



International Admissions Admission Strategies for International MBA Candidates

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During the next 90 to 180 days, you will be formulating, packaging and selling one product: You. Your moment has arrived. You possess the requisite grades, skills and overall work experience. Demand is high but the competition is fierce. As an international MBA applicant, you have to work smarter, employ more-tailored advice and launch that critical pitch when your target audience is most receptive. Admissions committees are on the lookout for top candidates on every continent. Give them a host of reasons to believe that you are a hot commodity and among the very best they will see.

With acceptance rates hovering between just 5% and 10% at top MBA programs, your competitiveness depends on distinguishing yourself among as many as 10,000 applications at a single school. An admissions dossier that does not resonate with the committee quickly runs out of momentum at this level. But as an international applicant, you can steadily, perhaps rapidly close in on an offer of admittance, if you take charge of your strategy in the following ways.

Submit Your Dossier Early

Admissions cycles, owing to greater competition, now start earlier. Have your dossier completed ahead of time to be considered for the slots open to applicants from your country or region.

Several national security regulation changes, particularly in the US, have caused a lengthening of visa application processes, ratcheting up the pressure on the admissions calendars as pertains to international students. It is now more advantageous – in some cases almost necessary - for applicants to aim for First Round deadlines (October, November) than Second Round ones (January, February). Of course, you should submit your application only when it is the best it can possibly be; moving early to secure a place in the next class intake tactically works only if your profile is competitive when you

submit it.

Nail the GMAT, AWA and the new TOEFL Speaking Section

Assuming you have not already sat these exams, give the TOEFL Speaking Section and the GMAT AWA Section the preparation time they deserve. A dismal AWA score can reflect badly on your application, especially if your admissions essays are well-written. The same advice applies to the TOEFL Writing Section.

The new TOEFL Speaking Section provides MBA admissions committees a new tool to evaluate the English communication skills of non-native English speaking applicants. Most schools grant admissions interviews, but keeping in mind the ones that do not, you might be wise to treat this section as an opportunity to provide reassurance about your communication skills – just in case you are not invited for an interview.

Select Schools for Profiles, Personal Preferences and, if possible, Visit

Many international applicants, seduced by the lure of globally-branded schools, employ a risky top-heavy tactic – applying only to schools that have single-digit admittance rates. Regardless of your qualifications, schools want to be convinced that the fit between them and you is strong. The best way to make your case, especially if you are coming from another country or region, is to know why a particular program's curriculum, university location, city, campus culture, multi-year and company-level recruitment patterns, comparative specialization (one school is known for finance while another for marketing etc.), educational leadership ethos, faculty representation and access, as well as alumni support network, might fit with your personality, need for challenge and plan for near-term to long-term career success.

That's a lot of information to research and not all of it will be comprehensively available for every school. However, given the magnitude of the financial and time commitment you are considering, you owe it to yourself to know why the choice you are making is the right one. Knowing makes it a lot easier to convince the selection committees,

especially if you picked up your knowledge firsthand by visiting select schools on your list.

Don't Skip Optional Interviews

Whenever an interview opportunity is offered, always use it; if you can, create it. Every year there are true stories about applicants who, to the benefit of their dossiers, creatively found ways to impress admissions executives during regional tours or campus visits even though they had no formal interview scheduled. If you are a non-native English speaker who is confident about your English communication skills, taking advantage of any interview situation will allow you to allay one of the major concerns admissions committees have about international applicants – their ability to function effectively in an MBA program where the language of instruction is English.

Turn Relative Weaknesses into Strengths

Don't leave unexplained gaps in your profile – address periods of unemployment, disciplinary action or delayed graduation in terms of what the setbacks taught you and how they contribute to your maturity. If you didn't have the chance to participate in extra-curricular activities and community service, shift the focus to how you have created your own opportunities, availed yourself of the ones that existed or even share your thoughts on an issue that you are passionate about and how you would go about becoming involved in it if given the chance to do so.

Leadership is in the eye of the beholder. Paint a picture for the committee of how you manage a task or project no matter how small. Focus on the process you go through as you evaluate your options, select your course of action, record the result and glean lessons from the experience. Not everyone applying to an MBA has held a headline-grabbing professional role. The beauty of the application process itself is that your character-driven story and perspective on it can create a powerful image that reflects accomplishment, potential and charisma, enchanting selection committees whether you led 5,000 people or collaborated only with 2.

Lead Your Presentation with Unique Perspective

Employ a coordinated strategy for organizing and presenting the myriad details comprising your dossier. Have that strategy vetted by or even developed with third party assistance. Admissions consultants, as experts on the application process, are qualified to help you in crafting an approach that has the best chance of success, and as importantly, in eliminating ones that won't.

To help strategically distinguish themselves further, international applicants should probably seek advice and assistance from specialized MBA consultants possessing: 1) sophisticated understanding of and firsthand exposure to diverse cultures on several continents; 2) experience living in circumstances similar to the applicant's own, and so can help such applicant bridge the cultural and communication gap between themselves and the admissions committee; 3) admissions experience at elite schools popular with overseas students; or better yet, all of the above.

While no applicant is perfect, the execution of your admissions strategy should itself be flawless, leaving no room for doubt about whether you have done your best or are in fact, THE best in terms of what you have to offer to an MBA program. Implementing these steps is tantamount to driving down the risk of rejection while broadening your appeal, increasing the chance that the admissions committee at the school of your choice will want to grab you before anyone else in the market does.

