

Being prepared and committed is what counts in an MBA

By Dr Ailsa Stewart Smith & Dr Trevor Wegner, issued by UCT Graduate School of Business

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While the demographics and content of MBA courses worldwide are changing, what still matters most for candidates looking to embark on this premier degree is preparation and commitment, and the GMAT can help to set the tone.

The Association of MBAs, a global and impartial authority on MBA programmes, recently released statistics showing women now make up 36% of the worldwide accredited MBA cohort, up from 32% five years previously.

The AMBA research also showed that women are more likely to be aged 25 – 29 when they graduate with an MBA, while men tended to dominate in older age groups of 35 and up. AMBA suggests this may call for special efforts to encourage and support women taking MBAs as their careers mature, especially since it is clear that opportunities for advancement remain unequal.

Along with a gradual move towards gender equity in the classroom, there is also evidence that the format and content of MBAs are shifting in line with a changing marketplace. A growing number of schools are, for example, [moving away](#) from the traditional full-time delivery of the programme and offering new specialisation options. And [many schools](#) are dialling up their focus on the so-called soft skills such as emotional intelligence and creativity – in response to the changes brought about by the 4th Industrial Revolution.

But as the saying goes, the more things change, the more they stay the same. In the 20 plus years of our involvement with the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB) what we've seen is that, regardless of who is in the classroom or what the focus of the curriculum is, what really sets those delegates who excel apart from those who struggle is their level of preparedness and commitment – and it starts before they even get to business school with how well they prepare for their studies.

Going back to study after having spent some time working is no easy feat. It requires both financial and time commitments that not everyone is capable of. One of the factors taken into account when analysing a candidate's preparedness for the MBA is the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT). While this is not the only predictor of success, and indeed not all business schools in South Africa even require a GMAT, engagement with the GMAT offers a good reflection of ability and an important orientation for anyone wanting to tackle an MBA.

GMAT is not just a hurdle that needs to be jumped through in order to get into the best business schools; the skill set required for completing the exam is exactly the same as that required to succeed on the MBA programme. Looked at in this light, the GMAT can be seen as a vital warm up session in preparation for the MBA ahead. It allows students to acclimatise to re-entering their studies and works as an introduction to the pressure and pace of MBA learning.

What makes people feel more or less confident about coping with the GMAT is their prior competency with quantitative and verbal aspects of the work. Over the last two decades we have noticed how current students grasp concepts much more quickly, largely attributable to the greater accessibility of online learning materials and information about the GMAT.

However, while internet-based resources can provide a helpful background for preparing for GMAT, peer learning is a well-established phenomenon which cannot be replicated by an online chatroom. Listening to others' questions and explanations in a classroom environment simply cannot be replaced in its role of helping candidates to discover and deal with their strengths, weaknesses and fears. This again is also much more in line with the experience of the actual MBA where team learning and interaction are among the key elements of most good programmes in helping to hone self awareness and interpersonal skills.

It can be helpful therefore to attend a GMAT prep courses, such as the one we have run for many years through the UCT GSB. This course combines the focused learning of an online course with the stimulus of class discussion and personal instructor support.

The GMAT is not a difficult test but it can be unfamiliar to candidates because of its design. The prep course helps delegates find out where they are competent and where they will need to put in more preparatory work. All of this makes for more effective practice in final preparation for the test.

When it comes to success on the MBA, it can be tempting to think that the people blessed with brains are inevitably going to do best. But, according to research from Stanford University, [attitude is in fact a better predictor of success than IQ](#). Psychologist Carol Dweck found that people's core attitudes fall into one of two categories: a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. The latter are people who believe they can improve with effort and preparation and they end up outperforming those with a fixed mindset (who believe their ability to change is limited).

By deciding to do the GMAT prep course, delegates show a willingness to learn something new and demonstrate their commitment to their own professional advancement, which we believe is a core quality for success in an MBA. The prep course can be both a litmus test of a delegate's desire and readiness for moving forward to an MBA and an indicator of what is to come. Feedback from those who complete the course is overwhelmingly positive whichever route delegates ultimately choose to take.

The UCT Graduate School of Business [GMAT prep course](#) runs in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

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