



# Master Programmes

# Conquering the GMAT and GRE Tests

The Official INSEAD Guide



Taking the **GMAT** or **GRE** aptitude test can seem like a challenging prospect for business school candidates. But with the right preparation, it doesn't have to be. INSEAD's recruitment and admissions team provides all the guidance you need to ace your chosen exam.

# Table of contents

Introduction	4
Why do you need to sit the GMAT or GRE?	5
How do the GMAT and the GRE differ?	8
Key differences: The Verbal section	10
Key differences: The Quantitative section	12
Some quick questions to guide your choice of test	14
A five-step plan to prepare for and ace your test	16
Additional resources	18
Keeping the tests in perspective	19

# Introduction

In graduate and business programmes around the world, the **Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT)**<sup>1</sup> and the **Graduate Record Examination (GRE)** are widely used as standardised entrance exams. At INSEAD, completing either one of these tests is a requirement for entry into the **Master in Business Administration (MBA)** and **Master in Management (MIM)** degree programmes.

Both tests are designed to gauge applicants' critical thinking and problem-solving skills. They help admissions teams make informed decisions about a candidate's potential for academic success.

For test-takers, getting started can feel overwhelming – especially with so much

information available on what the tests involve and the skills required to prepare. That's why INSEAD's degree programmes recruitment and admissions team took the plunge and sat the GMAT and the GRE themselves to better understand what applicants go through.

## In this e-book, we share our key findings on what we learned, including:

- ✓ Core differences in the test structures
- ✓ The skills you will need to tackle each test
- ✓ Helpful preparation strategies

## We have also put together resources to aid your preparation, including:

- ✓ A five-step study plan
- ✓ Practice tests for both the GMAT and the GRE
- ✓ Additional study resources

We hope these tools and insights can help future applicants decide which test is more suitable for their skill sets, and then ace their chosen exam.

<sup>1</sup> Updated in February 2024 to a new 'Focus' edition. **This article** has more information on the differences between the previous GMAT and the new edition.

# Why do you need to sit the GMAT or GRE?

## The value of standardised aptitude testing

Many graduate schools – business or otherwise – expect applicants to have a certain standard of academic proficiency, regardless of their previous field of study.

This makes sense because postgraduate programmes tend to be intensive and rigorous. If a student cannot keep up, it will potentially be a missed opportunity for everyone.

Undergraduate performance is often a helpful indicator for graduate school admissions teams. However, scores can vary significantly depending on factors such as the student's country of origin, the quality of the awarding institute, and the area of prior study.

As admissions teams evaluate a diverse pool of applicants, it is impossible to account fairly

for all these variables or truly understand how one candidate's academic ability compares to that of someone from a completely different background.

That's where standardised aptitude tests like the GMAT and GRE come in. By focusing on skills such as critical reasoning, logical thinking and basic numerical literacy, they provide a platform for assessment that complements other academic scores.

Since applicants undergo the same test experience regardless of their background, admissions teams can benchmark results fairly. Data from the GMAT and GRE also gives schools a way to apply their understanding of different backgrounds and training more consistently.

## The GMAT and the GRE: Core facts

- Both the GMAT and the GRE are available via test centres and online.
- Each test takes around two-and-a-half hours to complete, including time for two optional breaks.
- You can sit either test more than once until you are happy with the result. However, both tests have some restrictions on the frequency of re-attempts and the total number of attempts allowed.
- Both tests are conducted only in English. While the tests do not constitute a language proficiency check, they do require some level of fluency.
- The good news here is that INSEAD, like most schools, understands the limitations in English of non-native English speakers. When we evaluate applications, allowances are made for the inherent challenges that such candidates face.

# Why do you need to sit the GMAT or GRE?

## Why the tests use 'adaptive testing'

A key feature of both tests is that they are computer-adaptive. This means that difficulty levels change as candidates go through the tests, according to their answers.

Each candidate will receive questions tailored to their ability to answer them – and ultimately, no one is expected to get all the questions

correct. In fact, most people are virtually guaranteed to get about 10% to 20% of the questions wrong. The point is to eventually find a difficulty level where even the brightest students get stuck, helping admissions teams distinguish between 'strong' and 'very strong' applicants.

