



ADMISSIONS TESTS QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSE ANALYSIS

September 2010

1. Background

An on-line questionnaire was issued in April 2010 following agreement at the Steering Group that it was now reasonable for SPA to explore in more detail questions including:

- what admissions tests were telling HEIs using 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 HEIs using their own tests e.g. for literacy and numeracy

The questionnaire, designed in Survey Monkey, was issued on 15 April 2010 and remained open until 10 May - reminders were issued each week during the time that the questionnaire was open. HEIs using one or more admissions tests were asked to complete the questionnaire. Of the 64 HEIs declaring the use of one or more admissions tests for 2011 entry to HE, 42 responded – a **66% response rate**.

2. Further Action

Analysis of the questionnaire responses identified areas of questioning and action which it would be useful for SPA to explore further with HEIs, where contact details were provided and it is therefore legitimate to do so, as follows:

2.1 A small amount of additional test usage was identified – these HEIs' details will be added to the data on the SPA website to ensure our information is as comprehensive as possible.

2.2 The eight HEIs which stated that they had research in progress to demonstrate evidence of predictive value added through the test usage will be contacted to ask if they are able to provide further information. The one HEI which has completed research will also be contacted.

2.3 A relatively large percentage of HEIs skipped the question which, when answered positively, would have demonstrated equal treatment of all applicants during the main admissions round, in Clearing and via Adjustment in relation to the use of an admissions test. A reinforcement message from SPA would be useful to remind HEIs that a test should be fairly and consistently administered, including the incorporation of the test score into the decision-making process, throughout all stages of the applications system.

2.4 Further useful information could be gained about institutions' usage of their own tests and the underlying rationale, building on the questionnaire responses. Some HEIs state their rationale as requiring quite specific additional information in order to make admissions decisions.

2.5 Within the context of courses which require applicants to be interviewed, one HEI stated that a test was used as a single factor to determine a cut-off point for selection for interview. Further information about this HEI's process will be sought if possible.

2.6 Within the context of courses which require applicants to be interviewed, two HEIs stated that a test was used as a single factor to determine a cut-off point for de-selection for interview. Further information about these HEIs' processes will be sought if possible

2.7 Within the context of courses which do not require applicants to be interviewed, two HEIs stated that a test was used as a single factor to determine a cut-off point for selection prior to an admissions decision being made. Further information about these HEIs' processes will be sought if possible.

2.8 A relatively large percentage of respondents skipped the question which asked about specifying weightings for test scores within the admissions process, which may suggest either that weightings are not used or that some HEIs were reluctant to disclose this detail. Further information will be sought from these HEIs if possible.

2.9 A significantly high percentage of respondents skipped the question which asked about publishing previous test score cut-off points. Further information will be sought from these HEIs if possible.

2.10 A relatively small number of HEIs skipped the question which asked about the use of an approval mechanism for the introduction of a test. Further information will be sought from these HEIs if possible.

Analysis of the questionnaire responses will continue and a further report will be presented to the December Steering Group, once some follow up questioning has taken place with HEIs.

The full analysis of responses is available on request from Annie Doyle, SPA Senior Project Officer – A.Doyle@spa.ac.uk

Annie Doyle
SPA Senior Project Officer
September 2010

3. Analysis of responses

3.1 Question 1 asked which main admissions tests are in use:

- i) Three respondents confirmed the use of STEP (Sixth Term Examination Paper). Since SPA started researching HEIs' use of tests in 2007 only two HEIs have been identified as using STEP and the additional HEI can now be added to the information on the SPA website.
- ii) Four respondents confirmed the use of TSA (Thinking Skills Assessment). SPA's data collection exercise in 2010 identified three HEIs as using versions of TSA; SPA will now contact the fourth HEI to ask about their use of the test.

3.2 Question 2 asked which institutions' own tests (IOTs) are in use:

- i) 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 Maths equivalence; giving additional applicant information; and to meet nursing and midwifery council guidelines for admissions.

3.3 Question 3 asked institutions what additional information was provided if they used one or more of the national tests:

- i) All HEIs 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.

3.4 Question 4 asked institutions if they had any evidence of predictive value added through the test usage if they used one or more of the national tests:

- i) 62% of respondents skipped this question which may suggest they would have given a negative response, had they answered.
- ii) Of those responding, only one HEI answered positively and seven negatively. Eight HEIs stated they have research in progress.
- iii) SPA will follow up with those HEIs that have research in progress and will contact those that skipped the question, if they identified themselves.

