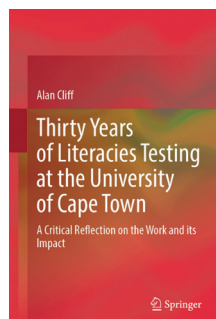


**BOOK TITLE:**

Thirty Years of Literacies Testing at the University of Cape Town: A Critical Reflection on the Work and its Impact

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ISBN:

9783031586781 (hardcover, 161 pp, EUR130)
9783031586798 (ebook, 161 pp, EUR111)

PUBLISHER:

Springer, Cham, Switzerland

PUBLISHED:

2024

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HOW TO CITE:

Boughey C. Review of “Thirty Years of Literacies Testing at the University of Cape Town: A Critical Reflection on the Work and its Impact”. *S Afr J Sci.* 2025;121(3/4), Art. #20779. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2025/20779>

ARTICLE INCLUDES:

- ☐ Peer review
☐ Supplementary material

PUBLISHED:

7 March 2025

Review of “Thirty Years of Literacies Testing at the University of Cape Town: A Critical Reflection on the Work and its Impact”

Work on testing for admissions and placement conducted at the University of Cape Town (UCT) will be familiar to anyone who has worked with student recruitment and enrolment in South African higher education. A new book, Alan Cliff's *Thirty Years of Literacy Testing at the University of Cape Town*, chronicles the work of what began as the 'Alternative Admissions Testing Project' and, in doing so, provides an important record of what is arguably the most sustained piece of work in the history of the field known, in South Africa, as 'Academic Development'.

As Cliff points out, the 'testing project', which began in the 1980s, was rooted in activism and observations that students' results on the school-leaving examinations, in the context of the poor quality of schooling provided to black learners, did not always predict their ability to succeed in higher education. The desire to widen access as the country moved towards democracy and, at the same time, ensure that students were properly supported once they entered university, led to work that developed tests of academic and mathematical and scientific literacy.

Although a great deal of Academic Development work draws on activist intentions, the nature of knowledge produced in the field often lacks the power to 'reconceptualise' problems in teaching and learning in ways that will contribute to transformation.¹⁻³ The 'testing project' has been different in this respect because of the body of theory that backs it and the rigorous research that has been used to inform it. In spite of this, attempts to use tests alternative to the school-leaving examinations to admit and place students have often been met with resistance, and questions about why this is the case are interesting to consider.

In many respects, the answer to such questions lies in the power of common sense. As Brumfitt^{4(p.1)} points out, “[l]anguage and education share two disadvantages that many other areas of study avoid – they are both too familiar”. Familiarity with schooling and school-leaving examinations can result in the uninterrogated assumption that schooling prepares for higher education and school-leaving examinations are an indication of an individual's ability to engage with it. This is in spite of the fact that, in South Africa, only about 20% of 18-year-olds enter universities, and schools therefore need to prepare for, and test, a wide range of abilities.

The tests developed by the UCT project were never intended to replace school-leaving examinations but were rather intended to provide additional information – information that, importantly, would allow additional support to students to be designed and provided. Testing was also largely free thanks to support from donors. Nonetheless, the number of universities drawing on an important source of information that will allow them to better serve their students has dwindled, not only because of ignorance but also because of political reasons. Questioning school-leaving examinations on the basis of their power to predict the readiness of young people to engage with higher education is not an easy task, as the history of the project has shown.

In the light of the observations made above, Cliff's book not only provides a record of the testing initiative but, also, a means of challenging many of the commonsense assumptions that inform thinking about access to higher education in South Africa and elsewhere by providing an account of the reasoning behind the tests and their analysis. In doing this, the book is a powerful reminder of what we do not know, and are often blinded from knowing, by the power of common sense.

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