

# Standardising admissions – Building a club Groucho Marx would proudly join

Integrity, diversity and fairness are the key to building the right cohort in business schools, argues **Sangeet Chowfla**

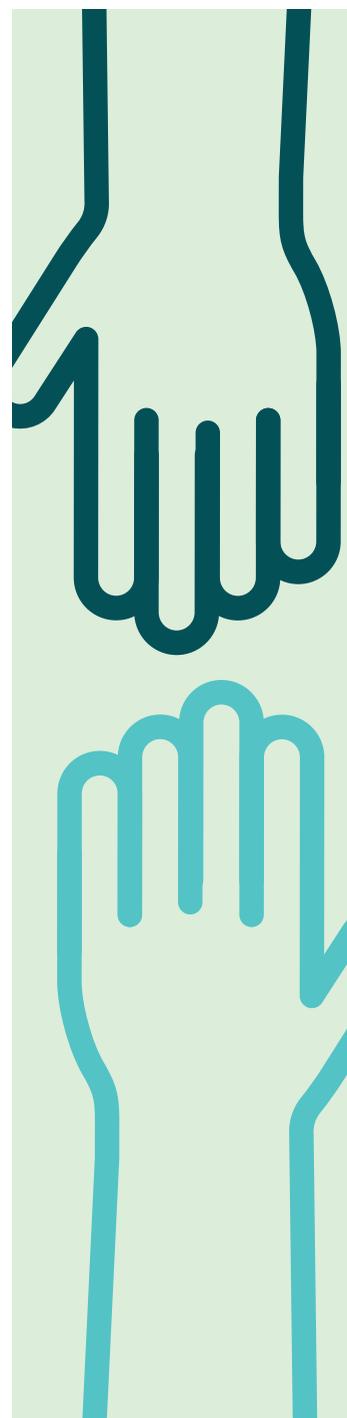
I was recently in conversation with the dean of one of the world's leading business schools. We were talking about GMAC research that showed how prospective students were finding it difficult to decide which school(s) to apply to based solely on the merits of their programmes. The programmes all seemed to be similar, promising the same content and career benefits. We discussed the need to create more competitive differentiation. A unique value proposition. Something distinct.

The dean was clear about what competitive differentiation his school had: real estate and alumni. This caught me by surprise, as I was used to business school leaders talking about their programme content, the quality of faculty, or original research when they talked about their schools. Why real estate and alumni, I asked? He replied that content, faculty, and research are important enough, but they are table stakes – must haves – and what truly sets a school apart are the things that others do not always have.

By real estate, he meant location, location, location. His school was in a major metropolitan hub of global business that students found attractive. It was a fixed point of distinction, unable to be improved or degraded. Alumni, on the other hand, were a factor he could work on every day. A degree from his school was a signal to both employers and prospective students – not just about what the student had learned

during the programme, but about the potential of the individual who held that degree. This signal is not created by the school directly but is instead demonstrated by the success of the alumni who hold a degree from that school. Just as a farmer recognises that the quality of their crop is not just dependent on the quality of their farming but on the quality of their seeds, this dean recognised that identifying and admitting the right students into his programmes was the most important thing that he could do to sustain his competitive differentiation.

Prospective students tell us something similar. Location is incredibly important in their school selection decision, but even more so is the existing alumni network and the perceived success of future alumni – i.e., their own cohort. Their perception of the quality of the admitted cohort directly translates into their perceptions about the success of future alumni, and therefore the future value of their degree. In a sense, they are echoing Groucho Marx who famously joked that he would refuse to join a club that would have him as a member, implying that it is not worth joining if just *anyone* can get in. Students are saying, 'I wouldn't join a school that would have just *anyone* as a student.' Prospective students are acutely aware that the business school brand that they will carry for the rest of their lives lies not just on their own achievements, but also on the achievements of the "club" - their fellow students.



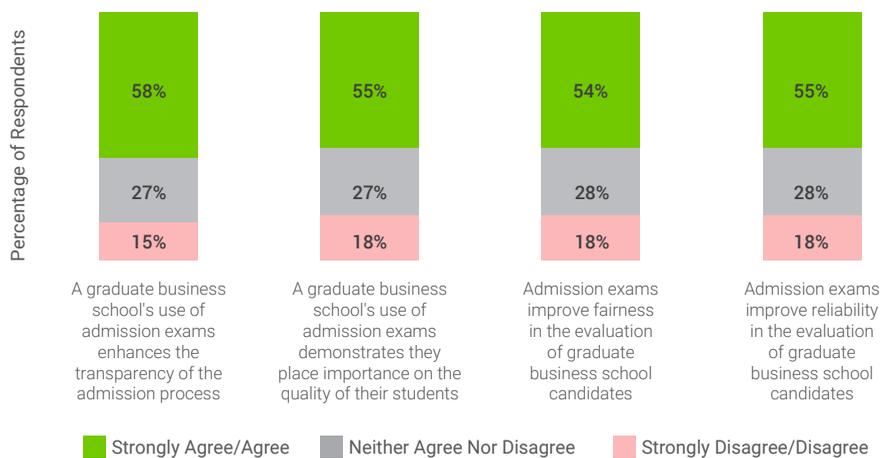
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## Overall, more than half of prospective students agree that the use of exams enhances transparency, fairness, and reliability of the admissions process