3.5 Question 5 asked institutions using one or more of the national tests and accepting applicants via Clearing or Adjustment, how these applicants are assessed:

- i) 69% of respondents skipped this question which may suggest their processes for assessing Clearing and/or Adjustment applicants were not the same as for those accepted during the main admissions round. SPA will follow up with those HEIs that skipped the question, if they identified themselves.
- ii) Of those responding, three HEIs stated that both Clearing and Adjustment applicants were only accepted if they had taken the relevant test and scored at the same level as applicants accepted during the main admissions round.

3.6 Question 6 asked institutions not using one or more of the national tests during the main admissions round and accepting applicants via Clearing or Adjustment who have taken a relevant test, whether the test score was taken into account when these applicants are assessed:

i) Only two HEIs responded positively, which may suggest a difference in process in terms of test usage for applicants accepted during the main admissions round and those accepted via Clearing and/or Adjustment. SPA will follow up with these HEIs, if they identified themselves.

3.7 Question 7 asked institutions using their own test for literacy, numeracy and/or ICT what the rationale was for using the test i.e. what additional information was gained that was not available from the application:

- i) The highest percentage (68.8%) of those responding stated that the additional information was the demonstration of English Language competence equivalent to GCSE grade C.
- ii) The next highest percentage (56.3%) of those responding stated that the additional information was the demonstration of Mathematical competence equivalent to GCSE grade C.
- iii) 25% of those responding stated that the additional information was the demonstration of subject specific knowledge required for the course, 18.8% that it was the demonstration of subject specific knowledge required for the profession and 18.8% that it was the demonstration of skills not tested by other pre-HE qualifications – comments about these skills were as follows from the three responding HEIs:

achievement of GCSE Mathematics and English at grade C does not necessarily guarantee applicants have the required level of skills;

reading and writing skills;

attitudes to those who have mental health issues plus evidence of empathy.

SPA will follow up with these HEIs, if they identified themselves.

3.8 Question 8 asked HEIs about the use of tests within the context of courses which require applicants to be interviewed:

- i) 76.5% of respondents stated that a test was used as one of a number of factors to determine a cut-off point for selection for interview.
- ii) Only one HEI responded that a test was used as a single factor to determine a cut-off point for selection for interview – SPA will follow this up, if the HEI is identified.
- iii) 23.5% of respondents stated that a test was used as one of a number of factors to determine a cut-off point for de-selection for interview.
- iv) Two HEIs responded that a test was used as a single factor to determine a cut-off point for de-selection for interview. SPA will follow this up, if the HEIs are identified.
- v) Some HEIs provided additional information about factors used to select applicants for interview as follows:

applicants are selected for interview and test simultaneously. A combination of the result in the test and performance in interview determine the offer decision;

all applicants will be interviewed as well as tested to ensure fairness;

tests where used are administered as part of the selection process which includes an interview;

GCSEs, A levels (or equivalent qualifications), work experience;

merit and potential as evidenced through prior and predicted academic achievement and reference;

used for applicants who have been interviewed and are on borderline with other candidates.

we will also use it for reserve list candidates who we have put on hold, but if places become available later on in the cycle, we will then go back to these students with the highest UKCAT scores to see whether they are still interested;

the BMAT score MAY be used as one factor in not calling an applicant for interview - but this is generally where there is a weakness elsewhere in the applicant's academic profile. Our Colleges will generally interview an applicant if there is any reasonable chance of admission;

A level or equivalent grades are used as the first academic screen. UKCAT is then used to determine who should be interviewed;
prior academic attainment, predicted academic potential, academic reference, contextual information, written work (some humanities and modern languages disciplines);
personal statement, academic reference, predicted grades;
qualifications, reference, personal statement which should demonstrate good understanding of the healthcare courses and insight into the nursing courses;
UKCAT - UCAS personal statement, academic performance and referees statement.

3.9 Question 9 asked HEIs about the use of tests within the context of courses which do not require applicants to be interviewed:

- i) 75% of respondents stated that a test was used as one of a number of factors to determine a cut-off point for selection prior to an admissions decision being made.
- ii) Only two HEIs responded that a test was used as a single factor to determine a cut-off point for selection prior to an admissions decision being made – SPA will follow this up, if the HEIs are identified.
- iii) 25% of respondents stated that a test was used as one of a number of factors to determine a cut-off point for de-selection prior to an admissions decision being made
- iv) Some HEIs provided additional information about factors used to select applicants as follows:
merit and potential as evidenced through prior and predicted academic achievement, personal statement and reference;
performance in a group discussion exercise;
academic qualifications (predicted and achieved grades), english language proficiency, personal qualities, career exploration, non-academic achievement, LEAPS/Pathways to the Professions eligibility/participation.

