THE SCREENING HYPOTHESIS: 
AN APPLICATION OF THE WILES TEST

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THE SCREENING HYPOTHESIS:  
AN APPLICATION OF THE WILES TEST*

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* The views expressed are those of the authors, and should not be attributed to the Bureau of Labour Market Research or the Commonwealth Government.

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ABSTRACT

There is substantial evidence of a positive correlation between earnings and educational attainment. What is less clear is whether higher rates of remuneration reflect increased productivity or merely employers' use of credentials as a screening device. Human capital theory argues that the former is likely to be true. The alternative screening or credentialism hypothesis is based upon the assumption that employers believe that the education system itself identifies individuals whose productivity is high. Even if the education system fails to contribute significantly to productivity, it may still be in the employer's interests to utilise such a filtering device to minimise the risk of hiring less productive individuals.

A method of discrimination between these two hypotheses which has considerable appeal was proposed by Wiles. In brief, Wiles advocates comparing the salaries of individuals working in areas which make explicit use of the subject matter of their qualification with those of individuals with the same skills working in other areas. Under the screening hypothesis there is no expectation that the earnings of graduates in a given discipline (e.g. economics) will vary across work types (or occupations). Human capital theory, on the other hand, would argue that there ought to be a premium to using certain skills other than merely possessing them. This note uses the Wiles approach.

Two groups of graduates were selected for study, namely those with training in economics and those with training in science. These particular sub-groups were chosen because they are reasonably sizeable and because of intrinsic interest.

For males with economics degrees there was no significant difference between the incomes earned by graduates working in economics and incomes earned by the remainder of the sample. This result is replicated for female graduates in both economics and science, and implies that for these groups employers do not place a premium on the relevance of specific skills. These estimates therefore provide support for the screening hypothesis at
the expense of human capital theory.

Such is not the case in the equation for male science graduates, however. Here there is evidence of a significant positive premium for using science related skills, an outcome which favours human capital theory. It is not clear why a difference should exist between male and female science graduates in this regard, though it may be worth noting that while insignificant, the salary increment of female science graduates working in science related areas is still positive.
THE SCREENING HYPOTHESIS: AN APPLICATION OF THE MILES TEST

1 INTRODUCTION

There is substantial evidence in the literature [Chiswick (1978), Psacharopoulos and Layard (1979), Haig (1982)] of a positive correlation between earnings and educational attainment. What is less clear is whether for certified individuals higher rates of remuneration reflect perceived and relevant value added, or merely employer’s use of credentials as a screening device. Human capital theory argues that the former is likely to be true. The alternative screening or credentialism approach to explaining income differentials is based upon the assumption that employers believe that the education system itself identifies individuals whose productivity is high. Under such circumstances, even if the system fails to contribute significantly to the marginal product of a student, it may still be in the employer’s interests to utilise such a filtering device to minimise the risk of hiring less able individuals.

Various methods for distinguishing between the screening hypothesis and human capital theory have been proposed. Layard and Psacharopoulos (1974) argue that comparisons of salaries of individuals who completed their courses (and gained formal qualifications) with those who undertook those same courses but failed to complete them would provide useful information. According to this so-called "sheepskin" version of the screening hypothesis wages will rise faster with extra years of schooling when the extra years also convey a certificate. A second test is implicit in their question "Why do employers not administer specialised intelligence or aptitude tests which are, at least to society at large, much cheaper"? Layard and Psacharopoulos also argue that the persistence over time of income differentials between certified and uncertified individuals might be expected to imply that the screening hypothesis did not hold.

* We wish to thank Richard Layard for helpful discussion.
These tests have been criticised by Riley (1979) who notes that:
(a) it is difficult to distinguish between dropouts who leave because they are pushed out and those who are induced to leave by superior alternatives;
(b) screenists have never argued that firms pay exclusive attention to certification; and (c) one of the roles of screening is to select more talented individuals for on-the-job training and under such circumstances the lack of a fall in earnings differential might still be consistent with screening.

