

Admissions Tests - Good Practice Briefing for HE provider institutions



SPA's objective and role with regard to admissions tests

SPA is the UK's independent and objective voice on higher education (HE) 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 (institutions) maintain and enhance excellence and professionalism in admissions, student recruitment and widening participation/access.

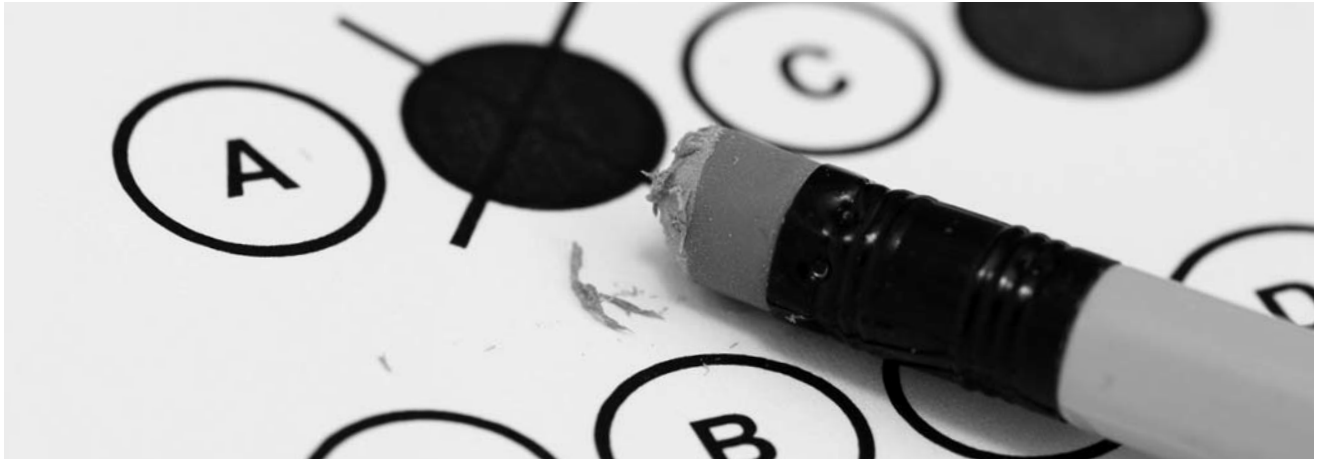
One of SPA's objectives is to review admissions tests, and to consider issues relating to their rationale, purpose and validity and use in your institutions and the impact this has on schools and colleges and applicants with regards to good practice. We have been working with institutions to identify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

The SPA team, together with the SPA Steering Group, 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. The Steering Group comprises of: stakeholder representatives from the UK funding councils and governments; UUK; GuildHE; the HE sector; the Association of Colleges; UCAS; the Higher Education Academy; schools and colleges and UK admissions practitioners groups.

We have developed criteria around what makes a "good" admissions test and as a result we recommend you to 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 continue to be used by a very small proportion of courses (about 0.8% of the 43,360 courses in the UCAS scheme for 2011 entry) and by a small proportion of institutions (about 21% of the 306 HE providers in the UCAS scheme for 2011 entry). These figures have remained largely unchanged since SPA began researching the use of admissions tests in 2007. There was an apparent increase in tests from 84 (for 2010 entry) to 90 (for 2011 entry), and SPA asked institutions whether the tests were new or if they were now being more transparent about their use. All replies received indicate increased transparency rather than new tests for 2011 entry. SPA will continue to encourage those of you that are using tests to make this more transparent.



Current number of admissions tests 2011 entry

The SPA website 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. The information about which admissions tests are being used for 2011 entry to HE which was collected as part of SPA's annual update exercise is available within the Admissions Tests pages on the SPA website at <http://www.spa.ac.uk/admission-tests/tests-being-used.html>. There are about 90 tests currently in use, of these 33 (i.e. just over a third) are at Oxbridge. Five are 'national' tests used as follows:

UKCAT	25 universities of which 22 for Medicine; 9 Graduate Entry Medicine; 9 Dentistry; 3 Graduate Entry Dentistry
BMAT	5 universities of which 4 for Medicine; 2 Graduate Entry Medicine; 2 Veterinary Medicine; 1 Biomedical Science; 1 Pharmacology; 1 Physiological Sciences
LNAT	9 universities for Law and subjects combined with Law
STEP	2 universities for Mathematics
GAMSAT	5 universities of which 2 for Medicine; 3 Graduate Entry Medicine; 1 Graduate Entry Dentistry

