness, pedagogical sensitivity, the integration of knowledge and practice, and reflective practice. These five values permeate all aspects of the programme and inform the goals of the programme. They are used to create the much needed structure for “integrated, coherent programmes that emphasize a consistent vision of good teaching” (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007, p. 119). Given the emphasis on this vision throughout the programme, it was important that these values permeated the intake process. As a result, we began this three year study to examine the effectiveness of our admission process in relation to student success, procedural efficiency, and alignment with our programme values.

This TEP is a one year post-degree programme consisting of 36–50 student teachers. Within the Canadian context, education at the Kindergarten to Grade 12 level is regulated with each province through Ministries of Education. Within British Columbia, TEPs are accredited with the Ministry of Education through the Teacher Regulation Branch (TRB). The TRB works within a legislative mandate to ensure that educators in the K-12 school system in BC meet and maintain the high standards of competence and conduct required to keep students safe and to foster public trust and confidence in the teaching profession. There are eight standards for the education, competence, and professional conduct of educators in BC (e.g., value and care for all students and act in their best interests, educators have a broad knowledge base and understand the areas they teach, etc.), which provide the professional foundation and certification requirements for teachers in this

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