The criticisms of the Layard and Psacharopoulos tests are difficult to refute and reflect in microcosm the unsatisfactory nature of empirical aspects of the debate aimed at discriminating between the two theories. Various other tests (e.g., Wolpin [1977]) have also been proposed from time to time and similarly dismissed [see Riley (1979)]. It is somewhat curious, therefore, given the importance of the issue, that a method of discrimination which has considerable appeal, and which was proposed by Wiles (1974) when the debate was still in its infancy, has not been exploited in the literature. In brief, Wiles advocates comparing the salaries of individuals working in areas which make explicit use of the subject matter of their qualification with those of individuals with the same skills working in other areas. Under the screening hypothesis there is no expectation that the earnings of graduates in a given discipline (e.g., economics) will vary across work types (or occupations). Human capital theory, on the other hand, would argue that there ought to be a premium to using certain skills other than merely possessing them.

The purpose of this note is to apply the Wiles approach to discrimination. To facilitate this we utilise data from the April 1981 Census of 1980 graduates from Australian Universities. It is important that the test be based on new graduates for the reason provided by Riley above. Indeed it has been noted by Blaug (1976) that
This thesis (i.e. the credentialist thesis) accounts at best for starting salaries and not for the earnings of long-time employees in different firms.*

Two groups of graduates were selected for study, namely those with training in economics and those with training in science. These particular sub-groups were chosen because they are reasonably sizeable and of intrinsic interest. Furthermore, neither falls within the category of liberal arts. As noted by Rosen (1972) most major courses of study in the liberal arts do not apparently produce any directly marketable skills, at least at the undergraduate level.

The implication of this for our analysis is that a finding that liberal arts graduates working in their area of specialisation earned no more than other such graduates could not be unambiguously taken as evidence in favour of the screening hypothesis. Such an outcome would also be consistent with the 'no-marketable skills' argument of Rosen.

II EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Attempts to discriminate along the lines proposed by Wiles must take place within the context of a more general multivariate functional specification of equations explaining starting salaries. Miller-Webber (1982) have shown that a range of factors influence starting salaries in Australia. These factors include age (or previous work experience), sex, source of qualification, work location, nature of the study regime (i.e. whether study was on a part or full time basis) private-public sector orientation of employer, quality of degree (i.e. whether the degree was an honours or pass degree), subject

* Our parentheses.
background, occupation type, and whether the graduate was prepared to be mobile in his job search.

In line with Miller-Volker therefore we assume here that the interaction between these factors and earnings can be represented in the form

$$\ln(Y) = \alpha + \beta X + \epsilon$$

where $X$ is a vector of variables described above and $\epsilon$ is a classically well behaved error term. This form incorporates that advocated by Mincer (1974). As implied above, separate equations were estimated for economics and science graduates, the sample in each group being further differentiated on a sex basis. In order to determine whether economics graduates working in economics related areas earn more than other economics graduates the work area 'other than economics' is specified as the control group. For science graduates the control group is science graduates working in an area other than that designated as science related. Estimates of equations designed to test the screening hypothesis are presented in Table 1.

We do not discuss the estimates in detail here for space reasons. We note, however, that many of the regressors which contributed to a significant degree to explaining variation in starting salaries when the data are pooled across subject areas [Miller and Volker (1982)] provide less evidence of contribution at this individual subject level. While it might be argued that such an outcome might lead to inefficiency in estimation we have retained the more general form of the equations for consistency with the earlier models and for consistency across equations. An experiment was conducted, however, in which the variables reflecting the source of qualification, namely the 'University' variables, were omitted from the specification, these variables providing as a group the least
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* White's (1980) heteroscedasticity-consistent 't' statistics in parentheses.
* Significant at the 5% level
evidence of explanatory power. The test results aimed at discriminating between the two hypotheses did not differ, however.

A second econometric consideration relates to the presence or otherwise of heteroscedastic error structures and their effect on standard errors. In order to accommodate this particular issue we employed White’s (1980) heteroscedasticity-consistent covariance matrix estimator and compared the standard errors with those from the usual estimator as recommended by White (p.817). This comparison suggested that heteroscedasticity was not a problem with our estimates.

With these points in mind we note that there is substantial evidence across the equations of the importance of age, locality, and the private-public sector orientation of the employer. The nature of the study regime, that is whether study was on a full or part time basis, is also important.

Considering the economics sample first, we note that for males there is no significant difference between the incomes earned by graduates working in economics and incomes earned by the remainder of the sample. This result is replicated in the equations for female graduates in both economics and science, and implies that for these groups employers do not place a premium on the relevance of specific skills. These estimates therefore provide support for the screening hypothesis at the expense of human capital theory.

