

GMAT scores keep climbing as MBA applications soar

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MBA applications have spiked again, which is good news for business schools. But competition for applicants keeps getting tougher, with the GMAT standard climbing steadily.

A steep increase in the number of MBA applications and a rise in the average GMAT score have increased the demand for adequate GMAT preparation, recent surveys have shown.

The latest [data](#) revealed a spike in the number of tests taken, which was reflected in an increased number of [applications to business schools](#) as well as more applications to the GMAT exam owner, GMAC. A total of [261,248 GMAT tests were sat](#) in 2016, an increase from 2015's total of 247,432.

Moreover, prestigious international business schools such as Harvard and Stanford reported increases in the average test scores of applicants.

"As the MBA becomes a more sought-after qualification, admissions become more and more competitive," says Dr Ailsa Stewart Smith, who runs a short prep course at the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB) to help students prepare for the GMAT. "It is therefore also to be expected that the average GMAT score would increase accordingly, as students realise they cannot leave anything up to chance."

Stewart Smith says the MBA programme at the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB), has also become increasingly competitive, especially since the GSB is one of just 77 schools worldwide to be "triple-crowned"; that is, accredited by the three leading global accreditation bodies (AACSB; AMBA and EQUIS). Many applicants have to be turned away, she says.

"It can be devastating to see someone with potential losing out on the chance to do their MBA because they have misunderstood the requirements of the GMAT," says Stewart Smith. "Ideally, one wants everybody going in with an equal chance."

"Many graduates will tell you that getting accepted on a good course was the hardest part of their MBA," says finance writer [Claudia Gonella](#), recalling her own application. Gonella stresses the competitive nature of the GMAT, adding, "It's important to aim high. The best schools will be looking for a GMAT score of at least 700, so if you fall short, it's a good idea to take the test again. Many applicants will take the GMAT at least a year before they plan to apply so they have enough time to prepare and get a good result." Some top business schools suggest aiming for well above 700.

One of the reasons for the MBA's increased competitiveness is that it is perceived as a must for career advancement. Recent data from [2011 – 2016](#) suggested a substantial return on investment for MBA graduates, while [Poets & Quants](#) reported that nearly 80% of employers expected to hire MBA graduates in 2017.

Furthermore, there has been increased pressure on MBA programmes to diversify. The *Financial Times* rankings, for example, includes class diversity as one of its rating criteria.

The GSB, which has consistently achieved high scores from the *Financial Times* for diversity, welcomes students from all over Africa and further afield, as well as reflecting improved gender distribution.

"A more diverse landscape equals more competition, which is ultimately good for MBAs as it raises the standard overall," says Stewart Smith. "It also means good preparation is essential."

It is not advisable to attempt the GMAT without guidance from an experienced mentor, says Stewart Smith: “Students wishing to register for an MBA are advised to begin their GMAT preparation early and, if they are registering for a prep course, to do so well ahead of time. This is advisable in case they wish to take the test more than once.”

The GSB GMAT Prep Course is an intensive five-day short course that gives a thorough overview of what to expect in the GMAT exam. Courses run five times a year: two in Johannesburg (Sandton) and three in Cape Town (at the GSB).

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