

MACQUARIE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

MINDING THE GENDER GAP IN MBA STUDY

Why men continue to outnumber women
completing MBA programs and how to
overcome the problem

Minding the gender gap in MBA study

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Foreword by Alex Frino, MGSM

Despite the numbers of women in the workforce continuing to grow, as well as growing numbers of women in management roles, the number of women enrolled in MBA programs is failing to keep pace with male enrolments.

In 2014, MBA degree enrolments are 30 – 35 per cent female, despite increases in the number of women who have completed postgraduate studies. Specifically in Australia, there were 20,000 students enrolled in MBA programs, of which 35 percent, or 7,000, were women and the other 13,000 were men. That means 6,000 women were ‘missing in action’ – we want to find where those women are and why they are not enrolling in MBAs.

This is not an Australian problem – but a global issue. There is not one school in any global rankings of top 100 business schools consistently reporting gender balance in their MBA programs.

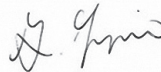
At MGSM, we are committed to making a difference.

This research underpins our Women in MBA initiative – it tells us about the issues women face in enrolling and studying for an MBA, as well as their experiences post-MBA.

We have asked women what works and what doesn't. We want to know what needs to change. Nothing has been taken off the table – including how the program is delivered, its structure, and the type and amount of support available. The outcome is a suite of initiatives to provide women with the financial support, as well as the flexibility they need.

For us to address this issue, both in Australia and overseas, business schools need to become smarter about how to create a better learning environment that attracts women to MBA study.

We believe that by addressing the inequality at enrolment level we could have a real impact on the numbers of women working in senior management, executive ranks and on the boards of our leading companies.



Alex Frino
Dean, MGSM

Executive Summary

The MBA is a powerful tool – driving middle-managers towards executive and senior leadership roles. In Australia, few degrees cost as much or arguably demand as much of its students in terms of face time, group time and study time. It is the only postgraduate business degree requiring their students to have pre-experience in business and management meaning the cohort is generally older with many students balancing families, work and study time.

This research examined the perceived barriers women face in pursuing MBA study and why these perceived barriers may be less salient for men. It also examines some potential ways to overcome these barriers. It involved thirty-eight, one-hour in-depth interviews with men and women who are either (a) considering doing an MBA, (b) in the middle of doing an MBA, or (c) MBA graduates. The interviews were transcribed, and a qualitative analysis of the resulting data was performed by the lead researchers Professor Charles Areni and Michelle Wood.

By interviewing women who have completed, contemplated or have taken a lengthy break (stopped or dropped out) from MBA study, as well as their male counterparts, this research has identified deterrents, barriers, challenges, motivators and aids to MBA study.

While respondents cited time and money as their two primary deterrents to MBA study, with flexibility the most commonly offered solution, on analysis it is evident there are other issues at play which limit the numbers of women enrolling in and graduating from the MBA.

This research has identified several potential causes of the MBA gender gap:

- Work-life conflict issues are greater for women
- Lack of female mentors or role models in business
- Persistence of a gender gap in salary for male and female MBA graduates (the 'glass ceiling') which has led to women not as strongly associating an MBA with career success.

It has also identified key ways to overcome the gap:

- Better linking MBA study with employers and establishing strong post-MBA career pathways
- Pairing female students with mentors throughout MBA study.

It has also touched on emerging themes about women and their role as the primary breadwinner. The female breadwinner herself is also challenged by her own perceptions of her roles at work and in the family. In large part breadwinners because their husband cannot get work or does not have the earning potential

they do, these women do not 'hand over' the running of the household either. They feel guilty about the quality of time they spend with their children and notions about their traditional role in the house. They also feel resentment and anger at their husbands for not taking on more of the housework or household tasks but ultimately see it as their 'job to do'. Often, they feel shame that they are not being provided for by their husbands and are not the parent their child might go to for comfort. These are reflective of internalised and apparently deeply-held characterisations of traditional gender roles both at work and at home.

This research has found that women are deterred by the challenges and barriers to MBA study largely because they are concerned about balancing household, family and domestic duties. Women see the time and money invested in themselves and an MBA education as a 'sacrifice' of time with their families and loved ones. Women also seemed to associate study time as 'me time' whereas men associated it so closely with career advancement that they saw it as necessary 'work time'.

While public policy (paid parental leave, subsidised childcare) has had an enormous impact in driving increases in a mother's participation in the work force, this research shows evidence of the widespread conflict faced by many women wanting to study, be with their children, as well as the need to support their household income – and the perception that these three demands are "competing." To that end, women find managing this conflict so difficult to contemplate (far more difficult than the study itself) they opt out altogether.

What is also clear from this research is that gender and, more specifically, being a female and a mother, generally has a detrimental impact on a woman's career. With female full-time salaries at just at 82.9 per cent of their male colleagues (Australian Bureau of Statistics, February 2014) women are far less likely than their male counterparts to financially recoup their MBA investment. Although women tend not to openly admit the influence of gender on their working lives, the glass ceiling does reinforce a perception amongst women that there are very few senior leadership roles for them post-MBA.