Such is not the case in the equation for male science graduates, however. Here there is evidence of a significant positive premium for using science related skills, an outcome which favours human capital theory. It is not clear why a difference should exist between male and female science graduates in this regard, though it may be worth noting that while insignificant, the salary increment of female science graduates
working in science related areas is still positive.

A further test of the screening hypothesis is provided in an examination of the significance of the interaction term between honours in the area of specialisation, and work area. The purpose of this interaction term is to determine whether honours students working in their area of specialisation earn more than honours students working in job types less closely related to their specialist skills. The insignificance of the regressor in each of the four equations suggests that this is not in fact so, thereby providing further support for the screening hypothesis. In other words, while there is evidence that honours students in science earn more than pass degree students there appears to be no premium for using this additional knowledge where it is most relevant.

Finally, although we have not presented the results here, we note that a disaggregation of 'other work areas' suggested that only for one work area was there any evidence inconsistent with the above. In each of the four models graduates working in the education field (presumably as teachers) earned significantly more than graduates working in their field of specialisation. This result might well have been anticipated, however, because the majority of teachers possess additional specialist qualifications and it is highly probable that the income differential reflects the value of this additional certification.

III CONCLUSION

The screening hypothesis was tested using an approach outlined in Miles (1974). As far as we are aware no application of this approach has previously appeared in the literature. The test involves comparing the salaries of graduates employed in areas where they might be expected to utilise skills acquired at university with salaries of graduates of equivalent background not so employed. The hypothesis is that if employers
place little premium on skills acquired and utilise the awarding of degrees
only as a filter there will be no difference between the salaries of these
two groups. Comparisons made for economics and science graduates implied
for the most part that screening was alive and well in Australia.
APPENDIX A

In this Appendix we present a brief description of the variables used in the analysis. Further details on the data are to be found in the Graduate Careers Council’s publication Destinations of 1988 University and College Graduates.

Universities: Four groups of universities are considered: (i) the older, established universities (University of Sydney, University of Melbourne, University of Queensland, University of Tasmania, University of Adelaide, University of Western Australia); (ii) other well-established universities (University of New South Wales, Macquarie University, Monash University, LaTrobe University); (iii) The Australian National University (A.N.U.); (iv) the remaining universities (University of New England, University of Newcastle, University of Wollongong, Deakin University, James Cook University, University of North Queensland, Griffith University, Flinders University of South Australia, Murdoch University).

Major Subject Studied: 11 categories are analysed: (i) Science, which includes Agricultural, Biological, Physical, Chemical and Earth Sciences, and Forestry. (ii) Architecture which includes regional planning, building science and technology, interior design, landscape design, quantity surveying. (iii) Mathematics includes statistics and actuarial studies. (iv) Computer Science. (v) Medicine & Dentistry. (vi) Veterinary Science. (vii) Economics. (viii) Education which includes only training leading to a teaching qualification. (ix) Engineering includes electronics, communication and metallurgy. (x) Humanities - this is a broad group which encompasses courses in languages, history, fine arts, music, art, drama, literature, journalism, politics and geography. (xi) Psychology, Social Work and Sociology.

Occupation type: 11 types of work are distinguished. (i) Administration: non-specialised management, includes traineeships in general and public service clerical positions. (ii) Science based occupations: includes scientific research and development, engineering design and drafting, environment and/or resources planning and control. (iii) Medical work. (iv) Veterinary work. (v) Psychology: includes jobs such as educational and vocational counselling, personal counselling, personnel and industrial relations. (vi) Production and Sales which encompasses production management, product management, planning and control, supply and inventory control. (vii) Management Services which includes computer programming, operations and systems analysis, operations research, corporate planning and general management. (viii) Finance - includes public and other accounting and auditing, taxation, investment analysis and advice, general and merchant banking, financial management. (ix) Economic and Statistical Research. (x) Education and Education Administration. (xi) Other categories - includes literary, construction supervision and secretarial.

Government employment: covers employment in the Australian Public Service.

State Public Services, Semi-Government Authorities and Local Government, and includes employment in educational institutions. Private employment includes private professional practices, private industry and commerce, and non-profit organisations.

Mobility: Individuals are classed as mobile if they work in a State or Territory other than their State or Territory of permanent residence.

Part Time Study: this encompasses part-time study, external study and study undertaken on a sandwich mode basis.

Locality: The following regions are distinguished between: Sydney metropolitan area, other metropolitan areas, country regions.
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