

Educational testing as a global industry

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Standardized testing of great numbers of students has become a global industry with huge financial stakes and its own vested interest in expansion. Computerisation has given testing corporations the capacity to sell their products to educational authorities worldwide. Around the globe, students' lives are dominated by the amount of testing they are subjected to in school.

Giving an indication of the amounts of money involved, British publishing giant Pearson PLC has just announced a takeover of leading US assessment company National Computer Systems (NCS) for \$2.5 billion in cash. NCS had an operating profit of \$70 million last year on revenues of \$630 million, with 5000 employees and subsidiaries in 30 countries.

In April this year the company was awarded a major contract renewal with the Texas Educational Agency to conduct statewide testing, worth an estimated \$233 million over the next five years. The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills tests are the biggest in the United States, and a trailblazer for the expansion of high stakes testing throughout the American public education system. NCS is also poised to share in a billion dollar contract with the state of California for a project gathering information on all its public schools. It has been looking to establish a joint venture with University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate, a British testing authority which organises exams worldwide.

In a revealing example of the sway that testing companies have over the lives and educational opportunities of students, NCS is presently confronting a class action suit concerning a large scale test it conducted earlier this year in Minnesota, when wrong results were given to 45,000 students in a state maths test. Among these results, 8,000 students were incorrectly failed. These fail marks meant that 336 high school students were not allowed to graduate. The

lawsuit has been issued on behalf of some of these students.

The size of the assessment industry, and its explosive expansion, are bound up with the agenda of every educational authority in the world, which is usually termed "educational reform". What this means is that alongside the dismantling of the social safety net comes the restructuring of education to attune it ever more closely to the needs of the market. In this regard, the United States leads the way.

For tertiary entrance purposes, high stakes testing serves as an invaluable social engineering tool. In Britain a campaign in the *Daily Telegraph* to replace the existing tertiary entry exams has insisted on the supposedly egalitarian qualities of the American Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), formerly the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Claiming the SAT provides a level playing field for entrants, and rounding up support from various university academics, columnist John Clare asserts: "The American experience over nearly 75 years shows that aptitude tests, as well as being objective and fair, cut across inequalities of schooling." The campaign is also backed by several millionaires whose aim is to develop a meritocracy in British society.

Singapore has just decided to revamp its university entry exam, and has announced it will introduce the SAT from 2003. A spokesman for the Singapore government said recently: "We are doing it in the interests of meritocracy, transparency and objectivity."

The American experience historically shows that far from being egalitarian and objective, standardised test scores tend to be highly correlated with socio-economic background. Recent US data shows that someone taking the SAT can expect to score an extra 30 points for every \$10,000 in his parents' annual income.

Failed students can be sidelined from the education process, with the test serving as a barrier to their

promotion to any further education. The origins of the SAT as a large-scale test are bound up with its designers' ability to persuade military authorities of its efficacy. In World War II it was first given to 300,000 military candidates in one day. During the Korean War it proved its usefulness again to military authorities when they tested college students on induction, to determine who should be kept from active service to prevent a brain drain for the US through war casualties.

Hostility to the SAT in particular and standardised testing in general developed so much by the 1980s that there developed an industry watchdog, the National Center for Fair and Open Testing (Fairtest.) This body was endowed by Jay Patrick Rooney with money he won from a court case against Educational Testing Service, which devises the SAT, over the racial bias of its employment tests.

Yet during the 1990s the standardised testing industry has grown stronger and more entrenched than ever. As one academic work on the subject, “*The Fractured Marketplace for Standardized Testing*” (1993), noted: “The rapid rise to eminence of firms such as NCS and Scantron shows that computer technology is having an increasing influence on the testing marketplace and that test-related services, such as scoring and reporting of results, are an increasingly important segment of the market, as compared with the sales of tests themselves”[1].

There are two tendencies at work. Computerisation reinforces the test industry's claims as to the objectivity of the tests, and enables their scale to be continually expanded.

At the same time, among educational authorities, any conceptions that public education systems should be universal and inclusive have been definitively sidelined. The rationale for the large-scale testing is no longer that it will allow diagnosis of educational deficiencies that need to be addressed by school programs. Rather, schools are now expected to respond ever more precisely to market driven demands for an educated workforce. The arbitrary standards imposed by the test become a social end in themselves.

Within the classroom, the regime of the test dominates—education is replaced by teaching to the test. Companies such as Kaplan, Inc. and Princeton Review provide schools with software and facilitators to coach students in “test-prep”, that is, test-taking as a skill in

itself. Some facilitators come dressed in combat fatigues, and lead the students in chants to indoctrinate them with test-taking techniques. One American teacher complained at a recent union conference that a “testing mania” was overtaking schools “like some education-eating bacteria”.

Testing is being extended right throughout the school years, even to children as young as four years old in kindergarten. The Milwaukee Board of Education is embarking on an unprecedented expansion of standardised testing of its public school students. When the Milwaukee School Superintendent was challenged recently to cite any respected childhood educator who supports standardised testing for children under nine years old, he replied: “You mean other than George W. Bush?”

The expansion of the testing industry as a global business has been matched by the development of international assessment benchmarks or, as one study termed them, “tests focused on newly-valued ‘world-class’ standards”[2]. Tests such as the 1996 Third International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS), with half a million participants in 41 countries, provide data comparing students in one country against those in the next. Skills such as critical literacy or numeracy are judged according to the needs of the globalised economy. To this end, and aware that opposition to standardised testing has not abated, academic apologists for the industry are seeking to refine the testing mechanisms that have sufficed for crude political purposes in states such as Texas.

Notes:

1. Walter Haney, George Madaus and Robert Lyons, *The Fractured Marketplace for Standardized Testing*, 1993, Boston
2. Geoff Masters and Margaret Forster, *The Assessments We Need*, 2000, Australian Council for Educational Research



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