

Three top tips for acing the GMAT test

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There is no shortage of advice on how to prepare for the GMAT exam - the often daunting test that opens the door to the most prestigious MBA programmes around the world - but taking advice from someone who's cracked it themselves is a good place to start.

Shivani Ghai is the founder of management consulting firm, Vitrus, and is an associate coach at the UCT GSB, supporting MBA cohorts. She did her MBA at the UCT Graduate School of business in 2019 and was not only the class president but one of the top six MBA students in the world. Not bad for a woman who at the age of 13 was told by a school guidance counsellor that she should rather focus on "creative" career pursuits, and could definitely not be an engineer (which she subsequently became) or a business leader. She is often approached for advice about the GMAT test and has these three top tips to offer:

1. Don't underestimate yourself

Anyone can do the GMAT – and score well. While the GMAT exam has gained a reputation for being a hard nut to crack, letting that psych you out will not help you, says Ghai. Dr Trevor Wegner and Dr Ailsa Stewart Smith, who run a GMAT prep course four times a year at the UCT Graduate School of Business say the test in itself is not difficult – but it is tricky. It requires careful thought and consideration of all aspects of a question. The test consists of an analytical writing assessment, an integrated reasoning section, quantitative reasoning (which measures the ability to analyse data) and verbal reasoning (which tests your ability to understand).

The test takes about three-and-a-half hours to complete, and each answer influences the following question – if an answer is correct, the next question will be more difficult. If the answer was incorrect, the next question will be similar in terms of difficulty. At the end, you are scored on your answers. The UCT GSB accepts MBA applicants with a score of 550 and higher. A score of 700 is considered to be very good. GMAT exams are taken worldwide as a key assessment tool to the world's top MBA programmes. The GMAT test can also be retaken if you want to get a better score to improve your application.

2. Test yourself with free online GMAT tests

Ghai says there are a number of free tests online, for example on sites like www.mba.com, that give a very good idea of what the GMAT is all about. As many South African students don't have much exposure to standardised computer testing – in which the test adapts online according to the answers supplied – just getting to grips with this format will give you an advantage.

"Do a test and get an idea of what you are dealing with, and which areas you need to focus on," she says. "There are a number of online resources and books, or you can enrol on a prep course like the one the UCT GSB offers."

There is no set amount of time that any student has to spend preparing for the GMAT. It can take anything from a few weeks to three months of studying to prepare, depending on your level of commitment and your grasp of the content you need to master. Shivani recommends doing as many practice tests as possible and spending time making sure you understand the questions you couldn't answer especially!

3. It's not only about getting a good score

Many students are too tough on themselves, thinking that they will not be accepted on an MBA programme if they don't achieve exceptionally high marks. "But your MBA application is a comprehensive document based not only on your GMAT

score. It is a holistic picture of you as an individual and if you are an innovative entrepreneur, that for instance, will count hugely in your favour,” says Ghai.

Fellow UCT GSB graduate Darren Ravens adds: “ Your score simply has to demonstrate a base level of numeracy and language competence, and show that you have taken the application process seriously. Any score between 500 and 700 should put you in the frame but lower scores mean you need to be stronger in other areas of your application (e.g. work experience).”

Last but not least, doing the test can really help you to gauge whether or not you are in fact ready for an MBA. Wegner says: “The GMAT is definitely a useful tool for self-evaluation.” The structure and content of the GMAT is similar to what is covered in the MBA programme and gives you a very good idea of what they can expect on this rigorous course, says Ghai. And it is better to find this out before you embark on an expensive and time-intensive degree. “Your GMAT score is also valid for five years, so you can take it when you feel ready and use it at a later date when you are ready for your MBA,” she concludes.

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