



Admissions Tests - Questionnaire

The SPA Steering Group asked us to explore further with HEIs the rationale behind the use of tests as part of the admissions decision-making process. To broaden our research in this area we produced a questionnaire which asked not only about which specific tests are in use but also more detailed questions around areas including: what additional information is gained from the test result; how test scores are used in conjunction with other factors and whether any weightings are applied; whether any approval mechanism and/ or regular review process for tests is in place.

HEIs using one or more admissions tests were asked to complete the questionnaire and from a total of 64 HEIs which declared the use of one or more admissions tests for 2011 entry to HE, 42 responses were received, a 66% response rate. Thanks are extended to the HEIs that responded.

Key Findings

The questionnaire was designed to enable 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.

Further action

Analysis of the questionnaire responses identified some areas of further questioning and action which it would be useful for SPA to explore further with HEIs, as follows:

- The HEIs which stated that they had completed research and 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.

Good practice messages

- Equal treatment of applicants throughout the admissions cycle in relation to the use of tests was not demonstrated by respondents. A relatively small number of HEIs responded 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. SPA's good practice guidance reminds 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 admissions cycle.

- Some respondents indicated that a test was sometimes used as a single factor to determine a cut-off point for selection or de-selection for interview. SPA's good practice guidance reminds HEIs that a test should be used in conjunction with other factors and within the context of holistic admissions decision-making, These factors may include: merit and potential as evidenced by achieved and predicted academic performance; work experience; non-academic experience; personal statement; contextual information; performance in group discussion; written work; personal qualities; career exploration; and reference.
- Transparency of weightings for test scores and publication of previous test score cut-off points was not demonstrated in all cases. Some HEIs stated that their selection and scoring process was transparent and available on the University website, another that the weightings and test score cut-off points varied by test and that the information was available on departmental webpages and linked through to UCAS Entry Profiles. SPA's good practice guidance reminds HEIs that transparency is one of the five principles for fair admissions as recommended in the Schwartz \Report (ref to footnote here).
- A reasonable number of HEIs responded that they had an approval mechanism in place for tests. The highest response rate cited approval by Admissions Committee or similar, others cited: review before new admissions round begins; approval by high-level University Committee e.g. Senate or Council; review using data from test bodies; review at Annual Admissions Committee meeting; 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. SPA's good practice guidance recommends that a test should be approved for use through the institution's relevant structures and processes. Additionally, institutions should ensure their appeal and complaint mechanisms cover queries about admissions tests.

Review process

HEIs were asked what they might do as a result of any regular review process. A high number of respondents stated they would change how the test is used within the admissions decision-making process, others that they would confirm the continued use of the test and a smaller percentage that they would stop using the test.

Transparency

HEIs were asked if they would consider including previous test score cut-off points in new publication and communication material. A mixture of positive and negative responses were received, which are summarised below:

- The previous score may not be a realistic indication of where the cut off might lie; the cut-off is decide on a cohort by cohort basis
- The prospectus is published too early but the HEI may consider publishing the previous year's cut-off point on their website. The cut-off threshold varies from year to year depending upon the number of students the HEI is funded to recruit and the standard of the cohort.

- Some subjects do provide details on the significance of test score for the likelihood of being short-listed for interview however in most cases the score alone is not the only factor used to determine an interview short-list.

HEIs' test rationale

- All HEIs using the main national tests cited differentiating between equally well-qualified applicants as a reason for the use of the test. Over half also stated the demonstration of quite specific additional 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.
- The widest use 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 English and/or Maths equivalence; demonstration of subject specific knowledge required for the course; demonstration of subject specific knowledge required for the profession; and to meet nursing and midwifery council guidelines for admissions.

Additional test usage information

- A small amount of additional test usage was identified which had not been declared on UCAS Course Search. These HEIs' details have been added to the data on the SPA website to ensure the information is as comprehensive as possible.