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Demystifying the GMAT: Defining Content

By Lawrence M. Rudner

How does GMAC determine the mix of skills to include on the GMAT exam? It's a critical question because any test is defined by the skills it measures. The wrong mix can result in a test that might be reliable, but not necessarily valid.

For more than 50 years, the GMAT exam has been an admissions test created for business schools, by business schools. The exam has evolved continually over the years, but one constant is that defining the skills business schools expect of incoming students drives the entire test development process.

We have conducted three major curriculum surveys of business school faculty in the past five years, two global and one specifically emphasizing the curriculum in European business programs. The most recent one, in 2009, surveyed 750 leading business school faculty worldwide. Such periodic curriculum surveys have ensured that the test has aligned with business school needs through nine iterations of the exam and are also guiding the design the 10th Generation GMAT exam, slated for release by 2013.

The survey design process for each study began by examining current graduate course requirements, syllabi, and textbooks for MBA programs, Executive MBA programs, MA programs and European MSc programs. Requirements differ by program type, but curriculum has clearly changed over the past 10 years, with an increased emphasis on international issues and on quantitative skills. The question, then, is whether these changes warrant changes in the GMAT mix or possibly the inclusion of new skills.

From these curriculum studies, a team of content experts interviewed faculty members and generated a very broad list of skills potentially needed as entry skills for the core courses. Some skills on this initial list came directly from syllabi and some from the GMAT test specifications, but most came from an analysis of the curriculum.

The broad list served as the starting point for advisory groups composed of top b-school professors nominated by their deans. These advisory groups reviewed and revised the broad list of skills drafted by the content experts. We sought their assistance in developing scales that would allow faculty participants to rate the importance of the different skills as well as the expected levels of mastery of incoming students.

We specifically asked for professors who consistently received high ratings for their instruction and had significant classroom experience teaching core courses. Nominees were selected to assure representation across the core curriculum.

These advisors had a difficult task. Starting with our broad, tentative list, they were asked to add likely prerequisite skills needed for success in graduate business education programs. After they added skills, each skill on the overall list was thoroughly debated. Easy discussions revolved around what faculty members taught as opposed what they expected entering students to already know. Time value of money, for example, is taught, and students are not expected to start their programs with the formula mastered. More difficult discussions involved prerequisite skills that were either not universally required or already universally mastered by all incoming students. The non-universal prerequisite skills tended to be included in the surveys. The universally mastered skills, such as basic reading and mathematics skills, were excluded.

This process was done for each survey before they were given to business school faculty worldwide. The set of detailed specifications drawn from these surveys helps us outline specific test content.

As we design the 10th Generation GMAT exam, we continue our commitment to providing a test that specifically measures the skills expected of incoming management education students.

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