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Using the public examination system to differentiate between high achieving applicants

Dr Geoff Parks, Director of Admissions for the Cambridge Colleges

A familiar problem

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A-level results: one in eight to get straight As

One in eight students will gain straight As in their A-level results today as pass rates hit a record high.

By Graeme Paton, Education Editor
Published: 6:55AM BST 20 Aug 2009

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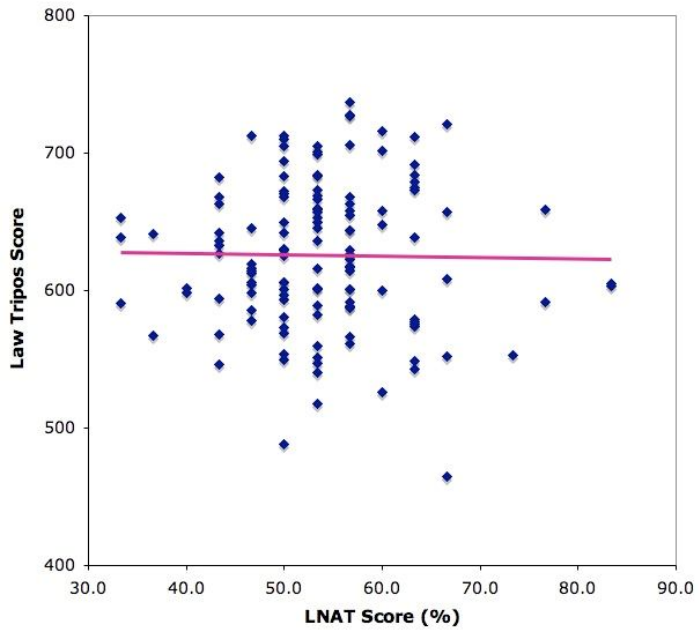
Two opportunities for differentiation

- At the point of selection
- In the setting of offer levels

Means of differentiation at the point of selection

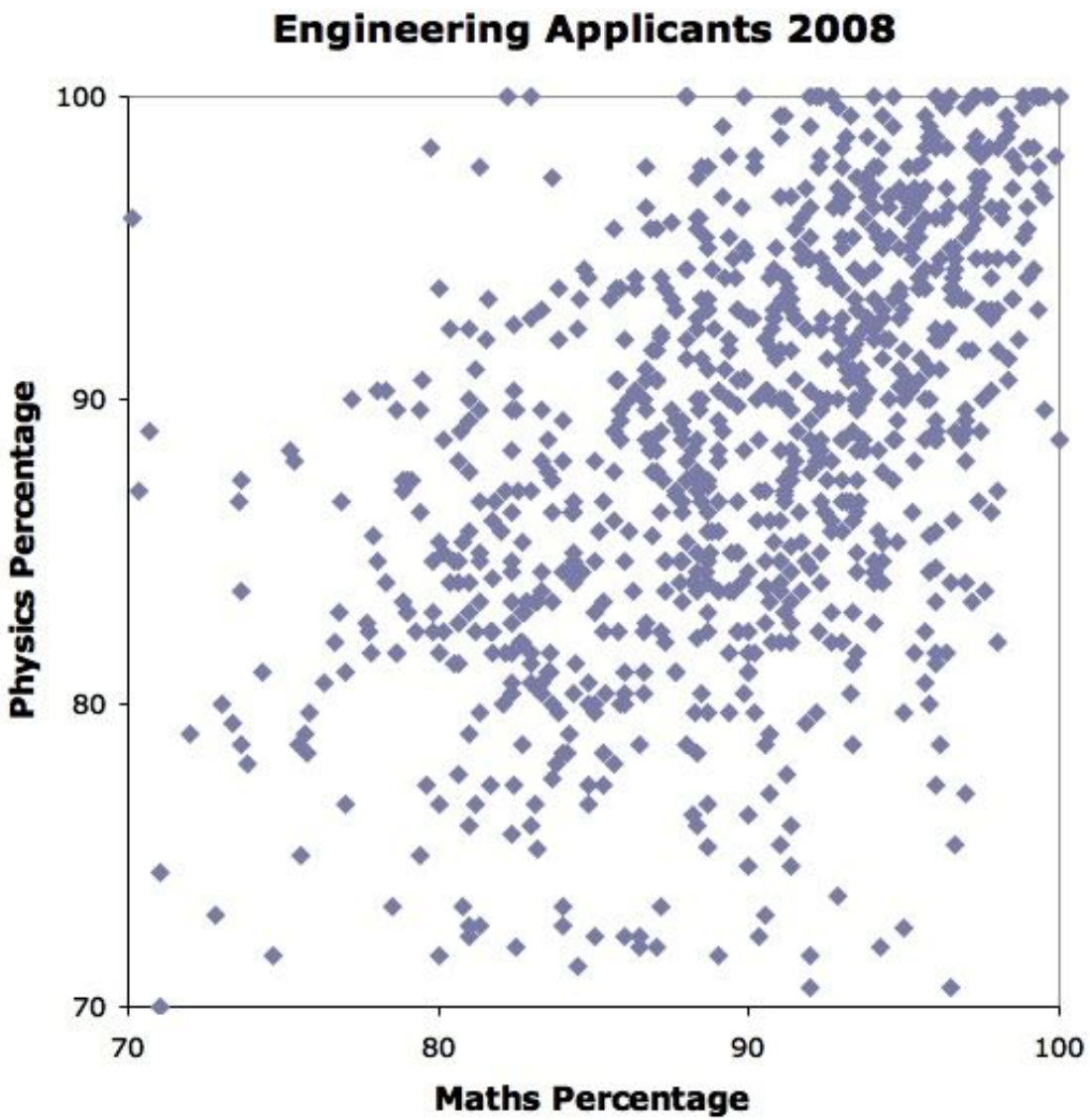
- Admissions tests
  - A potential barrier to applicants
  - Take several years to validate
  - Don't necessarily work
- Interviews
  - Helpful but not a panacea
- Personal statements?
- References?