Candidate Perceptions of Admission Exams



Source: mba.com Prospective Students Survey, GMAC | n= 1, 793 (Jan-Apr, 2021) | GMAC.com/Research

Graduate  
Management  
Admission  
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### Focusing on student quality

Our conversations with deans and candidates suggest that student quality is the most important area for schools to focus on as they grow their reputation and reach. Based on our own nearly 70 years of experience providing business schools with the tools to identify, and curate the ideal cohort, we suggest this effort be structured around three dimensions:

1. *Cohort integrity*: Business education is highly interactive and participatory. Class discussions, case studies, and industry projects are generally conducted in teams. Fact-based learning in the classroom is blended with experiential learnings in simulated settings (cases) or actual industry projects, with increasing emphasis on the experiential aspects. In such a setting, a student's learning is impacted as much by the capabilities of others in their cohort as it is by their own capabilities. Simply put, the rest of the cohort needs to both keep up and add additional value, otherwise the integrity of the cohort is compromised.
2. *Cohort diversity*: While the cohort must be similar in capability, they must equally be dissimilar in background and experience. The group is unlikely to learn much if everyone approaches the problem with the same perspective but will learn a great deal

from differing approaches of a diverse team. These different approaches to problem-solving come from the different viewpoints and experiences within the cohort: educational backgrounds, cultural approaches to decision making, gender differences, and experiences derived from working in different types of organisations.

3. *Fairness and transparency*: Prospective students gain comfort from a transparent and fair admissions process. A transparent process gives them the understanding of how the cohort will be constructed, allowing them to evaluate the "club" before they join it. A fair process helps to ensure that what is said will be done. *This is vitally important as the prospective student is committing to an experience and brand that will define their future before they have had an opportunity to experience it themselves.*

### The science and art of admissions

Admissions teams work hard at implementing these practices, building the right cohort, ensuring a diverse mix of talent, and doing so in a fair, transparent manner. This is the essence of holistic admissions practices. Such practices are often anchored in objective data such as admissions test scores and are supplemented by a 360-degree evaluation of a candidate through





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interviews, essays, and recommendations. This is the science (test score) and art (holistic evaluation) of admissions. Students appreciate the process when it is grounded in objective criteria such as an admissions test score, because it ensures both cohort quality and a fair, transparent process.

In a recent study, more than half of students agreed with the proposition that an admissions test increases the transparency, fairness, and reliability of the admissions process. This number was even larger amongst international students with 62% of international students saying the use of a test enhances transparency (13% disagreeing), and 58% saying it increases fairness (16% disagreeing).

Testing also plays an important role in ensuring cohort integrity, confirming that all students within the classroom meet similar standards of academic readiness. It is objective in both content and delivery. It is a secure instrument that provides the admissions professional with a standardised data point; admissions professionals can be sure that this data point accurately reflects the capabilities of the candidate, rather than their advisors or consultants. Put together, a well-designed test – that is truly predictive, reliable, secure, and demonstrably free of bias – serves as an anchor point to a fair and transparent admissions process.

## Test plus

The test can serve as an important foundation for admissions, but it should not be the only element. The admissions professional must evaluate not just the cognitive capability of the candidate, but also their drive, resilience, ability to communicate, and team skills. These are the more subjective aspects of the evaluation process, and it is this very subjectivity that can put transparency and fairness at risk. It is hard to maintain a standardised process when you have alumni conducting interviews in different parts of the world, as it is hard to fully eliminate conscious and unconscious bias from any human processes.

At GMAC, we believe that objective and evidence-based data points are the key to creating a truly fair and transparent admissions system. Standardised testing is important to this, but we must go beyond this. Just like the test provides an objective, and normed measure of a candidate's cognitive capabilities, we must move beyond that, and provide schools with tools that help them evaluate their interpersonal skills, objectively measure their ability to not just communicate, but to convince, while eliminating bias and variability in the interview process. In doing so, we will provide increasing amounts of objective data about each candidate to admissions committees so that they can tailor their work to the unique needs of their programme. This will complement their art with the science of objective and standardised measurement.

Through this, we then help business schools create a cohort that is both compatible and diverse, yielding one of the most important assets for the school: an alumni club that Groucho Marx would be proud to join.



### About the Author

Sangeet Chowfla is President and CEO of the Graduate Management Admission Council.

GMAC is an association of leading business schools committed to ensuring no talent goes undiscovered.