## There are also differences in each test's adaptability approach which can affect how applicants approach the test:

The **GMAT** adapts after every question, so although you are allowed to go back and review questions after answering them, you can only change a maximum of three answers per section.

By contrast, the **GRE** adapts after each section, so within a single section you are free to skip questions and return to them later.

Your scores on either test are mainly a function of the difficulty level you were able to clear. In short, this is not about how many questions you answered correctly, but how difficult those questions were.

## How the tests are scored

Both the GMAT and the GRE apply the concept of a percentile score. This tells people how their performance compares to that of a general population of test-takers.

### For instance:

- A percentile rank of 84% means that you scored better than 84% of test-takers. In other words, for every 100 people who took the test, only 16 of them did better than you.
- Crucially, this can vary according to the population you are measured against, bearing in mind that your GMAT or GRE score is valid for five years prior to the application deadline. So, a score of 84 on the GMAT Quantitative section may be an 84% today but an 80% some years later, depending on the performances of other test-takers.

The figure displays two sample score reports. The top report is for the GMAT, titled 'Performance By Section', and the bottom report is for the GRE, titled 'General Test Scores'.

Section	Your Score	Your Percentile	Mean
Total Score	595	72nd	546
Quantitative Reasoning	84	85th	78
Verbal Reasoning	79	51st	79
Data Insights	76	58th	74

Test Date	Verbal Reasoning		Quantitative Reasoning		Analytical Writing	
	Scaled Score	Percentile	Scaled Score	Percentile	Score	Percentile
June 9, 2022	164	94	165	84	4.0	54

Figure 1: Sample score reports from the GMAT (above) and the GRE (below).



Preparing for the GMAT can feel overwhelming, especially when managing work and personal commitments. What worked for me was a structured routine – an hour each weekday before work and more dedicated time on weekends.

I focused on one or two trusted resources and complemented traditional pen-and-paper practice with multimedia tools to absorb the material better. I also tracked my progress by topic (logic, math, etc.) and when I had built enough confidence,

I transitioned to full-length practice exams to build stamina. The key challenge isn't just the questions but maintaining focus throughout the lengthy exam, so preparation should include building mental endurance. Good luck!"



Marco Caldarulo  
INSEAD MBA'24D

# How do the GMAT and the GRE differ?

Given that applicants have a choice of which test to sit, one of the most common questions people ask us at INSEAD is: "Which test is easier?"

That is the wrong question! Rather, you should seek to understand which test may be more suitable for your skill sets or provide a better platform for you to demonstrate competency.

