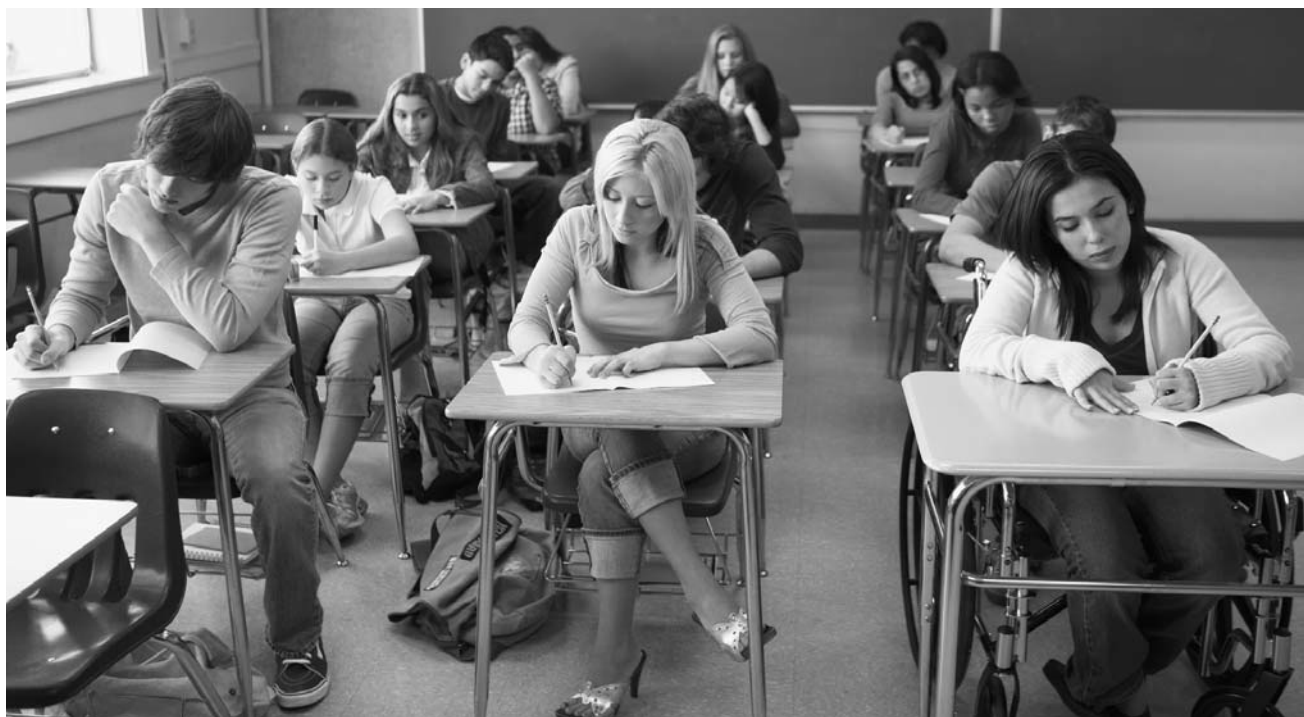


Admissions Tests – Good Practice Briefing for schools and colleges



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 helping higher education provider institutions (institutions) 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 and validity and use in institutions and the impact on your students and 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.

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.



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 HE) to 90 (for 2011 entry to HE), 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.

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.

Financial support

Some test bodies offer a bursary to applicants from widening participation backgrounds which covers the test fee. This includes BMAT and UKCAT which require applicants to write to the test body giving a relevant reason for requesting the bursary. In the case of LNAT (details of LNAT for 2011 entry are expected to be available on the LNAT website on or around 10 July 2010) and UKCAT, applicants must provide evidence that they are on the top rate of Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) or in receipt of income support (or the equivalent).

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



Current number of admissions tests 2011 entry

The SPA website has details of all admissions tests in use in the UK at institutions as declared to UCAS and from website research conducted by SPA. Information about the admissions tests which are being used for 2011 entry to HE was collected as part of SPA's annual update exercise and 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
- Thirty six other institutions use a total of 57 tests other than the national tests identified above, as part of the admissions process.

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.

SPA recommends to institutions that 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. 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 what may be perceived by some as an additional barrier within the admissions process.

Appeals

SPA was asked to investigate appeals regarding 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>. 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. Additionally, institutions should ensure their appeal and complaint mechanisms cover queries about admissions tests.



Back (left to right)

Leslie Currie – Senior Project Officer

Sheila Ham – Administrative Support Officer

Dan Shaffer - Senior Project Officer

Front (left to right)

Ruth Burchell – Project Officer

Janet Graham – Director

Annie Doyle – Senior Project Officer

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.

For more information about the SPA Programme please contact

t 01242 544891
e enquiries@spa.ac.uk
// www.spa.ac.uk

**Rosehill New Barn Lane
Cheltenham GL52 3LZ**

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.

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

SPA will continue to investigate the number and type of tests that are being used and to urge institutions to review these in light of our checklist for admissions tests. We will continue to recommend that institutions are 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.