An evaluation of traditional admission standards in predicting Kuwait University students' academic performance

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Abstract. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the usefulness of the traditional admission standards utilized by Kuwait University in predicting students' academic performance. It was found that the established practice of using students' score in standardized secondary school examinations and branch of study (i.e. sciences or arts emphasis) to be highly predictive of their college cumulative grade point average. Moreover, it was established that students' secondary school scores reflect intellective as well as the non-intellective factors pertaining to students' background.

Introduction

Ever since the establishment of Kuwait University (KU) in 1966, the basic standards for admission have been the students' secondary school examination score and branch of study (i.e., sciences or arts emphasis, see following sections for details). The former criterion is used for selecting appropriate candidates for admission while the latter is utilized in restricting choice of fields of study.

Although these admission standards were never critically studied to ascertain their effectiveness in the selection of appropriate candidates, they continued unchallenged for the period 1966–1980. The basic justification for their continued use seemed to be their widespread use in most of the neighboring Arab Countries in setting their university admission standards.

During the seventies the Kuwaiti society experienced a substantial rise in its standard of living due to sharp increases in oil revenues. This enhanced affluence combined with the explosive population growth with its high percentage of younger groups resulted in growing interest among the secondary school graduates from the various segments of the Kuwaiti society in university education. These factors led to mounting pressures on KU officials to lower admission requirements. Advocates of lower standards emphasized the need to offer increased access to those desiring university education. The subsequent success of that campaign led to a substantial relaxation in KU’s admission requirements during the period 1980-84. The requirements were reduced significantly under the new policy to allow almost all interested applicants to be admitted. Specifically, the minimum required secondary school score was set at 59.5% for both branches of secondary school. Whereas previously it ranged from 62.5% for the
science branch graduates to 70.2% for the arts. An interesting characteristic of
the new admission policy adopted between 1980 and 1984 was its equal treatment
of students from the two branches of secondary school. The old policy, in con-
trast, was based on preferential treatment of the science branch graduates
through setting lower minimum score requirements for them. Consequently, that
period witnessed a rapid increase in enrollment due to the influx of students with
minimal secondary school scores. In a span of four years, this led to a doubling
of the student body at KU.

During fall 1985/1986, Kuwait University officials severely curtailed enroll-
ment by reverting back to the old policy of setting stringent requirements for
admission. This move included the reinstatement of previous minimum exami-
nation score requirements and the preferential treatment for the science branch
graduates. Responding to critics of the newly adopted policy, KU officials em-
phasized the detrimental effects of low admission requirements on university
education. They stressed that the “generally perceived” declining performance
of KU students as measured by their cumulative grade point average (GPA) was
a manifestation of the inadequacy of the relaxed admission policy implemented
earlier.

Clearly, increased interest in university education and the concurrent growing
need for highly educated individuals in the Kuwaiti society necessitates a careful
examination of the admission standards at KU to ensure that all qualified appli-
cants are admitted to the university. Failure to do so deprives the country of its
most valuable asset. Equally important, admitting unqualified students leads
to declining confidence in KU graduates as well as waste and misallocation of
society’s limited resources. Thus, the stakes are high and warrant a careful and
scientifically based study of this issue. Moreover, lack of sufficient research on
this matter as it applies to Kuwait enhances the importance attached to this ef-
fort.¹

The objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are two. First, to utilize the experience of the period
1980-84 to study the usefulness of the traditional admission standards in predict-
ing KU students’ academic performance. Specifically, usefulness of secondary
school examination score and branch of study in predicting students’ perfor-
mance as measured by their cumulative GPA. Second, to identify the important
students’ background factors influencing the level of secondary school examina-
tion score itself.

An advantage of the period 1980-84 for carrying-out such a study stems from
the existence of a student population with very diverse backgrounds. Setting
minimal requirements for admission during that period ensured enrollment of