3.10 Question 10 asked HEIs about the use of tests within the context of all courses:

- i) 55.6% of respondents stated that a test was used for decisions in borderline cases during the main admissions round and during confirmation.
- ii) 33.3% of respondents stated that a test was used for decisions in borderline cases during the main admissions round.
- iii) 11.1% of respondents stated that a test was used for decisions in borderline cases during confirmation.
- iv) Some HEIs provided additional information as follows:
test scores may be revisited when deciding on the admission of borderline cases;
our Colleges very rarely admit applicants who do not meet the exact conditions of their offers. In exceptional cases the full academic profile will be considered (not just an admissions test score).
Not all Colleges use the TSA in Cambridge and therefore the only national test universally used at this institution is the BMAT.

3.11 Question 11 asked HEIs to specify weightings where these are applied to test scores:

- i) Only six HEIs answered this question, which may suggest that the non-respondents either don't use a weighting or were not prepared to disclose it. The six specific responses were as follows:
25%;
varies according to course applied for;
UKCAT quartile selection points for MBChB – top 3, second 2, third 1, fourth 0 – the potential 3 additional points (out of a maximum point total of 37) represent a weighting of only 8% within the Edinburgh selection process but have an important influence on the application outcome;
varies by test and departmental admissions webpages and linked through to UCAS Entry Profiles;

weighting is not used for UKCAT but it is for GAMSAT;
no weighting, specific score required for each programme, meeting of this score will lead to interview, falling below this level will result in an unsuccessful decision.
ii) SPA will follow up with those HEIs that skipped the question, if they identified themselves.

3.12 Question 12 asked HEIs if the weighting (likely to be for the previous year) was included in published entry requirements information:

- i) Of the eight HEIs that responded only two answered positively.
- ii) 81% of respondents skipped this question, which may suggest either that a weighting isn't used or that there are other reasons for not including this in published entry requirements information – HEIs comment further on this in their responses to question 14.

3.13 Question 13 asked where any published information appeared:

- i) Only three HEIs responded positively, citing the printed and online prospectus and Entry Profiles.
- ii) 93% of respondents skipped this question, matching the relatively high numbers of non-respondents to question 13.

3.14 Question 14 asked HEIs if they would consider including any weighting in new publication material:

- i) Only two HEIs responded positively, and five negatively.
- ii) These five HEIs gave the following indications regarding why this might be problematic:
not considered necessary;
the MBChB selection and scoring process is transparent and available on the University website;
the UKCAT score is only used as a last resort AFTER the interview stage. We are mainly looking at candidates who have a strong academic and non academic profile before this:
because it is one of a number of considerations as part of the selection process;
only relevant for a few applicants who cannot demonstrate literacy or numeracy achievement or who have dated qualifications.

3.15 Question 15 asked if previous cut-off test scores were published:

- i) Of the 50% of respondents who answered the question, only one answered positively, the remaining 20 HEIs answered negatively.

3.16 Question 16 asked where any published test scores appeared:

- i) The one HEI that responded positively to question 15 cited the printed and online prospectus.
- ii) The remaining HEIs skipped this question - SPA will follow this up, if the HEIs are identified.

3.17 Question 17 asked HEIs if they would consider including any test scores in new publication material:

- i) Three HEIs responded positively, and 14 negatively.
- ii) Of these 14, seven gave the following indications regarding why this might be problematic:
because it is not a realistic indication of where the cut off might lie; the cut-off is decided on a cohort by cohort basis;
we may consider publishing the previous year's cut off point on our website (the prospectus is printed too early). The cut off threshold varies from year to year depending upon the number of students we are funded to recruit and the standard of the cohort. When providing feedback I let the applicants know what the cut off point is and confirm their overall score (we use an overall score calculated using a formula which gives different weightings to each of the BMAT sections);

for UKCAT we apply +/- 1 standard deviation for each of the 4 subtest scores and set the overall score to target the number of interview places. The previous year's scores may bear no relevance to scores for the following year'

not considered necessary;

there is no cut-off score for the UKCAT;