AS/A2 UMS scores

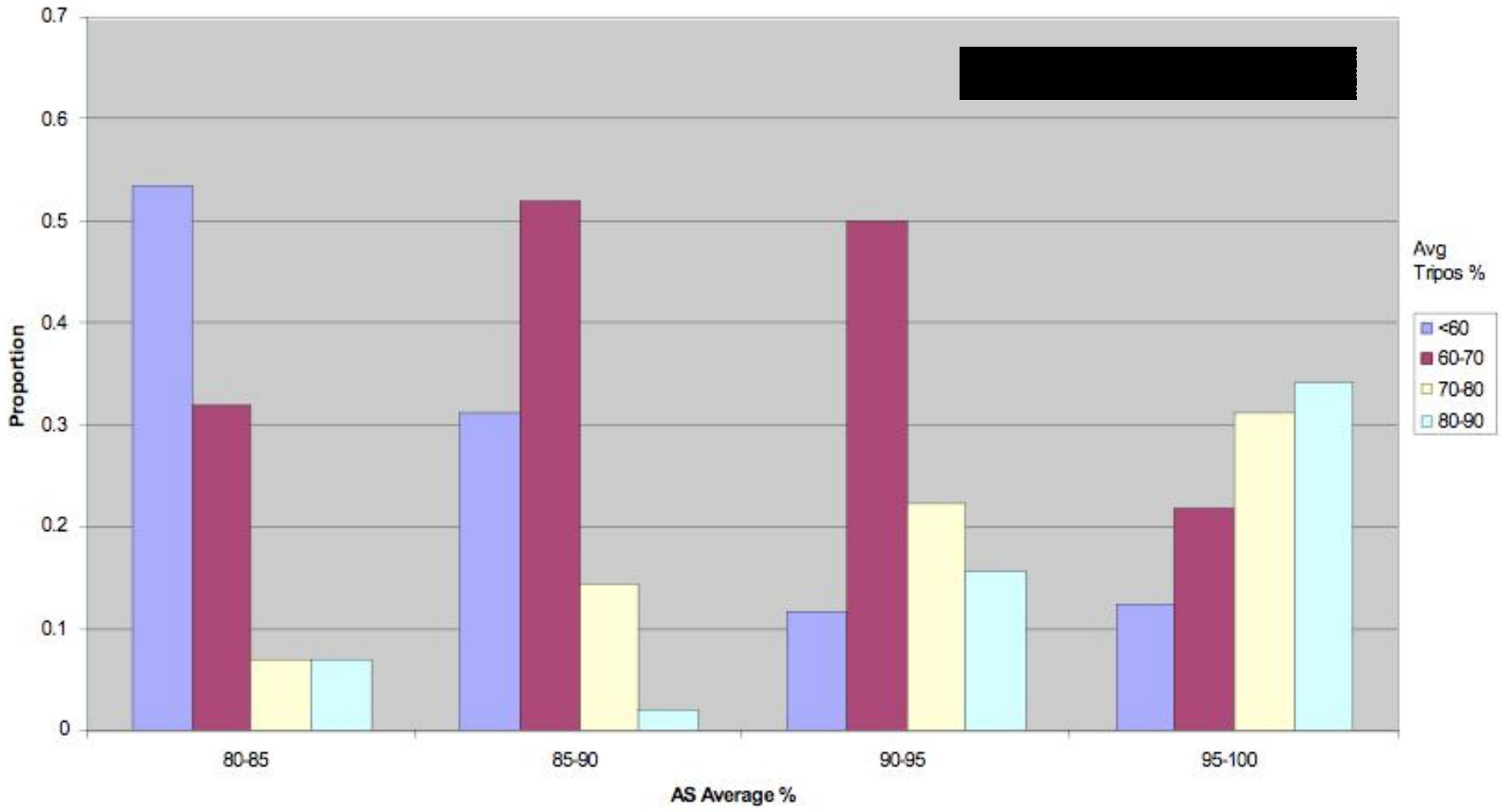
- Applicants already know these
- Schools/colleges already know these; sometimes mentioned in references, especially highlights
- Cambridge has been asking our applicants for this information for several years; previously on paper, now through our online SAQ
- Life would be much easier for all concerned if this information was communicated direct from the awarding bodies via UCAS to HEIs

