

GMAT

Testing times for students

Aptitude tests have long been a part of the MBA, but what do they prove and how can you pass? **Nic Paton** reports

The Government caused a stir last month when it announced plans to look at the feasibility of young people sitting aptitude tests to get into university. But for MBA students such tests have long been a part of the education landscape.

The GMAT (Graduate Management Admissions Test) celebrates its 51st birthday this year. Initially a paper-based test developed by US business schools, in 1997 it was transformed into a computerised test that is now used around the world.

Patrick Grant, 33, sat the GMAT two years ago when he left a career in marketing with fibre optics firm Bookham Technology to do an MBA at Oxford's Said Business School, which he is now near completing.

"I knew what the test was like because I had a friend who'd done it. He lent me a lot of the books that showed how it worked," he recalls.

"It is quite a complex test but it is also fairly formulaic, so if you spend time practising you can raise the probability that you'll get a better score."

The GMAT, which costs a flat fee of \$250 (£140), consists of four timed sections: two analytical writing tests and two multiple choice quantitative and verbal tests. The questions gradually become more difficult the more correct answers you give, meaning that in essence you are moving up a scale.

What score you get is determined by the number of questions you answer, how many you get right and the

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level of difficulty of each question you answered.

Scores range from 200 to 800, with the vast majority falling somewhere between 400 and 600. The sort of score business schools want inevitably varies, with London Business School, for instance, asking for around 680, although it stresses that a lower score will not necessarily rule you out. In

Grant's case, for entry to Said, he scored 650.

"If someone has scored badly, the odds are that they'll struggle," says Peter Calladine, accreditation services manager at the Association of MBAs. What the test is far less capable of doing is predicting whether a high scorer will turn into a business star.

"It is a proven test for predicting how a student is likely to do on the core MBA courses. It is also extremely useful in helping us to form a comparison that cuts across national differences and educational systems," explains Julia Tyler, associate dean of the MBA programme at London Business School.

But this has not stopped some business schools, such as Cranfield School of Management, from developing their own internal aptitude tests for students alongside the GMAT.

The reason behind this is not that schools believe that the test is flawed but that they want a fall-back for where scores are borderline or where there may be other issues, says Cranfield admissions adviser John Mapes.

"We introduced our own test when the GMAT was still a paper test because, at that point, if we had an applicant who could not make the test or applied late then our test meant we didn't lose anyone," he says.

The school converts its test to equivalent GMAT scores so a proper comparison can be made between candidates, he adds.

GMAT has also been accused of having too much of an American cultural bias, something strongly refuted by Daphne Atkin-

son, vice president of industry relations at the Graduate Management Admissions Council, which oversees GMAT.

"There have been repeated tests that have confirmed this is not the case. Whether there is a perception that it is biased is much harder to address," she says.

All this, of course, is academic to candidates who just want to know how to get a great score. Preparation, it seems, is the key.

There are many resources candidates can

turn to, like the website mba.com, run by GMAC, which offers free software.

There are also many formal primer courses available. But, says Joern Meissner, lecturer in management science at Lancaster University Management School, it is worth thinking long and hard before forking out the, on average, £500 or more needed.

"You do need to think about it. But particularly if you are looking to get into a very competitive school it could be worth it," he says.

In Grant's case, as he applied relatively late and time was tight, he decided that a formal course was a waste of time.

"One of the guys on my course did a three-month course over weekends just on GMAT," he recalls.

But he adds: "You do need to spend time, at least a weekend, looking at the books and getting to understand how the questions are put together. If you do not you will waste half an hour just working out how to answer the questions."

Test run Three GMAT sample questions

1. For which n is the remainder largest when the number 817,380 is divided by n ?

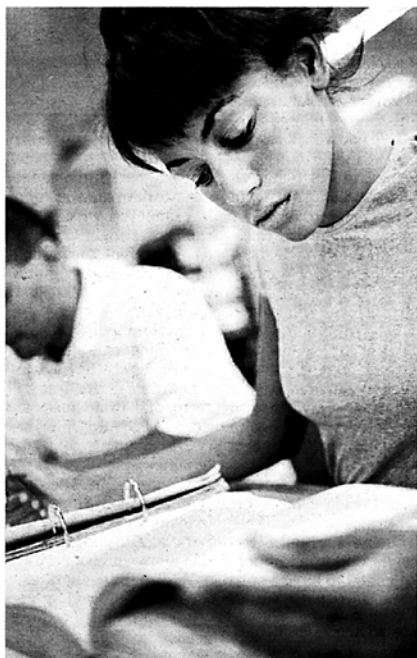
- a) 4
- b) 5
- c) 6
- d) 8
- e) 9

2. How many different positive integers are factors of 441?

- a) - 4
- b) - 6
- c) - 7
- d) - 9
- e) - 11

3. If $n = 4p$, where p is a prime number greater than 2, how many different positive even divisors does n have, including n ?

- a) 2
- b) 3
- c) 4
- d) 6
- e) 8



Number the best: can you handle a GMAT? BANANA STOCK