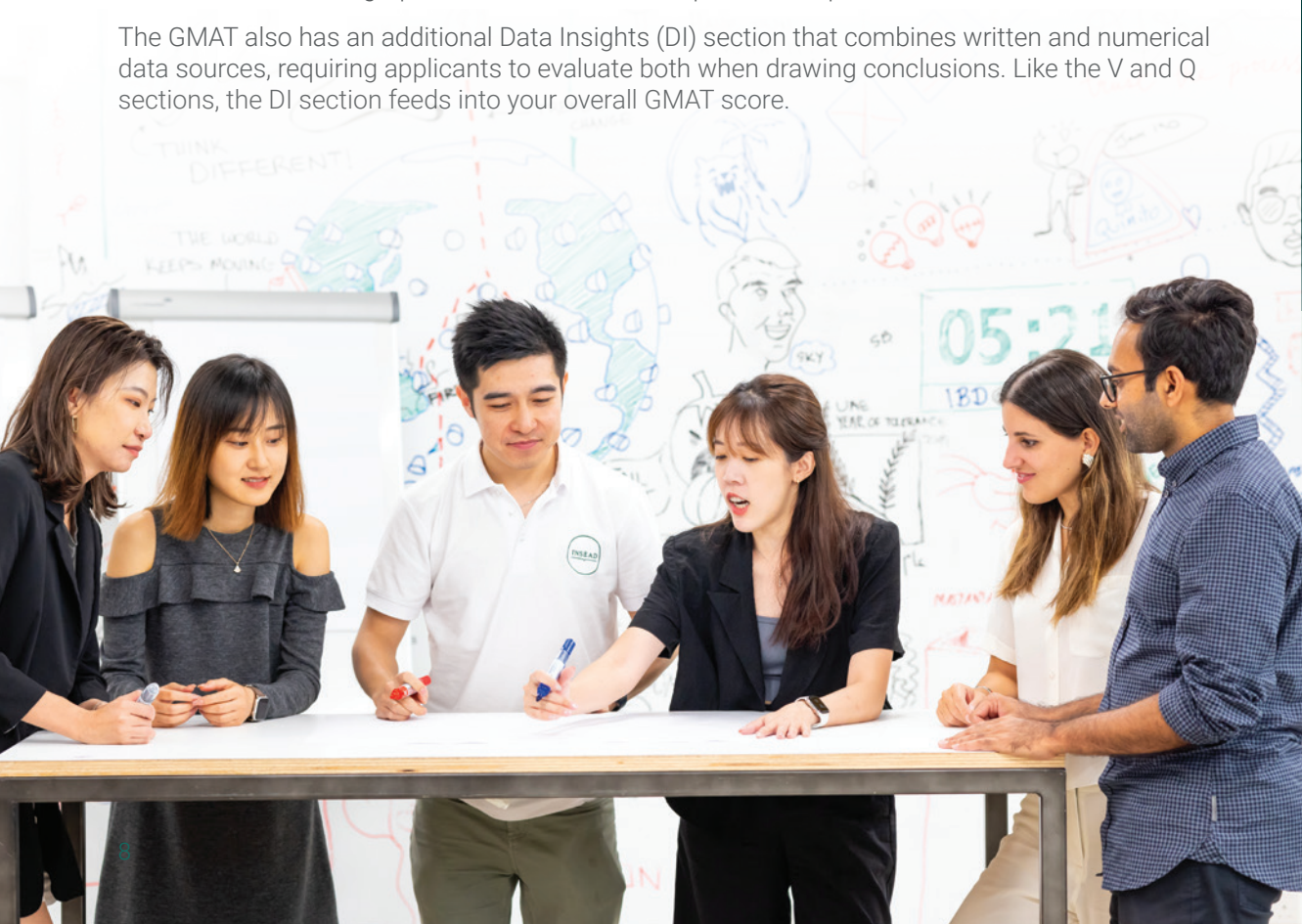
To help you do that, let's look first at the similarities in the way the tests are structured.

## Common components

The GMAT and GRE both have a Verbal and a Quantitative section (known respectively as V and Q). These are the 'bread and butter' components that most schools refer to when assessing your test performance.

- The V section is designed to test applicants' ability to evaluate arguments in English and to draw logical conclusions from information presented in written English. As mentioned above, this is not the same as a language proficiency check but it does assume a certain standard of English fluency.
- The Q section is designed to test applicants' ability to run simple calculations, draw inferences from numerical and graphical data, and solve simple number problems.

The GMAT also has an additional Data Insights (DI) section that combines written and numerical data sources, requiring applicants to evaluate both when drawing conclusions. Like the V and Q sections, the DI section feeds into your overall GMAT score.



## GMAT

## GRE

### Verbal

23 questions, 5 choices each  
45 minutes

2 question types:

- Reading Comprehension
- Critical Reasoning

2 sections of 27 questions in total  
41 minutes in total for both sections

3 question types:

- Reading Comprehension
- Text Completion
- Sentence Equivalence

### Quantitative

21 questions, 5 choices each  
45 minutes

1 question type:

- Problem Solving

2 sections of 27 questions in total  
47 minutes in total for both sections

4 question types:

- Quantitative Comparison
- Multiple Choice Questions (Single/Multi-answer)
- Numeric Entry

### Data Insights

20 questions, 5 choices each  
45 minutes

5 question types

(Not applicable)

## What is a 'good' GMAT and GRE score?

Most top business schools consider both the raw and the percentile scores when they evaluate test-takers' performance. In addition, INSEAD always looks at the mean scores per country to benchmark an applicant against their region.

INSEAD does not have a minimum required GMAT score. Rather than focusing on your overall score, we assess your individual results in the various test sections. We recommend a 60th percentile on the V component (80), and a 66th percentile on the Q (80) and DI (77) components.

At INSEAD, a score above 85% for the V and Q sections of the GRE is highly recommended.