AS/A2 UMS scores – do they differentiate?



AS/A2 UMS scores – do they predict success?

Tripos performance vs AS UMS percentage



Offer levels that differentiate

- Give applicants the chance to prove they are good enough
- Need a grading system that can discriminate finely enough at the top end (or awarding bodies to communicate marks as well as grades)
- Would offer a meaningful cover ratio to admissions tutors

One consequence of offer levels that differentiate

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A-levels: one in three top students fail Cambridge test

A third of A-grade mathematics students failed the Cambridge University entrance exam, sparking fresh claims that A-levels have been dumbed down.

By Amy Willis and Graeme Paton
Published: 8:00AM BST 22 Aug 2009

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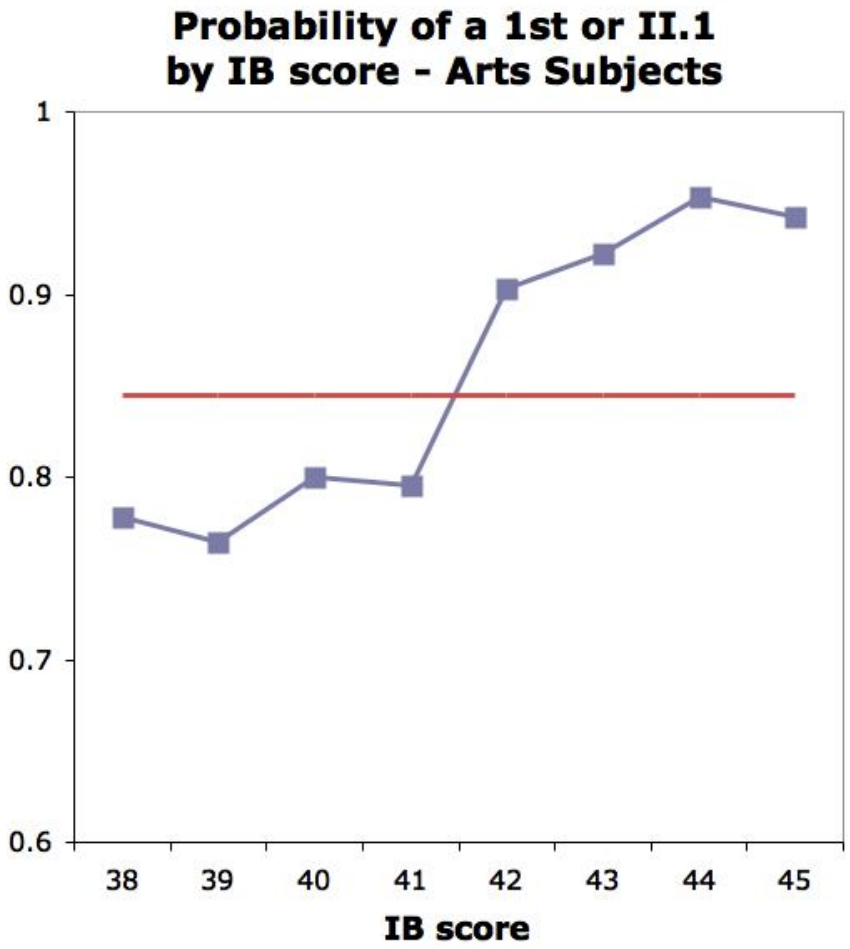
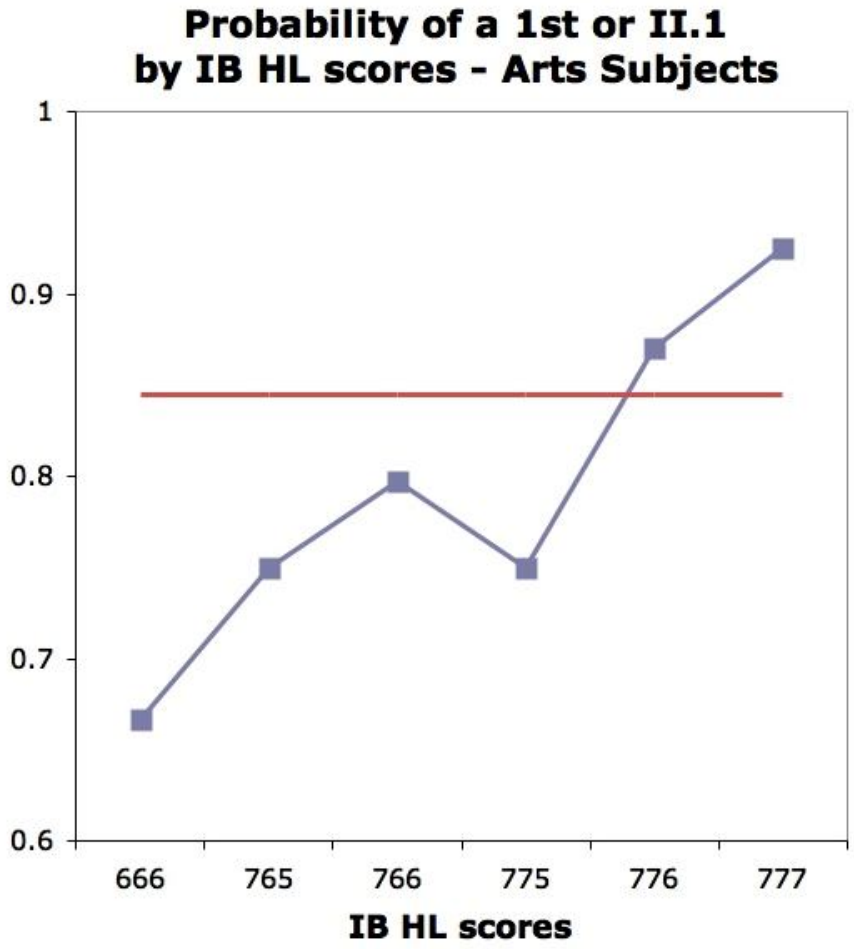