This breakdown has remained largely unchanged since SPA started researching institutions' use of admissions tests in 2007. SPA also 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, 19 tests including Thinking Skills Assessment (TSA), Modern and Medieval Languages (MML)
- University of Oxford, 14 tests including History (HAT), English (ELAT) and TSA (joint course issue)

Thirty six other institutions use a total of 57 tests other than the national tests identified above, as part of the admissions decision-making process.

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.

The total number of applicants who took the large national tests in 2009-10 was 38,394 broken down as follows:

BMAT	–	6,285
GAMSAT	–	1,867
LNAT	–	6,521
UKCAT	–	23,721

with the total number of applicants in 2009-10 being 639,860. Therefore 6% of applicants took one of the four large national tests. This figure remains unchanged since the previous SPA analysis in 2007-08.

What work is SPA doing?

SPA's work, 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 any admissions tests are validated internally before use, in line with the institution's quality and planning procedures. In addition, institutions should be able to demonstrate to prospective applicants and their advisors justification for using a test and how results are used as part of holistic decision-making.

SPA is not an auditing or validating body, nor do we 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 checklist for admissions tests.

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.

Appeals

SPA was asked to investigate the position with regard to appeals against test results. Meetings were held with the main test bodies and consortia (BMAT, GAMSAT-UK, LNAT, STEP and UKCAT) and desk-based research was carried out to establish what appeal mechanisms exist for each of the main UK tests. The appeal mechanism information can be found on the SPA website at <http://www.spa.ac.uk/admission-tests/AT-appeals.html> on the SPA website. For each of the main UK tests other than GAMSAT-UK, applicants are able to raise concerns about procedural irregularity and test scores – in some cases this involves contacting institutions directly rather than through the test body. In terms of institutions' own tests, within the context of SPA's definition of a "good" admissions test, part of our guidance includes approval for use through the institution's relevant structures and processes. You should therefore ensure that before a test is approved for use and introduced, that adequate appeal and complaint mechanisms exist, to cover queries about admissions tests.

Admissions Tests Questionnaire

We received a 66% response rate to our on-line questionnaire – of the 64 institutions declaring the use of one or more admissions tests for 2011 entry to HE, 42 responded.

The questionnaire, at <http://www.spa.ac.uk/admission-tests/AT-questionnaire.html> was issued on 15 April 2010 and remained open until 10 May, allowing SPA to explore in more detail issues including:

- what additional information admissions tests gave institutions which use the large national tests and if there was any evidence of predictive value added through the use of tests;
- why a test was necessary for those institutions using their own tests e.g. for literacy and numeracy.



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SPA, an independent programme established in 2006 is funded by the UK higher education funding councils. We work to support the continuing development of fairness and good practice in admissions with Higher Education Institutions, Further Education Colleges and other HE stakeholders.

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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Questionnaire Findings

Initial analysis of the questionnaire responses has found the following:

- Some differences have been identified between the numbers of tests declared to UCAS and those confirmed as being in use by institutions e.g. STEP and TSA. SPA will follow this up with the institutions concerned.
- The widest usage of institutions' own tests is in the areas of literacy and numeracy, for admissions purposes, rather than for diagnostic study. Various reasons were cited for the use of literacy and numeracy tests, including: assessing applicants without GCSE Mathematics equivalence; giving additional applicant information; and to meet Nursing and Midwifery Council guidelines for admissions.
- All institutions using the main tests cited differentiating between equally well-qualified applicants as a reason for use of the test. Over half also stated the demonstration of skills not tested by other pre-HE qualifications, such as: problem solving skills; numerical and spatial reasoning and critical thinking skills; understanding arguments and reasoning; data interpretation; critical analysis; ability to write timed subject-specific essays; and coping with unfamiliar concepts.

Analysis continues and the findings will be disseminated to the pre-HE and HE sectors.

Future work on admissions tests by SPA

We recommend, should you decide to use tests, that you do this 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.

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 to help applicants.

If you have or will be introducing a test please let SPA know so we can add it to our website. We would be happy to talk about admissions test issues with institutions.