

Critical Thinking

Overview of Assessments and Qualifications in the UK

There are various assessments and qualifications involving Critical Thinking available from Cambridge Assessment and other agencies. Critical Thinking (CT) has been available in the UK as an AS/A level since 2001 when 130 schools entered just over 2,000 candidates. By 2009 this had increased to over 1000 schools entering over 22,000 candidates. CT has become an important element in high stakes selection tests used by an increasing number of UK universities, and as a part of some psychometric tests used by employers.

The range of assessments and qualifications include the following. The quotations are taken from the qualifications' own websites:

OCR AS/A level Critical Thinking

"This course should enable candidates to develop: an understanding of the principles, concepts and techniques of critical thinking; the skills of communication, problem-solving, analysis and evaluation; a framework for moral, social and ethical decision-making; and a capacity for methodical and critical thought, which will serve as an end in itself as well as a basis for further study."

This qualification is aimed at 16-19 year olds studying AS and A levels in England. In 2009 over 22,000 candidates sat OCR Critical Thinking AS and A level examinations.

AQA AS/A level Critical Thinking

"This specification is designed to: develop skills and encourage attitudes which complement other studies across the curriculum; prepare students for the academic and intellectual demands of higher education, as well as future employment and general living; and introduce concepts, terms and techniques that will enable students to reflect more constructively on their own and others' reasoning."

This qualification is aimed at 16-19 year olds studying AS and A levels in England. The first award of the AQA A level in CT will be in 2010. Approximately 2000 students took the AS level in 2009.

CIE AS/A level Thinking Skills

"The aims of the syllabus are: to provide students with a specific and transferable set of skills for solving problems, critical thinking and reasoning; to encourage students to apply these skills to realistic scenarios; and to develop students' abilities to understand and engage confidently in argument and reasoning."

This qualification is aimed at 16-19 year olds studying AS and A levels in England and internationally. In 2009 over 2,000 candidates sat CIE AS and A level Thinking Skills examinations.

International Baccalaureate - Theory of Knowledge core requirement

"Theory of Knowledge offers students and their teachers the opportunity to reflect critically on diverse ways of knowing and on areas of knowledge and to consider the role and nature of knowledge in their own culture, in the cultures of others and in the wider world."

ToK is a core requirement for students taking the IB Diploma Programme, aimed at 16-19 year olds in England and internationally. The IB Diploma programme is offered in over 2000 schools worldwide.

OCR Thinking and Reasoning Skills Level 2 Award (Pilot)

"The qualification has a mix of reasoning skills and broader thinking skills, through which learners have the opportunity to develop thinking in its fullest sense. These skills have a broad range of applications and students should be able to benefit from these in a variety of contexts, both academic and everyday life."

This pilot was developed in response to a number of centres identifying a lack of a qualification in this discipline area for Level 2 (age 14-16) students. Due to its pilot status this qualification is currently available at 72 centres, with an estimated 2835 candidates.

Biomedical Admissions Test (BMAT) (Cambridge Assessment)

“The BMAT measures candidates’ scientific knowledge and thinking skills that are considered essential for students to succeed in Higher Education. The test was first used in November 2003 and is currently used by five UK institutions as part of their admissions process. Section 1 of 3 tests Aptitude and Skills.”

The BMAT is a subject-specific admissions test taken by applicants to Medicine, Veterinary Medicine and related degree courses. 6,285 candidates took the BMAT in 2009.

Thinking Skills Assessment (TSA) (Cambridge Assessment)

“The TSA is used to help select very academically able students for courses which are usually oversubscribed. The test consists of 50 multiple choice questions assessing problem solving skills, including numerical and spatial reasoning and critical thinking skills, including understanding arguments and reasoning using everyday language.”

The TSA is an admissions test taken by applicants to certain courses at Cambridge, Oxford and UCL universities. There are separate tests for each university. 3,106 students sat the Oxford TSA in 2009.

The UK Clinical Aptitude Test (UKCAT) (UKCAT Consortium in partnership with Pearson VUE)

“UKCAT assesses a wide range of mental abilities and behavioural attributes identified by university Medical and Dental Schools as important.”

UKCAT is used by universities for selection of students applying to Medical and Dental Schools. 26 Universities used the test for 2010 course entry.

The National Admissions Test for Law (LNAT) (LNAT Consortium in partnership with Pearson VUE)

“LNAT is an on-screen test with two sections. The first section uses 30 multiple-choice questions to assess ability to read, understand, analyse, and make logical deductions from, passages of text in formal English. The second section requires candidates to write a well-reasoned essay on a topic chosen from a list.”

LNAT is used by universities for selection of students applying for undergraduate law programmes. 10 UK universities used the test for 2010 course entry.

Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal – UK Version (W-GCTA^{UK}) (Pearson)

“The W-GCTA^{UK} measures abilities that have relevance for the decision-makers in an organisation. The test includes problems, statements, arguments and interpretations; processes similar to those encountered on a daily basis in management roles.”

The W-GCTA^{UK} is used primarily for recruitment and selection in a range of professions including accountancy, civil service and management consultancy.

Context of research

Since 2006 Cambridge Assessment has undertaken a programme of research focussed on Critical Thinking. The work began with the development of the definition and taxonomy. Cambridge Assessment drew upon the expertise of leading figures in the field in order to derive this definition. Research was conducted into the impact of CT in schools and this included teachers’ experiences and perceptions. Interestingly, in an additional study there was evidence to suggest that taking CT AS level is associated with higher achievement in other A levels. The Critical Thinking research programme will culminate with the publication of a glossary of terms. This will provide a source of reference for commonly used terms in the CT domain, for use by students, teachers, academics and professionals.

Further information

Full details of the Critical Thinking work by Cambridge Assessment are available at:

www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk

Contact: Beth Black
Research Division
Cambridge Assessment
1 Regent Street
Cambridge
CB2 1GG

Tel: 01223 556153
Email: black.b@cambridgeassessment.org.uk