The main ways to provide women with a return on their investment post-MBA is by linking their MBA study with a leadership or career development pathway in the workplace. Further, that the workplace provides support through providing flexible hours and peer support for time off and study. It needs to be a top-down and culturally supported organisational-wide initiative.

Background

The MBA is the only business postgraduate degree with a pre-experience requirement with most schools requiring their MBA students have at least 5 years' management experience before commencing the MBA. This makes the MBA cohort older than the average postgraduate student at 33 years old.

Despite the numbers of women in the workforce continuing to grow, as well as increases in the number of women in management roles, the number of women enrolled in MBA programs remains at around 30 – 35 per cent. In fact, the numbers of women completing MBA's has remained fairly constant over the last 20 years, despite increases in the number of women who have completed postgraduate studies. According to the 2012 Australian National Census, 46 per cent of women hold postgraduate degrees in 2011, up from 39 per cent in 2001. Significantly, in Australian universities women outnumber men completing study in every age group (Figure 1).

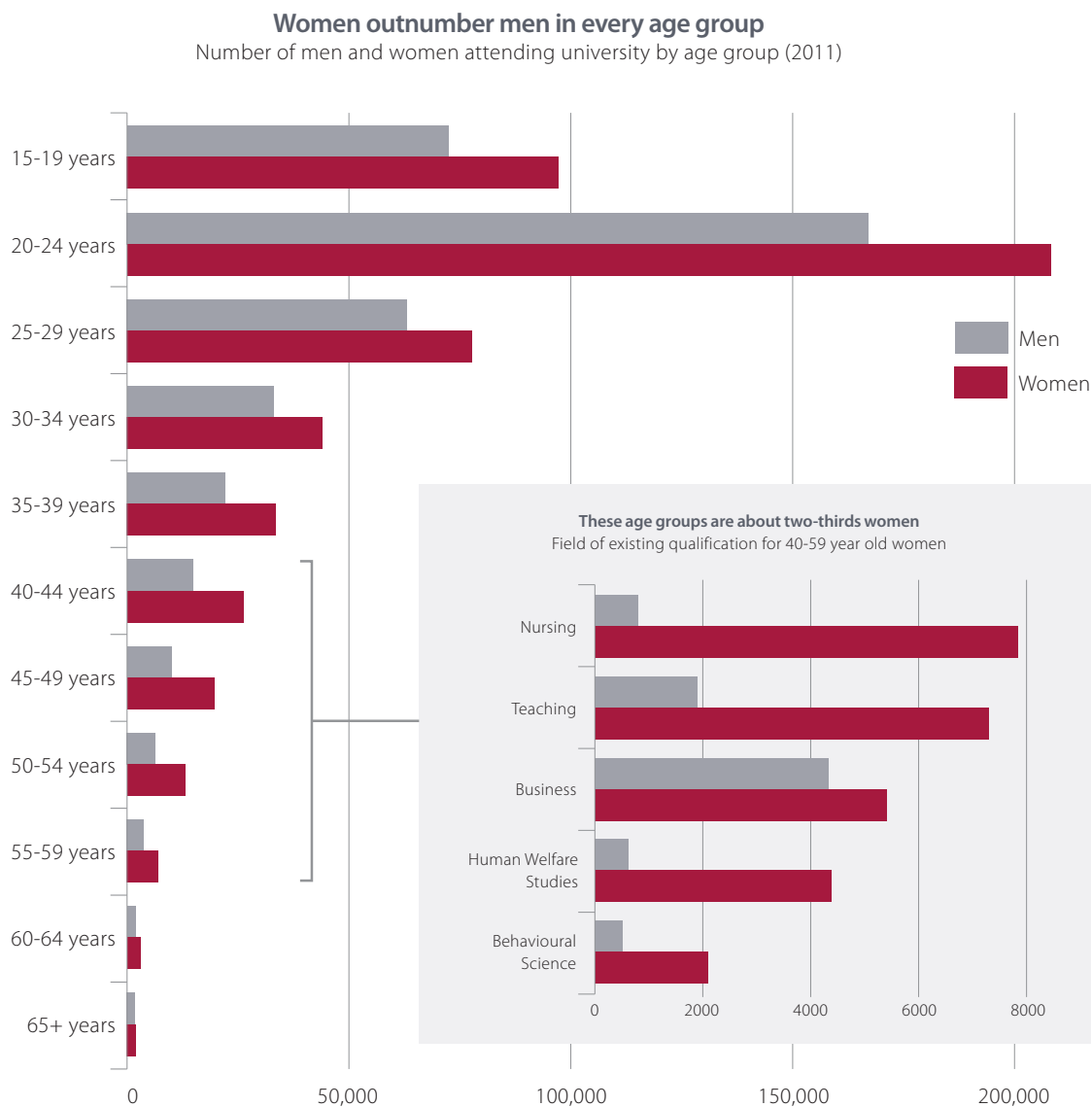


FIGURE 1

Interestingly in Australia, women with an existing qualification in business were among the most likely to return to university – 58.7 per cent of women returning to study had a business qualification (Figure 2).

However, these women returning to university to undertake postgraduate studies are not choosing MBA programs.

