

Admissions Tests – Good practice briefing for HE provider institutions



SPA and Admissions Tests

SPA is the UK's independent and objective voice on higher education admissions. We lead on the development of fair admissions, providing an evidence base and guidelines for good practice and in helping higher education provider institutions maintain and enhance excellence and professionalism in admissions, student recruitment and widening participation/access.

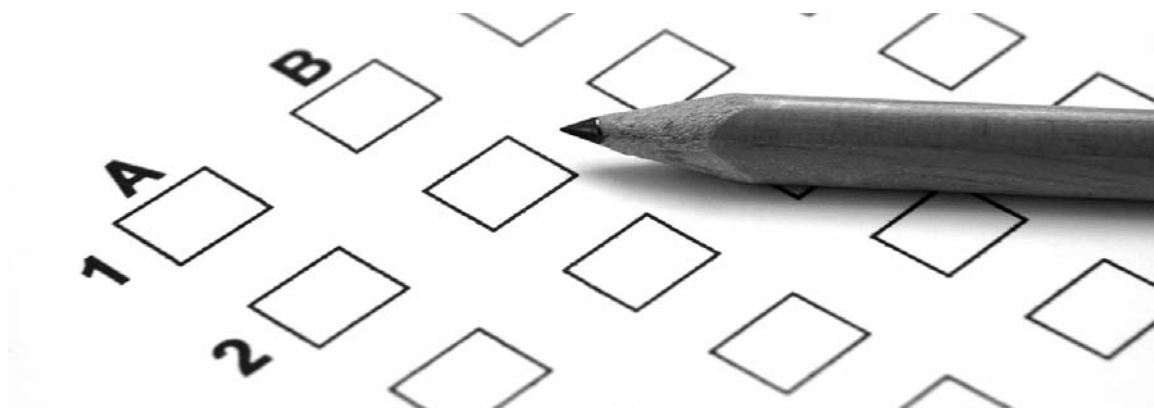
One of SPA's objectives is to review admissions tests, and to consider issues relating to their rationale, purpose, validity and use in your institutions and the impact this has on schools and colleges and applicants with regard to good practice. We have been working with institutions to identify the good practice that exists and share this with schools and colleges and the HE sector.

As an authoritative group, the SPA team together with the SPA Steering Group, comprising stakeholder representatives of the UK funding councils and governments, UUK and GuildHE, the HE sector, the Association of Colleges, UCAS, the Higher Education Academy, schools and colleges and the UK admissions practitioners groups is listening to the concerns around the use of admissions tests in the UK and we are working to contribute to the debate and respond effectively.

We have developed criteria around what makes a “good” admissions test and we recommend you consider the good practice issues associated with the introduction of, or continued use of, a test. This would include whether the use of the test is well-focused and ensuring there is transparency about how test results are used to add value to the admissions decision-making process. We particularly recommend institutions' own tests details are added to Entry Profiles to help applicants and their advisors prepare for this part of the admissions process. SPA would be very pleased to learn about good practice examples that do exist, to enable us to disseminate this throughout the HE sector and to schools and colleges.

Number of admissions tests and impact on applicants

Admissions tests are not a big part of HE sector admissions decision-making. They are used by a small proportion of institutions - about 16% of the 309 HE providers in the UCAS scheme in 2008 for 2009 entry, and by a very small proportion of courses - about 0.7% of the 49,000 courses in the UCAS scheme for 2009 entry. In following up the apparent increase in tests from 57 last year to 67 for 2009 entry, SPA asked whether the tests were in fact new or whether there was now increased transparency about their use. All replies received indicate increased transparency and that the tests are not new for 2009. SPA will continue to encourage those of you that are using tests to make this more transparent.



Admissions tests for 2009 entry

SPA has defined an admissions test as a timed unseen written paper based or on-line test normally taken in the academic year before admission to an institution, the results of which can be used by that institution as one element in decision making on an application. This means we have not included short tests such as numeracy or literacy that some institutions devise and use, particularly for professional courses.

The SPA website www.spa.ac.uk has details of all the admissions tests in use in the UK at institutions as declared by institutions to UCAS and from website research conducted by SPA. There are about 67 tests currently in use, of these 34 (i.e. just over half) are at Oxbridge. Five are 'national' tests used as follows:

UKCAT	24 universities of which 22 for Medicine; 5 Graduate Entry Medicine; 8 Dentistry
BMAT	6 universities of which 4 for Medicine; 1 Physiological Sciences; 2 Veterinary Medicine
LNAT	10 universities for Law [<i>nine for 2010, Cambridge has withdrawn from LNAT</i>]
STEP	2 universities for Mathematics
GAMSAT	5 universities of which 5 for Medicine; 1 Graduate Entry Dentistry

SPA has details of a number of other tests, some of which are short tests at interview. Some of these tests are devised by the institution and some with or by test bodies. These include:

- University of Cambridge, 22 tests including Thinking Skills Assessment (TSA), Modern and Medieval Languages (MML)
- University of Oxford, 12 tests including History (HAT), English (ELAT) and TSA
- Twenty other institutions use a total of 28 tests other than the national tests identified above, as part of the admissions decision-making process.