# Key differences: The Verbal section

If we had to sum up the main difference between the two tests' V sections, it would be that the GRE seems more focused on vocabulary. **Figure 2** below shows two question types presented in the GRE: 'Text Completion' and 'Sentence Equivalence'.

2. Vain and prone to violence, Caravaggio could not handle success: the more his (i) \_\_\_\_\_ as an artist increased, the more (ii) \_\_\_\_\_ his life became.

Blank (i)	Blank (ii)
(A) temperance	(D) tumultuous
(B) notoriety	(E) providential
(C) eminence	(F) dispassionate

2. It was her view that the country's problems had been \_\_\_\_\_ by foreign technocrats, so that to ask for such assistance again would be counterproductive.

(A) ameliorated	(B) ascertained	(C) diagnosed
(D) exacerbated	(E) overlooked	(F) worsened

**Figure 2:** Sample GRE Verbal questions from the 'Text Completion' (above) and 'Sentence Equivalence' (below) question types

As you can see, these GRE questions often require knowledge of rather unusual words – after all, when was the last time you used 'providential' or 'ameliorated' in a conversation?

However, the focus here is more on knowing the meaning of many unique words and less on how you might construct a sentence with them. For instance, in the 'Text Completion' example, you need to know which word is synonymous with 'success' for Blank (i), and synonymous with 'prone to violence' for Blank (ii).

In the 'Sentence Equivalence' example, you need to figure out what meaning fits best in the blank and choose two words from the six options which mean the same (D. 'exacerbated' and F. 'worsened').

Even without an extensive vocabulary, it is still possible to do well in such questions if you are good at guessing the meanings for words based on the overall context of a sentence.

## Boosting vocabulary: A vital V section strategy

Reading as widely as possible is a proven method for improving your skills in general – for either test.

Publications such as the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* tend to write in the styles favoured by the GMAT and the GRE test-setters. Exposing yourself to material from similar

sources will naturally improve your ability to understand and analyse sentences.

For the GRE, there are many word lists available online to help improve your vocabulary. Some computer operating systems also have an inbuilt 'word of the day' function that you could take advantage of.

## The GMAT: Understanding written arguments

By contrast, the GMAT focuses more on the ability to understand written arguments, as **Figure 3** indicates.

Question:

Mall Owner: Our mall's occupancy rate is so low that we are barely making a profit. We cannot raise rents because of an unacceptably high risk of losing established tenants. On the other hand, a mall that is fully occupied costs about as much to run as one in which a rental space here and a rental space there stands empty. Clearly, therefore, to increase profits we must sign up new tenants.

Which of the following, if true, most seriously weakens the argument?

- (A) The mall's operating costs could be cut by consolidating currently rented spaces in such a way that an entire wing of the mall could be closed up.
- (B) The mall is located in a geographic area in which costs incurred for air-conditioning in the hot summers exceed those incurred for heating in the mild winters by a wider margin.
- (C) The mall's occupancy rate, though relatively low, has been relatively stable for several years.
- (D) The mall lost tenants as a result of each of the two major rent increases that have occurred there.
- (E) None of the mall's established tenants is likely to need additional floor space there in the foreseeable future.

**Figure 3:** A sample GMAT Verbal question of the 'Critical Reasoning' type

While the GMAT may also require knowledge of some uncommon vocabulary, the intent is to make sense of broader context. When you have an entire body of text to read, it is easier to get by without knowing the actual meanings of a word or two. This makes the GMAT's 'Reading Comprehension' questions more straightforward.

'Critical Reasoning' questions in the GMAT are also different: they move from the realm of "What does this mean?" to "Why does this make sense?" which involves an entirely different set of skills beyond language competency. As with much of the test, the ability to think logically is more important here than just understanding the language.



# Key differences: The Quantitative section

At INSEAD, we believe the main difference between the GMAT and GRE Q sections is that the GRE requires slightly harder maths skills, with a little more focus on precision and computation. By contrast, the GMAT only requires rough calculations.

One indicator of this is that the GRE provides an on-screen calculator for its Q section, while the GMAT does not. Our team members agreed that a calculator during the GRE would have been very helpful (we did not realise the on-screen calculator would be provided), whereas during the GMAT it really was not necessary.