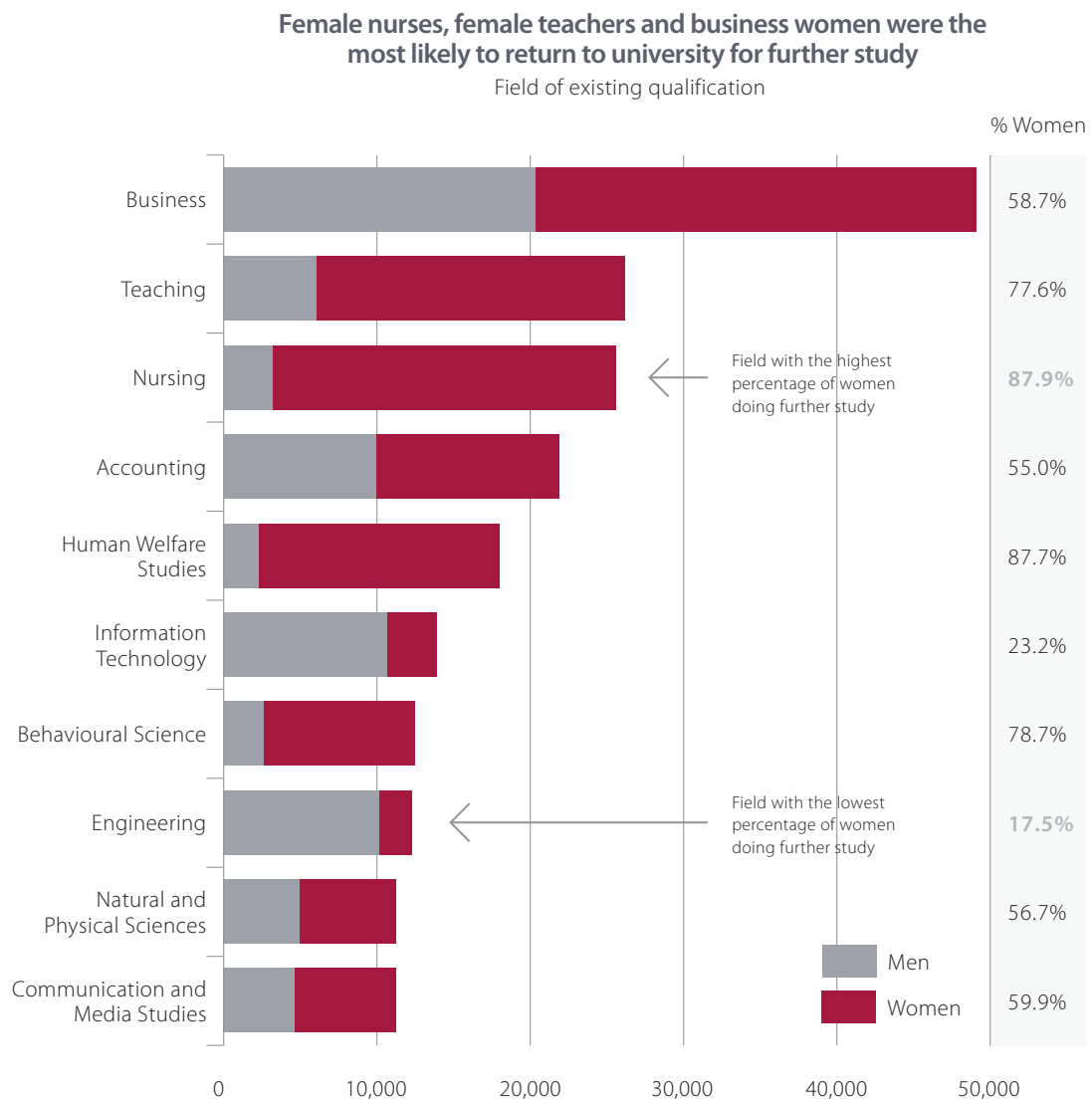


FIGURE 2

Source: Australian Financial Review, How Australians Study, 1 November 2012

Key findings

- **The persistence of a gender gap in salary for male and female MBA graduates has led to women not as strongly associating the MBA with career success.** Due to a lack of female role models in the top ranks, women find it hard to believe that an MBA will help them overcome the effects of the 'glass ceiling' to advance to leadership roles within an organisation.
- **Numerate subjects are a disincentive to potential female MBA candidates who suffer from "stereotype anxiety" about their own ability.** Women are concerned about their ability to succeed in numerate subjects such as finance, accounting and statistics, and the time it would take for them to pass these subjects. Male MBAs have no such concerns about their ability. Women also question the relevance of numerate subjects more than men.
- **Group work and intensive classes are a challenge for mothers and a deterrent to MBA study.** Flexible modes of delivery that offer a range of study options and put less of an emphasis on group work, which is very time-consuming and depends on the needs of others in the group, would benefit women with children. It would also benefit fathers. Expanding the offering of online courses would also encourage many women to commence MBA study, as well as assist many in completing it.
- **Work-life conflict issues are greater for women who are often the primary caregiver and take on a disproportionate share of household duties, even if they are the breadwinner.** Questions of how to manage these work/life conflicts are perceived to be far more difficult than the study itself with many concluding the balance is too hard to negotiate and are opting out of MBA study altogether.
- **There is a lack of female mentors or role models in business.** This not only prevents women from benefitting from the mentoring experience but also highlights the existence of a glass ceiling for women in business.
- **The employer has the biggest single role to play in helping women overcome their concerns and supporting them through an MBA.** Female respondents overwhelmingly stated that their time and cost concerns about the MBA would be overcome if their employer told them they had potential to reach senior leadership roles within that organisation. Further, if their employer worked with the employee to map out a post-MBA leadership pathway.
- **Mentors can play a powerful role in supporting women through MBA study and assisting their post-MBA career progression.** Mentoring was identified as a powerful factor for both men and women as they move into leadership roles. It was also found to play a significant role in assisting women to complete MBA study.

