

Admissions Tests – Good practice briefing for schools and colleges



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 helping universities and colleges maintain and enhance excellence and professionalism in admissions, student recruitment and widening participation/access.

One of our objectives is to review admissions tests, and to consider issues relating to their rationale, purpose, validity and use in institutions and the impact on your students, schools and colleges.

An admissions test has been defined by SPA 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.

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 higher education (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.

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 very small proportion of courses (about 0.7% of the 49,000 courses in the UCAS scheme for 2009 entry) and by a small proportion of institutions (about 16% of the 309 HE providers in the UCAS scheme for 2009 entry). When SPA investigated the apparent increase in tests from 57 last year to 67 for 2009 entry, we asked institutions whether the tests were in fact new or whether they were now being more transparent about their use. All replies received indicate that they were being more transparent and that the tests are **not** new for 2009.

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.

SPA is also exploring the issue of multitesting 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. 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, should they be required to take more than one test.

The total number of applicants via UCAS 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 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.

Financial support

Some of the test bodies offer to meet the cost of the test through a bursary for applicants from widening access/participation backgrounds, if the applicant writes to the test body giving a relevant reason for requesting the bursary. In the case of the LNAT and UKCAT applicants must apply for a bursary before they register for the test and provide evidence that they are on the top rate of Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) or in receipt of income support (or the equivalent).

Details can be found via the following web pages:

- LNAT www.spa.ac.uk/admission-tests/lnat.html
- BMAT www.spa.ac.uk/admission-tests/bmat.html
- UKCAT www.spa.ac.uk/admission-tests/ukcat.html

There is a role here for colleagues in schools and colleges to help to ensure that students are aware of this support and that bursaries, if applied for, are taken up. Evidence from the test bodies demonstrates that currently the take-up is low.

Admissions tests for 2009 entry

All the admissions tests in use at institutions in the UK as declared by institutions to UCAS and from website research conducted by SPA are on the SPA website: www.spa.ac.uk/admission-tests/tests-being-used.html. 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:

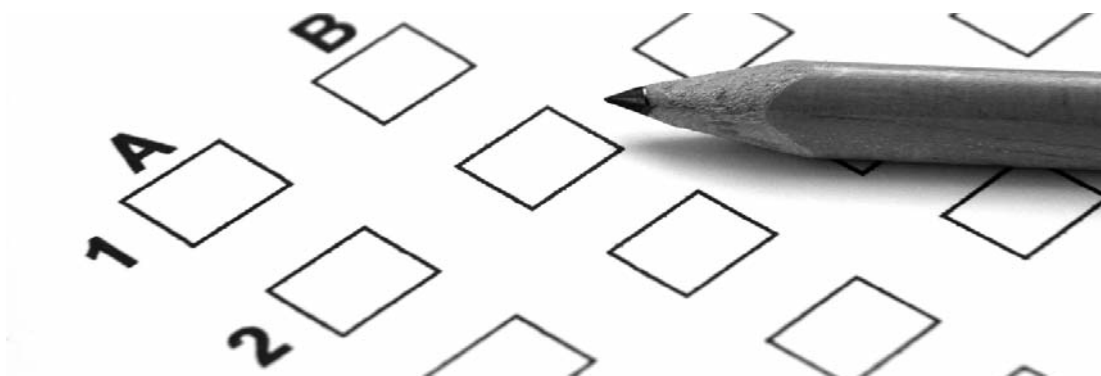
UKCAT	24 universities of which 22 for Medicine; 5 Graduate Entry Medicine; 8 Dentistry
BMAT	6 universities of which 4 for Medicine; 1 Physiological Sciences; 2 Veterinary Medicine
LNAT	10 universities for Law [<i>nine for 2010, Cambridge has withdrawn from LNAT</i>]
STEP	2 universities for Mathematics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

Most of the test bodies provide freely available exemplar materials on their test websites and students and their advisors are urged to make use of these in preparation for a test.



What is SPA doing?

SPA is continuing to investigate the number and type of tests that are being used and urge institutions to review these in light of SPA's checklist for admissions tests. We are also continuing to recommend institutions to be transparent about the use of tests as part of their 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.

SPA's work, which is intended to benefit the pre-HE sector and prospective applicants, includes urging all institutions, should they decide to use tests, to do so appropriately. By this we mean that any additional assessment should be kept to a minimum, that institutions should ensure that any admissions tests are validated internally before use in line with the institution's quality and planning procedures, and that institutions should be able to demonstrate to prospective applicants and their advisors their justification for using a test and how the results are used as part of holistic decision-making.



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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SPA is not an auditing or validating body, nor does it comment on the value of the tests. Each institution must consider the necessity and value of introducing a test and set this against the SPA criteria 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 – and many of the tests do have such material freely available for students to practice the test;
- Be fairly and professionally administered;
- Be able to demonstrate it is fit for purpose and add value as part of holistic decision-making;
- Be approved for use through the institution's relevant structures and processes.

Admissions tests can provide admissions decision-makers with additional information for the few courses that use them, and are 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 to institutions that it is made clear to applicants and their advisors that test results are considered as part of holistic assessment e.g. along with other factors in admissions decision-making. 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.

Future work on admissions tests by SPA

SPA will carry out further work with institutions to encourage and to help them understand 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.