## The GRE: Precision and computation skills

Since the GMAT usually only requires rough calculations, being adept with basic mental arithmetic can help you save time and work on questions faster. This means being comfortable with ballpark calculations: if you see  $503 \times 157$  for instance, approximate it to  $500 \times 160 = 80,000$ . This is usually good enough for most purposes within the GMAT.

On the other hand, the GRE places more emphasis on mathematical knowledge, such as Cartesian coordinates, geometry and manipulating algebraic equations. If most of that was gibberish to you, be prepared to put in a little revision time!

1. One pen costs \$0,25 and one marker costs \$0,35. At those prices, what is the total cost of 18 pens and 100 markers?

\$

**Figure 4:** A sample GRE Quantitative question of the 'Numerical Entry' type

A typical GRE Q question like the one above may test straightforward computation skills. Because the question demands a precise answer instead of providing choices, candidates are forced to calculate the answer.

## These examples illustrate the somewhat different skills tested by the GMAT and GRE.

This is not to say that the GMAT requires no computation at all, or that the GRE does not require any logical thinking. There is some emphasis one way or the other, but both tests are ultimately designed to test a similar range of skills.

Question:  
If a certain wheel turns at a constant rate of  $x$  revolutions per minute, how many revolutions will the wheel make in  $k$  seconds?

(A)  $60kx$  (B)  $kx$  (C)  $x+k$  (D)  $x+(60k)$  (E)  $kx+60$

**Figure 5:** Sample GMAT Quantitative question of the 'Problem Solving' type

On the other hand, the GMAT question shown above in **Figure 5** illustrates that the actual calculation is not important. All you need to know is the relationship between the variables introduced, then perform basic manipulation of mathematical equations. No direct calculation is required.

## Why practice is critical – even for finance/quant professionals

Being exposed to numbers in your work or studies is not always a sure-fire way to become adept at the Q section – whichever test you take.

For example, some finance professionals handle numbers and equations all the time but may still struggle with the Q questions. This may be because their exposure typically involves plugging numbers into equations

or applying well-known formulae (such as IRR, WACC and various ratios) to situations – whereas the Q section demands additional skills.

The key takeaway? Practice really does make perfect. In our team's experience, the Q sections are probably where constant practice will yield the most visible improvements.

## The GMAT Data Insights section

As mentioned, only the GMAT has a Data Insights (DI) section. This combines written and numerical data sources, requiring applicants to evaluate both when drawing conclusions. Given how important the DI component is to your GMAT score, it deserves a closer look.

The DI segment is designed to measure a candidate's ability to analyse and interpret data while applying it to real-world business scenarios. You can expect questions where the data may come from sources such as charts, graphs, tables and text. Your task is to reason your way through these information sources and come to logical conclusions.

Sample questions are difficult to show here as they tend to be quite interactive, requiring you to toggle between different pages, but they do effectively mimic real-world business scenarios

Candidates familiar with the old version of the GMAT (phased out on 1 February 2024) will recognise question formats from the 'Integrated Reasoning' segment, as well as 'Data Sufficiency' questions that came from the old Q segment. Putting all these into a single scored category indicates the important role that logical reasoning and data analysis play in this test.



For the GRE, my advice is focus on truly understanding fundamental concepts and techniques. I made it a point to thoroughly go through the official guidebook, treating it as my primary resource. Additionally, I kept a dedicated error log to track the questions I got wrong and revisited them regularly."

**Biao Lu**  
INSEAD MBA'24D



# Some quick questions to guide your choice of test

**Bearing in mind the similarities and differences between the two tests, how do you decide which one is best for you – and how should you prepare to score well?**

As with any recommendation, we cannot stress enough that each individual is unique and so approaches may vary.

**Ultimately, the best way for you to truly understand which of these two tests is more suited to your personal strengths is to give each a try.**

The good news here is that both GMAC and ETS (the organisations that administer the GMAT and the GRE respectively) offer free sample tests that closely replicate the actual experience. You can try

them to get a very good sense of your preference and where you might perform best.

However, we recognise that this is very time-consuming – especially for working professionals – and you may want a few guidelines and tips to point you in the right direction.

To fulfil that need, we have put together a few sample questions you can try on your own. We've also provided an answer key at the end of this e-book.