Research Methodology

The methodology for this research centred on 3 x two hour focus groups (24 participants in total) and 38 face-to-face interviews (approximately 1 hour in length).

Focus groups were conducted with a combination of women who had an MBA, together with women considered 'missing in action'. Missing in action women are those who are high-achieving, high-potential women but absent from MBA programs.

Discussion at the focus groups were used to refine the questions and sample group for the face-to-face interviews. Interviews were conducted with:



Women who completed an MBA (to be called **Graduate/s** for the purposes of discussion)



Women who actively considered an MBA actively but for some reason did not do an MBA (to be called **Evaluator/s or Evaluating** for the purposes of discussion)



Women who started the MBA at the MGSM but did not complete the degree (to be called **Sidetracked** for the purposes of discussion)



Fathers who were a mix of the top four categories (**Men – mix of above**)

All 38 face-to-face interviews were conducted over two months (July and August 2014) using a semi-structured interview guide and approach. The average length of each interview was 50 – 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed producing almost 800 pages (794) pages of verbatim dialogue averaging 20 pages and 8500 – 9000 words per transcript.

The interviewees represented a diverse spread of mothers and women without children (when they completed/contemplated) MBA study. However, all men interviewed were fathers, so as to draw out comparisons in how the two genders perceived and dealt with work/life balance issues. The goal was to draw out notions of roles and responsibilities in the house and at work and to ascertain whether role conflict was, in this sample, as prevalent for fathers as mothers. The majority of respondents were aged between 30 – 45 years of age. Most were based in Sydney and had completed their MBA at a Sydney business school and/or tertiary institution.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted by five members of a research team who investigated:

- What motivates women and men to consider/undertake MBA study?
- What deterrents exist for MBA study?
- What factors contribute to women no longer pursuing/undertaking MBA study?
- Are there challenges, specific to MBA study, in terms of how the course is delivered and its content? Are these challenges more acute for women compared to men?
- What factors/support mechanisms make it easier for women to continue with/complete MBA study?
- What role does a workplace play in motivating/supporting women in commencing or continuing with MBA study?
- Can any comparisons be drawn to their male counterparts in terms of motivations, supporting factors or deterrents to MBA study?
- What are the main benefits of MBA study for women? How does this compare to the perceived benefits for men?
- Are there any perceptions about gender and MBA study including of a "masculine culture" within the classroom environment that acts as a deterrent for women?

Research Outcomes

The research revealed three overarching themes which point to reasons for the gender gap in the MBA program as well as some ways to address the gap.

These overarching themes are:

1. Design and delivery barriers

Features of the MBA relating to course content or delivery methods which either deter female enrollees or act as barriers for women. They may also present such a challenge (for women more so than men) that they can no longer continue studying.

2. Return on Investment deterrents and challenges

Issues relating to the reputation of the MBA program and its outcomes which are specific to women and which either do not adequately address concerns or provide enough of an incentive to undertake or complete MBA study.

3. Motivators and aids

Factors which incentivise women to undertake or complete MBA study which assist them in overcoming their concerns and which also provide support which encourage them to commence or complete MBA study when they may not otherwise be able to.

Design and delivery barriers

Women are asking for greater flexibility in terms of how the MBA is delivered and also the course content. They want less of an emphasis on group work and intensive classes, more online options and a reduced focus on numerate subjects.

COURSE CONTENT

Women have a negative perception of the MBA's core subjects which relate to accounting, finance, statistics and other mathematic or quantitative study. The research has found that numerate subjects are a deterrent for women because they become subject to "stereotype anxiety" which affects their perception about their numerate abilities. Further, they cannot see the relevance of the subjects while they are contemplating MBA study and they are concerned about the additional time it would take for them to learn and pass these subjects, when compared to undertaking a degree with less numerate subjects.

Concern about maths subjects were greatest amongst the *Evaluators* group – those who thought about studying an MBA but decided not to pursue MBA study – but were also mentioned by the *Side-tracked* group. Despite there being only 4 compulsory numerate subjects as part of most Australian MBA programs, there is a perception that these dominate the MBA.

EXISTING RESEARCH

Earlier research (Spencer, Steele & Quinn 1998) discussed the impact of "stereotype" in a women's perception on her own math's ability and found that when women are told that a certain math test should be harder for women than men, women performed substantially worse than equally qualified men did. The preconception of a lack of maths ability becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for women – but not for men.

While a significant challenge, it may also largely be a perception barrier addressed through tailored marketing of the MBA course. There were notable differences in the views of these numerate subjects from the *Graduate* group who did feel that these subjects were necessary for business and management.

