

Objection to the admission arrangements to Altrincham Grammar School for Boys (AGSB)

Case ref: ADA/2581

Response to the School's Adjudicator from GL Assessment

9 May 2014

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Confidentiality/Freedom of Information Notice

The content of this statement is confidential and commercially sensitive information. You should not disclose this information to any third party (including to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator or any other third party concerned with this particular objection to the admissions arrangement) without our prior written consent.

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Introduction

GL Assessment is the longstanding supplier of the selection test for Altrincham Grammar School for Boys (AGSB). AGSB have in the past used for their admissions process three tests: verbal reasoning (VR), non-verbal reasoning (NVR) and maths.

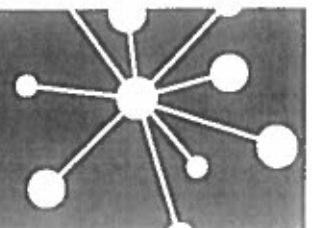
In 2014, they propose to replace the non-verbal test with an English test (retaining the VR and Maths tests).

The Schools Adjudicator has asked AGSB to provide assurances that children with a) **Special Educational Needs (SEN), especially dyslexia, and b) English as an additional language (EAL) are not disadvantaged by the new arrangements. This is GL Assessment's accompanying statement.**

Executive Summary

GL Assessment is the UK's leading provider of integrated assessments and services for schools. We are also the biggest provider of bespoke tests written and constructed in many cases for the purposes of selection into Year 7.

In all our business we maintain the highest standards of educational, psychometric and statistical expertise. As such, GL Assessment stands by the suitability and reliability of all questions and tests supplied for the purposes of selection, regardless of the choices made by individual admissions authorities. VR tests are of particular use for schools in identifying academic potential and those supplied by GL Assessment take into account the need to test reasoning (correlated with potential) and not acquired skills.



There are nevertheless considerations to be made when considering the purpose and suitability of testing. Most specifically, the cases of a) children with SEN and b) candidates regarded as EAL must be treated separately as the effects and appropriateness of testing are different for each case. **In order to be true assessments, GL Assessment tests cannot therefore be adjusted for differences in language ability or educational need (although appropriate adjustments can be made to the testing environment). Those differences must be taken into account elsewhere in the selection process.**

Test types, reliability and fairness

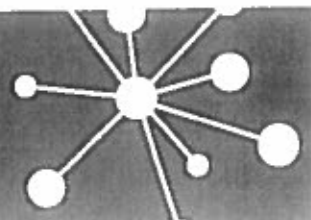
GL Assessment's bespoke tests are constructed from a bank of items written and maintained exclusively for the purpose of admissions. The individual items in the bank are monitored to measure their performance, especially reliability. Items for which there is evidence of bias against gender or socio-economic group are not permitted for use. We offer four types of test available for the purposes of selection: verbal reasoning, non-verbal reasoning, maths and English.

VR tests are highly reliable (for tests of around 80 questions, like the one used by AGSB, internal consistency reliabilities are typically in the order of 0.90) and strong predictors of future academic attainment (correlations with school exams taken over five years later are above 0.70) and this link is in part based on both the measurement of general reasoning as well as the connection between verbal-linguistic strength and school curricula.

Moreover, **GL Assessment verbal reasoning tests are specifically designed and tested to focus on assessing reasoning ability – that is, to be valid according to the intention of the test – and to minimise testing acquired vocabulary and reading skill.** All of our VR items are written in such a way that reading attainment and vocabulary demands are at a low level, such that **they primarily measure differences between children in their basic reasoning processes – including comprehending the nature of the task from the examples, understanding the relationships between the words/concepts, recognising the intended words – rather than reading skill.** VR tests are therefore appropriate to the issue of being able to assess verbal reasoning skills in children from disadvantaged and EAL backgrounds who may have had limited opportunities to develop good reading skills and vocabularies, especially those pupils who themselves have an innate verbal bias in their cognitive profile.

In addition, although the learned content of VR tests (principally vocabulary) is by nature higher than for NVR tests, not all VR item types use words. Many involve symbol manipulation using letters or numbers to test reasoning capacities. Like many NVR items in fact, these VR items do rely on an element of verbal processing but one internal to the candidate, i.e. not necessarily particular to the language of the assessment.

One of the strengths of NVR tests is their ability to assess reasoning ability using novel material, i.e. material independent of prior learning. This can potentially highlight academic potential that is obscured by the verbal demands of other tests – this would include candidates categorised as EAL. Nevertheless, the choice of tests remains with the admissions authority and GL Assessment VR tests should not be understood as tests of literacy or language acquisition as such. The greater the range of tests, the more accurate the criteria for selection available to schools and GL Assessment acknowledges the full range of considerations an admissions authority must make, including cost and logistics.