## Question 1

Take a look at the list of words below. How many can you define without checking a dictionary?

- Loquacious
- Pernicious
- Abnegation
- Laconic
- Prevarication
- Perspicacity
- Amalgamation
- Moribund
- Castigation
- Saturnine

## Question 2

A straight line on a Cartesian plane intersects the x-axis at (0, 6). For this line to have a positive, non-zero gradient, what are the possible values of its y-intercept? (Select all that apply)

- a) 3
- b) 1.5
- c) 15
- d) -1
- e) -15

## Question 3

"It is raining, so you should take an umbrella!" Which of the following, if true, would invalidate this advice the most?

- a) I do not like having to carry an umbrella.
- b) I am only going out later.
- c) I enjoy being soaked by the rain.

## Question 4

A school has two language courses: Japanese and French. Every student in the school must take at least one course.

There are 20% more students studying only Japanese than there are studying only French. Thirty students study both Japanese and French.

Is there sufficient information above to calculate how many students attend this school?

**You found questions 1 and 2 to be easier:**  
you might want to consider taking the **GRE**.

or

**You found questions 3 and 4 to be easier:**  
you could consider taking the **GMAT**.

Again, we have to emphasise that this is a very rough indicator, and we definitely encourage you to put time aside and take at least one of the full test samples.



# A five-step plan to prepare for and ace your test

Based on your improved understanding of each test, it should now be easier to decide whether to focus on the GMAT or the GRE. But once you've chosen the test that's right for you, what should you do next to prepare?

Take a piece of paper and pen. At the top, write down today's date. Then, at the bottom, write down a date roughly three months away. Underline or circle it. That is your target date for completing your GMAT or GRE.

From today, you are going to complete a series of steps that will allow you to clear your test by that target date.

## • Step 1

- Go to your chosen test's website, create an account and do a full sample test.
- This is vital for two reasons: first, going through a full sample can help you understand if you have the skills being tested. Secondly, the score of your mock test is a very important benchmark to help identify how much preparation you need.

## • Step 2

- Check out the test requirements of your preferred business school. Each school has a different approach to assessing test performance. **For example, INSEAD prefers a balanced score with good percentiles across all test segments.**
- Measure that against your benchmark score from Step 1 to see how much improvement (if any) is needed.
- While INSEAD does not have a minimum GMAT score required for admission, we advise candidates to aim for scores that correspond to a 70th percentile for all three segments.
- If you opt for the GRE, we advise candidates to aim for a score above the 80th percentile for the quantitative and verbal sections.
- Please keep in mind that standardised tests are just one of several admissions criteria. A high score does not guarantee admission, and a below average score does not eliminate a candidate.

## • Step 3

- Plan your preparation strategy according to the score gap. **If you are less than 10 percentile points away from your target**, self-study and practice should be sufficient. Use the free practice questions from the test websites.
- **If you are between 10 to 20 percentile points from your target**, consider buying a prep guide to access a wider range of sample questions and detailed answer guides.
- **If you are more than 20 percentile points from your target**, consider enrolling in a prep class or working with a private tutor so you have a structured, supportive environment to help you prepare intensively. A tutor can provide a customised study structure and push you to improve.



## • Step 4

- Implement a preparation schedule.
- **Nothing beats consistent practice, and you will benefit more from completing three questions a day over a month than from rushing 100 questions in a single day.**
- Set aside 15 minutes a day to attempt practice questions and review your approach. Challenge yourself to keep an unbroken streak – for every seven continuous days of study, reward yourself with something nice!

## • Step 5

- After about two months of your preparation schedule, do another full sample test (remember that both GMAC and ETS provide two free tests each). This is when you will start to see your hard work pay off!
- Keep in mind that the higher your benchmark score, the more difficult it will be to progress, so if you started off with a 655 in the GMAT, do not be discouraged with 'only' a 675 in your second attempt.
- If you are comfortable with this score, book an appointment to do the actual test no later than two weeks from your second sample. If you are still falling short of your target, return to Step 1, draw up a new timeline and start over.
- On your piece of paper, draw an arrow connecting the two dates. Mark notches along this arrow for each step and write down a date beside each notch. Check that this timeline makes sense. When you're done, stick this piece of paper somewhere visible – or better yet, take a photo and share it with your family or friends!
- Commit to this plan and you will see your efforts bear fruit.