There are also two tests being piloted with longitudinal research studies, the NFER's Sutton Trust/DIUS funded research on SATs (the Scholastic Aptitude Test for HE entrance, rather than the tests taken in schools) and the Cambridge Assessment/ACER UniTEST pilot.

What is SPA doing?

SPA is not an auditing or validating body, nor does it comment on the value of the tests. We recommend you consider if it is, or why it was, necessary to introduce a test and set this against the SPA good practice checklist below. SPA believes admissions tests should:

- Have rigorous validation and reliability testing;
- Be supported by statistical and research evidence;
- Ensure the minimum of bias in the test questions so the test is valid for applicants from all backgrounds in a UK context;
- Be readily available and accessible to those with evidence of specific requirements in a timely way;
- Provide exemplar materials and tests with answers;
- Be fairly and professionally administered;
- Be able to demonstrate it is fit for purpose and adds value as part of holistic decision-making
- Be approved for use through the institution's relevant structures and processes.

Institutions should review the balance of factors for and against the introduction of a test, before the use is approved within the institution. Institutions should consider whether the potential of applicants can be assessed without the additional information that a test score may provide and should be clear about what the test result will tell them about applicants.

SPA's research into admissions tests

SPA will continue to investigate the number and type of tests that are being used and recommends that institutions ensure they review these in the light of SPA's checklist for admissions tests.

SPA is currently investigating, with UCAS, the behaviour of applicants applying to courses which have an admissions test to see if the existence of a test has a negative impact on those applicants from widening access/participation backgrounds. SPA is also working with UCAS to identify the number of applicants that were required to take an admissions test in the last admissions cycle 2007-08, based upon applications to courses for which a test is declared on UCAS Course Search, and the number required to take more than one test.

The total number of applicants who took the main national tests in 2007-08 was approximately 34,000 broken down as follows:

BMAT	–	5782
GAMSAT	–	1288
LNAT	–	6749
UKCAT	–	20185

and the total number of applicants via UCAS in 2007-08 was 582,657. The percentage of applicants who took one of the four main national tests was therefore less than 6%, as some applicants will have taken more than one test.

SPA is also exploring the issue of multitesting to try to establish the percentage of applicants who are required to take more than one test. SPA's data and statistics demonstrate that a relatively small number of courses require a test and the good practice identified demonstrates that tests are largely used in addition to the consideration of other factors such as academic qualifications, rather than in place of. While tests may have a disproportionate effect on a relatively small number of applicants SPA is in a unique position in being able to reflect nationally on the affect on applicants.



The SPA team

From left to right:

Sheila Ham – Administrative Support Officer

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The SPA Programme was established in 2006 and initially had just four staff, but by December 2008 we will be joined by Dan Shaffer, Senior Project Officer, who was Assistant Registrar for Admissions at Aston University, and Ruth Burchell as Project Officer. The SPA team bring over 65 years experience and expertise between them in student recruitment, admissions and widening participation/ access in higher education. This includes working with home and international applicants, publications and web information, strategy and policy development, procedures and admissions systems, business analysis, progression issues and more.

SPA welcomes discussion with staff in all sectors to share good practice and professionalism in admissions, student recruitment and widening participation

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How do you use tests?

Admissions tests can provide admissions decision-makers with additional information for the few courses that use them, and are therefore not necessarily a barrier. Institutions cite various reasons for using tests including having an additional piece of relevant information to aid decision-making for over-subscribed courses and assessing skills which are not apparent from the UCAS application. SPA recommends it is made clear to applicants and their advisors that test results are considered as part of holistic assessment along with other factors in admissions decision-making, as they provide only one piece of information about an applicant. Some institutions cite reasons for not using admissions tests i.e. sufficient information is provided on the UCAS application to enable effective decision-making and a desire not to discourage applicants by including in the admissions process what may be perceived by some as an additional barrier.

We recommend, should you decide to use tests, to do so appropriately as any additional assessment should be kept to a minimum. You should be transparent about their use as part of your admissions process, in line with the five principles of *'Fair Admissions to HE: Recommendations for Good Practice'* - the Schwartz Report, 2004 and the QAA Code of Practice on Admissions to HE 2006. Any admissions tests should be approved through your institutional structures and procedures such as admissions, quality or teaching and learning committee in line with your policies and strategies in these areas, before tests are introduced. The use of the tests should also be evaluated and monitored through the admissions or other relevant committee. The proposed utility of the test should be clearly articulated and supported by validity research and/or a demonstrable rationale. This should include identifying how test results will be incorporated into the admissions decision-making process and an indication of the relative weighting that will be assigned to them.

Future work on admissions tests by SPA

SPA will carry out further work with institutions to stress the importance of transparency in the use of tests. This will relate particularly to institutions' own tests and especially in situations where institutions do not describe the assessment as a "test". Institutions will be encouraged to include admissions tests details and how they are used in the admissions decision-making process in their Entry Profiles on the UCAS Course Search website to help applicants.