There seemed to be very little acknowledgement amongst any respondent group of the importance of building relationships, managing people or so-called 'soft skills' in business.

"When you're running businesses...that's the bottom line, you've got to know your finances..."

Female, no children, *Side-tracked*

"I was definitely scared of maths and the finance papers because it's not an area I am naturally drawn to so it's not an area I've worked hard on in the past."

Female, no children, *Side-tracked*

"It is (among) my top three reasons why I wouldn't (complete an MBA)."

Female, mother, *Evaluating*

DELIVERY MODES OF MBA STUDY

The high group work component was a feature of the MBA delivery method that also deterred women, particularly mothers, from starting or completing MBA study. It was also cited as a significant challenge to women who graduated from MBA study.

In most MBA programs, group work comprises a large percentage of assessable tasks. However, this research has found that the experience of those students – particularly women – who had completed or were completing MBA's was that it took up too much time and did not always produce the best return on time invested, when compared to face-to-face or individual learning.

Most women, particularly those with children highlighted group work and intensive classes as a significant challenge, requiring negotiation with their families and spouse and acting as a barrier for them to seek time out for networking or more social (MBA related) activities.

EXISTING RESEARCH

Vinnicomb and Singh (2010) propose that the gender gap may be "more to do with the design and delivery of the education" (pg 296), rather than the access to it, arguing that MBA programmes are traditionally designed around the male model of learning and women may see the structure of the full-time MBA programmes as being insensitive to their needs and circumstances, which are so often different to their male peers.

While noting the significance of group work as a networking tool, and cautious to downplay its significance, the Evaluators group had a view of group work as the antitheses of flexible learning. Group work was viewed as simply too constraining and limiting. Further, for those contemplating MBA study, the prospect of working to group timetables, not being able to control individual study time and having to find additional time (above class and study time) for group work was simply a bridge-too-far.

There did, however, seem to be greater support for the benefits of group work and intensives among male respondents generally who, although acknowledging the impact on their families, saw the benefits (networking, isolated study time) as priorities.

While there is strong opposition to online learning becoming a large component of any MBA program, with many pointing to networks as the primary return on their MBA investment, there is obvious support for it as an option amongst women and particularly for mothers and fathers.

In a similar vein, networking was something that women, especially those with families, just found too time consuming to realistically contemplate benefitting from. Again respondents refer to activities happening too frequently at night and being at the mercy of others' time.

EXISTING RESEARCH

The gender imbalance in family roles reinforces gender inequalities in career development (Rhode and Kellerman, 2006, pg 13).

WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE IMPACT OF GROUP WORK

I constantly needed to do work so I didn't let my team down.

What about your home life?

It was just a mess.

Female, mother, Graduate

"I guess my biggest concern, again, is that flexibility, being able to...rely on myself, when I can do work and getting the work done rather than relying on other people and their timeframes..."

Female, Mother, Evaluator

"I know my wife found it to be a challenge... but, you know, the flipside of it, the benefit was...that I'd removed myself from my day-to-day life, I was only here to focus on my MBA and, you know, that included work as well... so the benefit was taking time out of your daily life,"

Male, Father, Graduate

WHEN ASKED ABOUT ONLINE LEARNING

"It would be amazing...meaning that I don't have to allocate as much time during the week, I can focus on study but still be home with the kids rather than being out..."

Female, mother, Side-tracked

"Online learning would help...with work and on the days I do have to do pick-ups, get the kids fed, to bed and organise my personal life, I don't necessarily have the time to come here from six to 10 one to two nights a week and then study on top of that. What would be a potential solution is... being able to control your study time at your time. Even if that happens to be at 8 o'clock at night till 12 o'clock at night where you log on and do a two-hour lecture..."

Female, mother, Side-tracked

WHEN ASKED ABOUT NETWORKING

"It's very time-consuming, that's probably the networking issue, it's very time-consuming and it takes time away from family, so most of the networking events are in the evening and I don't want to be away from my children in the evening."

Female, mother, Evaluator.

It was a completely different experience from being an undergraduate fulltime student when you're 20 and you can just spend all day doing whatever you want to do, right. It's completely different being 40-something and having to rush home to your child."

Female, mother, Evaluator

"I think networking is important in the (MBA) environment. It's also more difficult for women if they have other commitments outside to network at night. Most of the networking opportunities are in the evening."

Male, father, Graduate

WHEN ASKED ABOUT GENDER AND THE MBA

"My concern from the discussions I've had is... intensive days and the way it is structured. That, to me, seems to replicate the way business operates already, that's already highly gendered and has been designed and structured to be easy for men, to suit their routines and not women, particularly those with children or caring roles,"

Female, mother, Evaluator

"When a lot of productivity is measured on face time and your worth in the organisation, wrongly so I believe, is measured by the fact that you're sitting there and present and somebody can see that you're sitting at your desk, even if you're sitting writing emails to your friend or painting your nails, or whatever. It's just a sad set of affairs and that's the way that our work is organised and that's the way our productivity is still measured and I know I can't be in the office those long hours,"

Female, mother, Evaluator.

We propose that the gender gap could be reduced by **offering greater options and more flexible modes of delivery**, as well as the ability to shift between study modes more easily.