I made it a point to take regular mock tests to track my progress and see where I stood. Whenever I couldn't seem to improve in a particular area, I didn't hesitate to ask for help – it made a huge difference. The GMAT official materials were my main resource, I can't recommend them enough. Having a routine was absolutely crucial, especially since I was managing a demanding job at the time. I carved out at least an hour each day to stay connected with the material, no matter how hectic things got. That consistency really helped me stay sharp and build momentum."



**Khushbu Anand**  
INSEAD MBA'24D

# Additional resources

Clearing the GMAT or GRE is a major milestone for any prospective postgraduate student. Preparing for either test takes discipline, commitment and a good support network. We've also rounded up some additional resources you can use to prepare.

## Mobile apps and websites

<b>GMAT</b> Official Practice	<b>GRE</b> Official Practice
<b>Manhattan GMAT</b> Practice app	<b>Manhattan GRE</b> Practice app
<b>Magoosh GMAT</b> Practice	<b>Magoosh GRE</b> Practice app
<b>GMAT Club Forum</b> Practice app	<b>GMAT Club</b> Flashcards

# Keeping the tests in perspective

Some final words of advice: it is always important to keep in mind the bigger picture behind your GMAT or GRE. A good postgraduate education can literally be a life-changer – this is something many INSEAD alumni will attest to. So while your preparation may seem like a thankless slog, remember why you are doing this!

We also want to emphasise that your GMAT or GRE, while important, isn't everything. Most top business schools apply a holistic evaluation model, and INSEAD is no exception. We always advise candidates to remember that these tests are just one part of the application to INSEAD.

As much as we recommend certain scores on both tests to demonstrate your academic ability, there are other elements you should also work on to demonstrate your eligibility and fit with us, or with any other business school out there.

As you work toward conquering the GMAT or GRE, INSEAD is here to help if you require advice or guidance on your application as a whole.

- **Join one of our many events** covering a variety of topics from admission tips to career development, as well as alumni sharing sessions that give different perspectives on what the INSEAD experience truly means.
- Our global recruitment team is always available and ready to chat.

If you would like to discuss your application in more detail, please **get in touch with us**.

## Page 14 - Questions answer key

### Question 1

- Loquacious: talkative
- Pernicious: harmful in a gradual or subtle way
- Abnegation: the act of rejecting something
- Laconic: using or speaking very few words
- Prevarication: lying or avoiding the truth
- Perspicacity: knowledgeable, shrewd
- Amalgamation: a combination or merging of multiple items
- Moribund: dying, close to death
- Castigation: scold or censure harshly
- Saturnine: gloomy

### Question 2

(d) and (e) are the only possible y-intercept values if the gradient of the line has to be positive and non-zero. If a line with a positive gradient crosses the x-axis at a positive value, its y-intercept has to be negative.

### Question 3

(b) is the best answer. To invalidate an argument means that you challenge the premises or assumptions in it. (a) "I do not like to carry an umbrella" does not change the logical connection between rain and the need for an umbrella. (c) "I enjoy being soaked in the rain" is similar. Only (b) attacks the assumption that the speaker is going out into the rain now.

### Question 4

There is insufficient data to calculate the total number of students in the school. Let the number of students who study only Japanese be J, and the number of students who study only French be F. We know that  $J = 1.2F$ , so the total number of students =  $1.2F + F + 30$ , which gives us  $2.2F + 30$ . With no further information, we cannot arrive at a final answer.

## INSEAD Europe Campus

Boulevard de Constance  
77305 Fontainebleau Cedex, France  
T +33 (0)1 60 72 40 00

## INSEAD Asia Campus

1 Ayer Rajah Avenue  
Singapore 138676  
T +65 6799 5388

## INSEAD Middle East Campus

Al Khatem Tower, Al Maryah Island  
ADGM Square  
P.O. Box 48049  
Abu Dhabi - UAE  
T +971 2 651 5200

## INSEAD San Francisco Hub for Business Innovation

224 Townsend Street  
San Francisco, CA 94107, USA  
T +1 888 546 7323



Website: [insead.edu/master-programmes](https://insead.edu/master-programmes)