Cambridge operates admissions on a gathered field basis and therefore each year the full academic profile of each applicant is considered within this context;

some subjects (e.g. pre-clinical Medicine) do provide details on the significance of test score for the likelihood of being short-listed for interview however in most cases where we use admissions tests the score alone is not the only factor used to determine an interview short-list. Because the applications vary from year to year, and this dictates the proportion of candidates we will interview, providing details of a "cut-off score" are not helpful to a candidate, as this can vary from year to year. In most tests used by Oxford (the exception being UKCAT, which is taken for Fast-Track Medicine) the candidate does not receive their test score in advance of the interview, so the information has limited value even if published, although in most subjects, a candidate will get some information on their contextualised test performance as part of their feedback.

3.18 Question 18 asked whether an approval mechanism was used when an admissions test was introduced at an HEI:

- i) 64% of respondents answered the question, 23 positively and only 4 negatively.
- ii) 15 HEIs skipped this question - SPA will follow this up, if the HEIs are identified.

3.19 Question 19 asked HEIs to outline the approval mechanism and any regular review process, where they existed:

- i) The highest response rate (87%) cited approval by Admissions Committee or similar
- ii) 47.8% of respondents cited review before new admissions round begins
- iii) 30.4% of respondents cited approval by high-level University Committee e.g. Senate or Council
- iv) 30.4% of respondents cited review using data from test bodies
- v) 21.7% of respondents cited review at Annual Admissions Committee meeting
- vi) There were a number of smaller percentage responses (each under 20%) which cited the following:

review following results;

review considering conversion rates;

review of available research;

review using data from UCAS;

review of applicant feedback;

review of school/ college feedback.

vii) It should be noted that some HEIs will have provided more than one answer to this question.

viii) Two HEIs answered negatively about whether a mechanism and review process could be introduced and gave the following indications regarding why this might be problematic:

tests are reviewed by the academic school administering the test;

the use of BMAT was introduced before I joined the College. I would assume it was recommended by the Admissions Committee and then approved by Senior Management Group.

3.20 Question 20 asked HEIs what they might do as a result of any regular review process:

- i) 82.8% of respondents stated they would change how the test is used within the admissions decision-making process.
- ii) 69% of respondents stated they would confirm the continued use of the test.

iii) 44.8% of respondents stated they would stop using the test.

3.21 Question 21 asked HEIs for any other general comments about their use of admissions tests:

i) Six responses were received as follows:

our admissions tests are used in conjunction with a rigorous interview process as we are aware that some candidates may be nervous during the test and may perform below their ability or alternatively they may perform well but may not be suited to this specific course, while we strongly encourage and support our tests, they are not the definitive method of making admissions decisions;

tests are used to ensure students have basic skills required for a specific vocation rather than as a tool for academic selection;

we only use the BMAT for our Veterinary Medicine courses which are particularly competitive; as the UKCAT is still relatively new, we at BSMS are still looking at other factors besides these test scores to assess an application. From previous research, we have found that having a high UKCAT score does not necessarily account for a strong academic or non academic profile. From recent research, we have also seen that most candidates who have a high UKCAT score are candidates from independent schools, and perhaps therefore more privileged. As BSMS is a university who is highly focused on widening participation and looking at local state schools, the UKCAT can therefore prove to be a slight disadvantage in this case as it mainly focuses on one group. We may use the UKCAT more thoroughly in the future, but for the time being, we will only be using it for candidates who have been interviewed and are on borderline with other candidates to being offered a place;

the use of admissions tests is very important for a University which has applicants who are universally predicted to perform well within their pre-University education, to allow effective differentiation between candidates who, on paper, are all highly qualified. The increasing focus on ensuring those short-listed for interview receive multiple interviews, in line with the evidence that multiple interviews with trained interviewers provide an effective means to identify the most appropriate candidates for our degree courses, requires that we have methods that can allow effective short-list procedures that are robust and defensible.

Only 70% of our applicants have A-levels, and the increasing diversity of both UK and international qualifications means that a standard subject-focused aptitude test taken prior to interview allows us to effectively assess and benchmark the potential of applicants, irrespective of their prior education;

UKCAT are due to publish the results of data gathered from the past 3 years when the test was first introduced, how we use the test would be reviewed in light of this information.

Annie Doyle, SPA Senior Project Officer

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