The research has found a strong preference amongst women for individual learning and study modes which give them maximum flexibility and control over their own time. There is a dominant view that group work takes up too much time and takes away the flexibility that they deem as absolutely essential to being able to complete the MBA. While the data does show that, to some degree, this is an issue for fathers as well, mothers, by virtue of the fact women are generally the primary caregiver and take on the larger share of domestic duties, feel the burden and conflicts more acutely.

Many men also see benefits in intensive study because it involves networking and enables them to 'take time out' to focus on their study.

Acknowledging that they are conflicted between their children, families, managing the household, the female respondents are deterred by the practical and logistical challenges that group work, intensive study and block classes represents to them. They also don't believe that they will have the time or opportunity to experience the networking or social aspects of an MBA, which they acknowledge as one of the main outcomes and benefits to the degree. Women are also deterred by having to negotiate with their partner. Ultimately it seems that many decide it is 'all too hard.'

While recognising its limitations though, many women see online learning as a potential solution to many of these challenges and as a helpful and innovative way to complete MBA study without forgoing time with their families at home.

There was no support in our research for the view that a MBA is too competitive or masculine but there were strong perceptions of the MBA as a male-oriented degree.

Return on Investment (ROI) deterrents

Women weigh the decision to commence an MBA in terms of the opportunity cost of the time away from family to complete the degree, the financial cost and their perceptions about its impact on their career. Concerns about managing their home and work life, in the face of a degree that they perceive to be more difficult and demanding than other postgraduate programs, are dominant. The 'value proposition' of an MBA is further called into question by the impact of the glass ceiling and a lack of female role models at the top.

Time and work/life conflicts

Women feel and experience work/life conflict issues more acutely than men. This research revealed that women are concerned that they cannot manage and balance the competing demands of study, work and family life. It found that many will choose to forego their MBA education to better cope with work/life conflicts.

Women express more concern (than men) about the commitment and sacrifices that they might need to make to complete MBA study with women perceiving that the MBA will severely limit the time they have for the people who are important to them. This view was prevalent among the *Evaluator* and *Side-tracked* respondents:

"As much I would have loved to have finished it (the MBA) not at that cost. Not at either the cost of either the money or the time or the sacrifices that my daughter had to make as well."

Female, Mother, *Side-tracked*

"Between juggling the family and my career, unfortunately I didn't have time to study"

Female, mother, *Side-tracked*

"Before children it was a more a decision about what I wanted to do ...how it would benefit my career progression. After children, the decision is more about what the impact would be on our family."

Female, mother, *Evaluator*

"It is a significant time commitment and this time commitment would impact on other people within our household and how the household runs on a day-to-day basis."

Female, mother, *Evaluator*

Given that women are still, most often, the primary caregiver, many women with families feel it is a significant (if not insurmountable) barrier for them to have children and complete MBA study. When asked about the impact having children has on their decision to complete an MBA, women were clear that it most-often removed it as an option.

The female respondents also seemed to have a strongly held view that women who completed MBA's were very "driven" or "ambitious" but that it was unrealistic for these women to also be successful on the home front. They do not believe it is possible for women to 'have it all' and some were opting out of study as a result of their feeling that a woman cannot be successful at study, work and family life.

Ultimately, the respondents are driven by an underlying view that it is their responsibility to manage the house and care for the children and this is non-negotiable – either because they feel it is their job or because their husband just won't do it. They are, on the whole, challenged by their own perceptions of their roles in the family but cannot (or will not) 'hand over' the running of the household – even if they are the primary income earner.

"I think you just need to accept the fact that you can't do everything...it's about making trade-offs."

Female, Mother, *Evaluator*

It is well established in the research that women take on a greater share of the household duties than men – even if they are the primary breadwinner. The female breadwinner increasingly finds themselves in a role-reversal scenario without there being a genuine role-reversal in terms of who-does-what on the home front.

"I think many of the tasks fall on myself, whether that's through negotiation or just a fact of life."

Female, mother, Evaluator

EXISTING RESEARCH

Existing research found that "while many men's success is primarily geared to achievement in the workplace, a woman's success is defined in terms of meeting a relentless stream of demands (often conflicting) from everyone at work and at home." (Vinnicomb & Singh, 2010, pg 303).

One possible reason for women feeling the additional burden of managing the work/life balance more acutely than men could be due to an emerging theme in this research that **women negotiate for their time whereas men assume they have it.**

"It is always a negotiation with us...if he wants to go out obviously then I stay home with the bub, if I want to go out then he stays home."

Female, mother, Graduate

"I mean, if men have got a reasonably stable personal life, stable partner, even if they have young children, they will not have to assume as high a level of care and responsibilities. That's generally speaking. So they can just say, "Oh, right. It's time for me to do my next degree," and they'll just get on with it. I mean, they never seem to say, "Oh well, how will I study if I've got these small children running around?" They just think, "Oh, somebody else will cover mostly."

Female, mother, Evaluator

Male respondents reflected a very different perspective of the way decisions were made in the household:

"I spoke to a number of people who basically had a meticulous sort of timetable drawn up but I couldn't understand how I would ever use that principle in my own home...it was understood and respected both ways."