Taking the TOEFL

Listening. Reading. Writing...And now Speaking!

In 2005-2006, MBA admissions officers introduced another way to evaluate non-native English speakers planning to attend business school. With the introduction of Internet-Based Testing (iBT), which I have dubbed TOEFL 2.0, the latest version measurably raises the bar of English language excellence for all international students. While paper-

based and computer-based testing are still available, the phased rollout of 2.0 brings with it changes that affect every non-native speaker from Tokyo to Moscow to Sao Paulo and all points in between.

The New Speaking Section will give admissions officers a better gauge of your spoken language skills, allaying a perennial source of their concern when trying to determine interpersonal communication skills of non-native speaking applicants.

Moreover, a high score on the speaking section helps to validate your command of English if you are unable to attend an interview. Even if you have not been invited to interview (in the case of schools which only selectively invite applicants to do so), the score helps to reassure the MBA admissions committee that you are prepared for the shift from your native language to an English-speaking environment.

Seize the Opportunity

US business schools regularly reject applicants who have nearly perfect test scores, if admissions officials are not convinced that such applicants are ready for the demanding classroom and social rigors of campus programs. Prove on the TOEFL test that you have the verbal communication skills to handle an English-language environment, rather than worry about whether your GMAT score could be 20 or 40 points higher.

Challenges

Getting a high score will be harder without devoting serious commitment to developing functional verbal skills. In other words, extended cram sessions aimed at memorizing grammar rules or even entire sections of old prep tests will only be effective to a point.

It will be much harder to use high scores achieved on multiple choice answers to deflect attention away from under-developed speaking skills.

What To Expect on the Test

With the new speaking section, human graders will assess your language use, the complexity and clarity of topic development and the effective delivery of your argument. The section comprises 6 assignments each scored from 0 to 4, and then cumulatively scaled from 0 to 30 depending on how well you handled each of the verbal response criteria.

Strategic Implications of the Writing Section

The section involves 2 assigned tasks; each scored from 0 to 5, and then cumulatively scaled from 0 to 30. All the elements of good writing are evaluated including grammar, diction, vocabulary and style. As an MBA applicant, you need to focus on doing as well on this section as on the speaking one, because a low score here may shake selection committees' confidence that you are able to adequately express yourself in essays and class presentations.

Moreover, admissions committees may draw negative conclusions about your application essays if your writing score is not reasonably consistent with said essays. To be fair, testing conditions are not conducive to the same quality of writing one achieves when they have the time to edit and re-edit over the course of days and weeks. However, be warned that in the case of a low writing score and exceptionally strong application essays, non-native speakers may be subject to suspicion about their applications – whether deserved or not – that could adversely impact the chances for acceptance. Save yourself some grief by giving your preparation in this area the attention it deserves without delay.

Listening, Reading and Structure Section Changes

The good news:

TOEFL 2.0 eliminates the Structure section.

The bad news:

Structure is integrated into all the remaining sections, making Speaking, Reading,

Writing and Listening a bit more challenging. The listening section becomes a little longer, with augmentations that test understanding of tone and attitude. Reading comprehension will require you to undertake new exercises in categorizing and organizing information.

The very bad news for some test-takers:

With the Structure section gone, it becomes much harder to rack up easy points based on straightforward grammar drill formats.

Selected Tips for TOEFL 2.0 that Relate to Your MBA Application

The Admissions Essays and the Writing Section:

In both cases, to write effectively, you must... Answer the question posed by the topic. Vary your use of vocabulary and sentence length. Make sure your overall thesis is clear, as ought to be the main point of each paragraph. Develop a convincing case for your position by exploring both sides of the argument. Support your prevailing argument with evidence and examples. Of course, the major differences - some would say drawbacks - with TOEFL are: TOEFL is timed, limiting the degree of polish and sophistication that can be integrated. TOEFL doesn't permit much latitude for the degree of creativity needed to make application essays compelling. Don't worry, though. No one is expecting a timed essay written in less than an hour to necessarily reflect brilliance. It should, however, amply showcase competence.

The Admissions Interview and the Speaking Section:

Err on the side of caution; practice, practice and practice in English. Read up on diverse topics from sources such as the Financial Times and the Economist. Listen to media outlets such as CNN and BBC every chance you get, paying particular attention to interview and debate programming formats. Join in activities where only English is spoken – you may not understand everything you hear or read, but the benefits of immersion take time to assimilate. There are no shortcuts to learning real command of

the language. The more incremental preparation you do on a regular basis, the less likely it is that your score will suffer on the test day.

The same reasoning applies to interview preparation. Although you may be better served by practicing MBA-related questions and answers, there really is no way to know with certainty what an interviewer will ask. Worse, if you provide a stock answer that he has heard before, you will have wasted an opportunity to make a strong impression – or quite possibly weaken yours. Practice helps reduce reliance of memorized answers, and thus limits the risk of being asked questions that you cannot creatively formulate responses for.

TOEFL Summary

TOEFL 2.0's Internet-based platform presents an opportunity for non-native English speakers to demonstrate a greater range of language command. Format and content changes will force a moderation of rote memorization techniques that previously proved effective for many non-native speakers. Whatever new test-beating strategies are developed, one thing is clear: the link between TOEFL and its role in vetting international applicants for MBA programs has probably strengthened, placing a higher premium on not just knowing the rules of English, but also on being able to wield it as a strategic tool for communication in business school and beyond.