Reasonable adjustment and appropriateness

From what has been said, EAL candidates will, on average, perform less well than non-EAL candidates on the same test and may perform better on NVR tests than VR tests. However, there are many and various factors which should be considered here (reiterating again those that are taken into account in the construction of GL Assessment tests).

It is equally true that the general reasoning ability of the candidate will influence the assessment outcome for either test. Where a selection process involves more than one test, it is up to the admissions authority to judge what contribution each test makes to the candidate's application, what other factors ought to be considered, and how the results are appropriate to the likely suitability of the candidate for the school (including predictive validity).

Admissions authorities are required to take reasonable steps to ensure that all candidates, including those with SEN or disabilities, can access the tests. However, while all candidates should be given the opportunity to sit the tests on an equal footing, there may be cases where the nature of testing and the means of carrying out make it inappropriate entirely for the candidate.

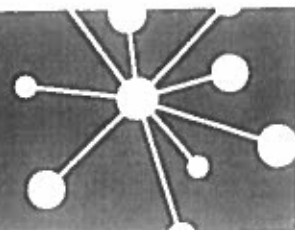
In the particular case of dyslexia, while in some cases suitable adjustments can be made, the need to retain orally-presented information constitutes a far more demanding cognitive task than to work with information that is readily available in print as the candidate solves the task. Many of the VR items would be far more difficult to solve if presented orally.

Any adjustments made should be in line with normal classroom practice for the candidate. Extra time should not normally exceed 25% although given the complexity of the issue of speed within a timed test, we would advise caution on assuming that extra time compensates for the candidate's disadvantage.

Special Educational Needs including dyslexia will affect the performance of a candidate on any test, especially those where the position or movement of letters or symbols is involved. **Each case should be individually assessed.** Indeed, because it may not be possible to establish for certain that the special arrangements perfectly compensate for the nature and extent of the disadvantage, in all cases the special testing arrangement should be noted alongside the test score and taken into account in any borderline decision.

In cases where dyslexia (or any other suspected condition) is not diagnosed by an accepted authority, then suitable testing and diagnosis must take place before any access arrangements are applied.

Whereas some adjustment to examination conditions can be advised for SEN candidates to allow them to access the tests, there are adjustments that cannot be made to the tests (such as those that may relate to EAL candidates – modified language or translation, for instance - without contravening the fairness that applies to standardised testing (that all candidates are treated equally), and weakening confidence in the claim to know what has been tested. By contrast, post-test adjustment (standardisation) for age *is* applied because the impact of age is measurable within the testing group and directly linked to the development of reasoning ability.



By way of comparison, the Joint Council for Qualifications permits use by EAL candidates of a bi-lingual dictionary and modified language papers in public examinations. Use of a dictionary would plainly not be appropriate to a Verbal Reasoning test, giving an EAL candidate unfair advantage (the JCQ likewise do not permit use of bi-lingual dictionaries in particular subjects such as English). Use of modified language papers would go against the establishment of a standardised environment. Support that is appropriate is through suitable familiarisation materials (different from practice or tutoring materials) and in person by invigilators on the day of the test to ensure candidates have a good understanding of what they are being asked to do by different item types.

Conclusion

- The cases of a) children with SEN and b) candidates regarded as EAL must be treated separately as the effects and appropriateness of testing are different for each case. Candidates with English as an additional language will find any test involving language harder than native speakers, relative to their ability and level of language acquisition. The issue is whether the assessment procedure is most suitable to matching the school with pupils who are best placed to succeed there.
- In order to be true assessments, GL Assessment tests cannot be adjusted for differences in language ability or educational need (although appropriate adjustments can be made to the testing environment). Those differences must be taken into account elsewhere in the selection process.
- GL Assessment can provide assurance that any test or series of tests commissioned from us are fit for purpose and, as far as is possible, do not discriminate against any one group.
- All of our VR items are written in such a way that reading attainment and vocabulary demands are at a low level, such that they primarily measure differences between children in their basic reasoning processes. VR tests are therefore appropriate to the issue of being able to assess verbal reasoning skills in children from disadvantaged and EAL backgrounds who may have had limited opportunities to develop good reading skills and vocabularies, especially those pupils who themselves have an innate verbal bias in their cognitive profile.
- GL Assessment believes that the greater the range of tests, the more accurate the criteria for selection available to schools. However, we also acknowledge the full range of considerations an admissions authority must make including cost and logistics. The choice of tests remains with the admissions authority and, as above, GL Assessment VR tests should not be understood as tests of literacy or language acquisition.
- The tests chosen must be those the school thinks likely to pick out candidates most likely to succeed at their establishment and any set of tests chosen may be argued to favour certain candidates over others. That is not at all the same as saying the tests are unfair or inappropriate.