Male, Father, Graduate,

"My wife was very understanding and flexible, you know, I would study on the weekends."

Male, Father, Graduate

"She was never really demanding about it. She was very supportive of the whole MBA. I don't even really recall having any discussions about it. It was really more just me personally thinking it's something I wanted to do."

Male, Father, Graduate

Male respondents also had different views on the MBA's impact on the work/life conflict and the impact on the household.

"I had a few friends who were studying...they had kids, they could handle it, you know, they could juggle the family life, you know, they said what are you waiting for, come and join us. They said we've got families, we can juggle it, you've got no excuse."

Male, Father, Graduate (when discussing what motivated his decision to enrol in an MBA)

EXISTING RESEARCH

Four out of ten women felt their husband created more domestic work than they contributed (Hewlett 2002 pg 143). There is also evidence (McNeil 2004) of men, struggling with the perceived emasculating situation that their wife earns more than them, disproportionately holds-on to traditional gender roles at home by doing even less domestic work.

One male respondent from the *Graduate* group captured the change in the consideration of work/life balance that occurred from not having children to having children:

So I guess we both know what's involved... It'd be a different sort of discussion. It'd be a different thing to consider depending on whether we're starting from scratch with no knowledge about what the MBA required versus our knowledge now, having gone through it.

Either way, yeah, I think it would be much more difficult now. It would be much more. Because it is really tiring and a real handful looking after our two kids.

Just having them for a couple of hours on your own can be a real - it really saps the energy out of you. There can be lots of whinging and complaining. They're very demanding.

I think she would be supportive because she's always - well, she wanted to do an MBA herself. When I started talking about doing it she was very encouraging of wanting me to do it. I think she would still let me do it but there'd be a lot more discussion around how I was going to approach it, how I was going to handle the whole managing of time and helping, with the helping of the family being front and centre as opposed to like a secondary issue."

Male, Father, Graduate

Questions of how to manage work/life conflicts are perceived to be actually more difficult than the study itself. It seems that the respondents, particularly in the *Evaluator* or *Side-tracked* group have concluded that the balance is too hard to negotiate and are opting out all-together.

Most men do not seem to feel work/life conflicts, and if they do, they certainly do not feel them as strongly. They do not need to negotiate time to study to the same degree as a women, they do not need to put in place contingencies to manage the children or the house to allow the time to study, participate in group work or enjoy the networking aspects of an MBA course, they simply assume it.

The challenge for business schools is to present these women with a requisite return on their investment that emphasises what they will get out of the degree and offsets the difficulty not of the study itself but of managing their work/life conflicts.

EXISTING RESEARCH

Marks and Edington (2006) found that women express more concern (than men) about the commitment and sacrifices that they might need to make to complete MBA study with women perceiving that the MBA will severely limit the time they have for the people who are important to them.

'Intrinsic' versus 'Extrinsic' outcomes of MBA study

Women highlighted factors such as enhanced credibility and confidence, the feeling of greater acceptability and personal status with the organisation, as key reasons for undertaking MBA study. However, the tone of the responses suggests that women undertake or consider MBA study to overcome perceived deficits in their personal or professional capacities. Even confident, successful women tended to frame the idea of doing an MBA in terms of overcoming deficits.

"From a personal level, it has been absolutely beneficial because I have now realised I can have conversations at levels that I just don't think I would have felt comfortable with before. For me, that's huge from a confidence point of view,"

Female, no children, Graduate

"I wanted to round out some skills and expertise...I didn't feel I did very well at telling a story...I wanted to be able to tell a story,"

Female, no children, Side-tracked.

"I really felt like I needed to polish some of my learning in terms of jargon but also in terms of just, as I said, polishing, just putting that finesse on some of the models, some of the stuff that I kind of knew was common-sense,"

Female, Mother, Graduate

In contrast, the male sample was driven more by personal drive or desire to push themselves to another level.

"My own learning...not having that feeling any more like I haven't done anything."

Male, Father, Graduate

"The real reason I started doing an MBA was that it was the one thing I wanted to do in life but had not done."

Male, Father, Graduate

In contrast to existing research, which categorically links the glass ceiling with lower rates of pay and less career advancement opportunities for women, this research found that women were not overly concerned about the glass ceiling and it was not a disincentive to MBA study.

Instead, there is evidence that women look to the MBA to provide them with an 'edge' in overcoming potential systemic barriers, with women perceiving the value of the MBA as a 'leveller' – assisting them in overcoming discrimination in moving up the corporate ladder.

(Having children) makes me more likely to do an MBA because I feel like I am at a disadvantage because I have a child, in my career."

Female, mother, Evaluator

THE GLASS CEILING AND PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER IN THE MBA CLASSROOM

Despite the longstanding and widespread gender gap in MBA programs, women generally believe that gender discrimination did not and should not play a role in their MBA experience. This study found that women do not like to be singled out or treated differently, even if it results in positive outcomes.

EXISTING RESEARCH

The Harvard Experiment showed that women will react negatively if they feel there is an element of 'feminising' their MBA learning experience and believe it degrades the value of the degree and does not reflect a real-world experience of business. Many women also suggested that any lack of women in the classroom was reflective of a business reality.

