

Research Note

Tests used for 2009/10 admissions by grammar schools in England

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Introduction

This short note presents findings on the admissions tests used (for admission in 2009/10) by a sample of grammar schools in England. Grammar schools are academically selective and as such admission is based primarily on the results of tests carried out by either individual schools or consortia of schools. However, there is a paucity of research on tests used. West and Hind (2003) examined admissions criteria used by grammar schools, but they did not examine the tests used (although they found that 3% of grammar schools also had criteria relating to ability/aptitude in a subject area as admissions criteria). West and Hind (2007) examined the tests used by 13 of the 19 grammar schools in (outer) London and found that all used verbal reasoning tests, 12 used mathematics tests, 11 used English tests and 8 used non-verbal reasoning tests.

For this short paper, we focus on a sample of the 164 grammar schools in England. A 10% sample of was randomly selected from a sub-sample of the total population of 164 which included only one school from each 'federation' or 'cooperative pair' to ensure that no two schools with identical admissions arrangements were selected. Examples of federations include areas where only one test needs to be taken for two or more schools or where pairs of boys and girls schools have identical arrangements.

The 16 schools were stratified by the percentage of grammar schools in the LA with the result that the final sample comprised 11 schools coming from less selective systems and five schools from more selective systems. Information on tests and other practices used were obtained via school websites, consortium websites (where relevant) and LA websites and brochures.

Tests used

Of the 16 grammar schools in the sample, 14 used verbal reasoning tests, 10 English tests, 10 mathematics tests and six non-verbal reasoning tests. Three schools used a headteacher's report, mainly to determine whether applicants on the borderline should be offered a place. On average (mean), schools used 2.8 different types of tests. The number of tests is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Number of tests used

Number of tests	Number of schools (N=16)
1	2
2	4
3	5
4	5

Both of the schools using one type of test only used verbal reasoning tests. Of the four schools using two testing instruments, three used a combination of verbal and non-verbal reasoning; the remaining school used both an aptitude test in music (for 20 places) with the remaining places decided by outcome in an 'other' academic test – the exact nature of these tests was not readily available. Of the five schools using three testing instruments, the most popular combination was English, mathematics and verbal reasoning, which was used by four of the schools, with the remaining school using English, mathematics and non-verbal reasoning. Of the five schools using four testing instruments, all used a combination of English, mathematics and verbal reasoning, with two of the schools using non-verbal reasoning in addition. The remaining three schools used the headteacher's report as well as the three academic tests.

In terms of admissions, eight schools ranked applicants in order to allocate places, whilst two applied their criteria to applicants who had been selected. The remaining six schools used a combination of ranking and criteria.

The majority of the schools (11 of the 16) did not provide details in the information available about the actual tests used. Of the remainder, two used GL Assessment (formerly NFER) and three used the GL Assessment for some of the tests whilst setting their own assessments for others.

Nearly half of the schools (seven schools) mentioned that they standardised the score in some way, with five specifically mentioning age, for at least one of the tests.

In terms of the score that needed to be achieved for consideration for a selective place, the majority of the schools (nine out of 16) reported that this varied from year to year according to applicants' performance. Three schools indicated that the cut-off point was determined in advance. One school used a combination of these two methods. For the remaining three schools, this information was not readily available.

References

West, A. and Hind, A. (2003) Secondary school admissions in England: Exploring the extent of overt and covert selection, London, Research and Information on State Education Trust. <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/38602/>

West, A. and Hind, A. (2007) School choice in London, England: Characteristics of students in different types of schools, *Peabody Journal of Education*, 82, 2-3, 498-529.