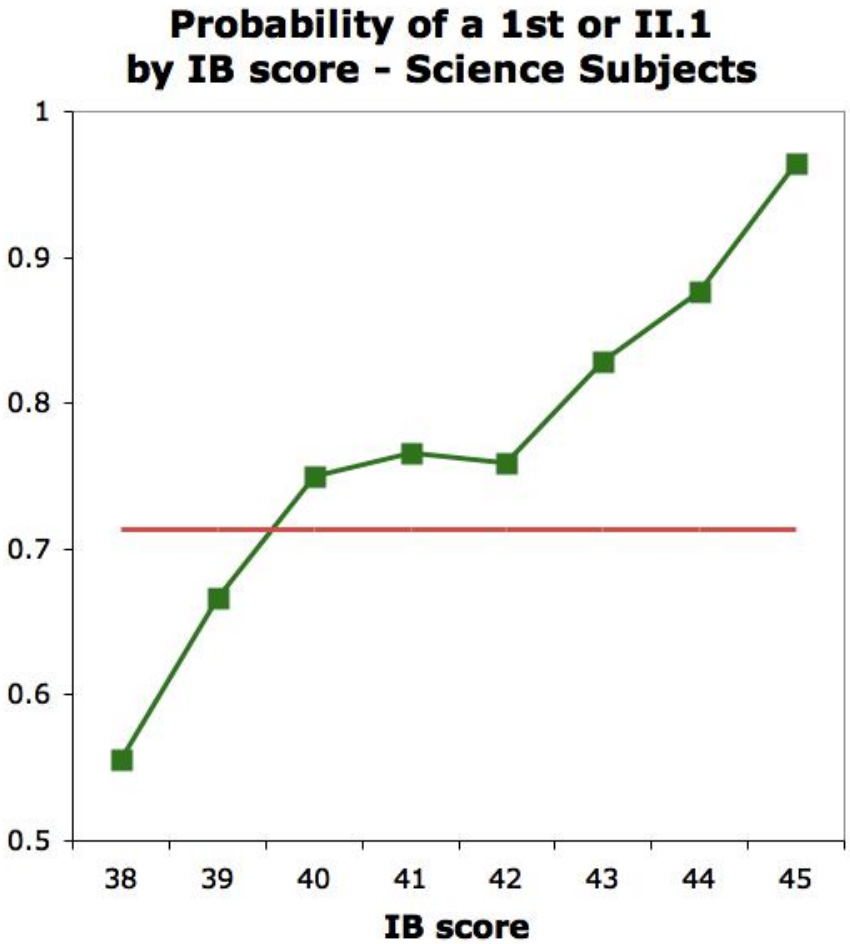
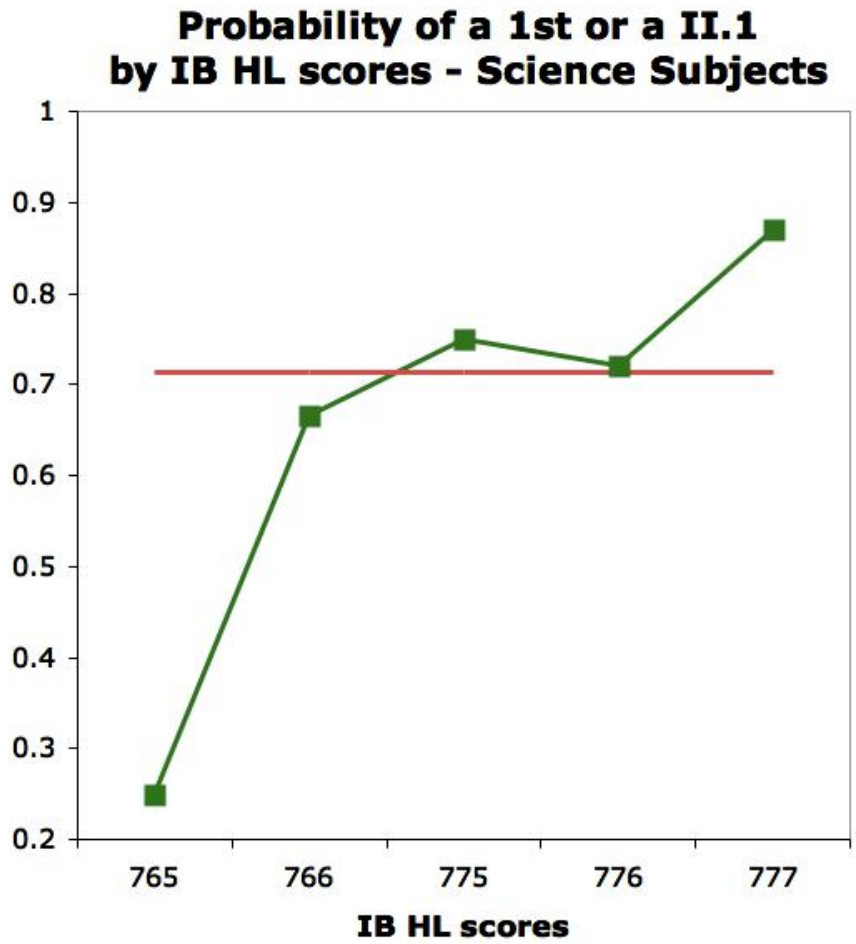
A system that provides fine discrimination – the IB





A system that provides fine discrimination – the IB





What about other UK examination systems?

- *Scottish Advanced Highers*: band information (A1, A2 etc.) could be exploited
- *The Pre-U*: grades D1, D2 and D3 should provide adequate discrimination
- The big question: Will the A* A Level grade do the job? Only time will tell.