Overcoming the gender gap

Building a pathway for women post-MBA

This research has found that the employer is the single most powerful factor in helping women commence and complete MBA study, by offering encouragement and support in the form of a leadership pathway.

Women are more likely to complete an MBA if her employer suggests it to her and encourages her by putting in place flexible work options and financial support mechanisms. Women are more inclined to see that MBA study is worth the time investment with support from their employer. They are also more likely to perceive that the juggle of negotiating the work/life conflicts is worth the struggle.

In this sample, a majority of the women who started or completed MBAs in this sample had done so because their employer had suggested it, with many stating that they would not have considered it otherwise.

More significant perhaps is that while **most female respondents reported time and money as the primary barrier to MBA study, but their concerns largely evaporated if the woman is supported by her employer – not only in a financial way but in terms of being identified as someone with ‘potential’ or as ‘a future leader.’** The support of the employer provides women with a return on their MBA investment - by linking their MBA study with a leadership or career development pathway in the workplace.

EXISTING RESEARCH

The role of the employer in increasing the participation rate of women in MBAs is supported by earlier research which finds that providing relief to women from a variety of non-work concerns can affect their likelihood to compete for and move into leadership positions at work (Dreher 2003, pg 559). Further, that firms which offer support to women through programs such as flextime, job share, telecommuting, elder care, adoption benefits, and dependent children options, are the firms with the highest percentage of senior management positions held by women (Dreher 2003, pg 556).

“I was being supported by my business because the company . . . was sponsoring me. It’s the company I still work for today. I’ve been with them for eight years. They backed me into doing this MBA and will continue to if I choose to continue it. That’s really the reason I started it.”

Female, mother, Side-tracked

WHEN ASKED ABOUT HOW THE EMPLOYER CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE:

Interviewer: “If they said, look, you know... you could be the CEO of this organisation . . .”

Respondent: “Oh, I’d definitely do it (an MBA). Yeah”

Female, mother, Evaluator

“You commit . . . to that pathway so that you know you’ve got a plan, you’re in study, because I think that life and culture and social norms take over once you’re out in the workplace”

Female, mother, Evaluator

Interviewer: “If someone at your work came to you and said . . . you’ve got leadership potential. We think you should do your MBA – Would you . . .?”

Respondent: “Yeah, absolutely”

Female, mother, Evaluator

EXISTING RESEARCH

When making a decision about enrolling in an MBA, both men and women first consider whether an MBA is right for them and their career goals, they then assess their ability to gain admission into graduate business school, finance their education and devote time and energy to their studies (Marks and Edington 2006).

Mentoring and role models

Mentoring is an important training and development tool and career mentoring is associated with increased promotions and pay. Most senior executives have had mentors who were vital to their success and the majority of women in top level management had one or more mentors and reported that mentorship was critical to their rise to the top.

Mentoring is a widely recognised career resource leading to promotions, career mobility and greater career satisfaction, as well as greater satisfaction with pay and benefits.

Mentoring has found to be of particular significance to women in helping them to 'break through the glass ceiling' and move up the ranks of organisations by offering them organisational recognition, a loyal base of support, career rejuvenation and improved job performance.

The *Evaluators* group in this research identified support from sponsors, former students and ideally, mentors as something that, once they commenced an MBA, would assist them in completing it. Most women earmarked their ideal mentors as someone who shared similar life values and characteristics.

This reflects research that the most effective mentoring relationships typically arise among individuals that share similarities, such as sex, race, ethnicity and background and interests.

Mentoring and role models is a significant and important factor for both men and women and this research has found that it would also offer much needed support and guidance to women. Respondents decisively indicated that if they had access to someone who had "done it all before" it would and could help them through difficult issues they would be more likely to complete their studies.

In particular, women want to be able to tap into a mentor as a resource – not just in terms of course content – but also in helping them manage and decide between matters of work/life conflict.

EXISTING RESEARCH

According to a Harvard Business Review study (Ibarra et al 2010), sponsorship is an extension of the mentoring relationship where the "mentor goes beyond giving feedback and advice and uses his or her influence with senior executives to advocate for the mentee" (Ibarra et al 2010 pg 3). In other words, sponsors help women link to a leadership pathway and advocate for them to get there.

"Having kids is such a big thing for women and there's not really any mentors for that. . . You know, and I think especially when you're coming from a corporate or even a professional environment, just transitioning back into it and getting back into some kind of routine, like professional routine as opposed to just being a domestic."

Female, mother, Side-tracked

"I would have restarted my MBA a lot sooner (with a mentor),"

Female, mother, Side-tracked

"I like the females who have the work-life balance but aren't that sort of cut-throat sort of I have to get to the top female, are happy just to have a good work life but also have a good family life."

Respondent, Side-tracked.

Conclusion

The research found that the employer has an important role to play in addressing many of the concerns women have about MBA study.

It found that issues of work/life conflict are felt more acutely by women than men. Women also suffer from a lack of role models and mentors in senior leadership, which is a key aid to career advancement and promotions in business.

Women also want different things from their MBA education, when compared to men, seeking intrinsic, rather than extrinsic benefits. They are looking for a direct return on their investment, knowing that possibility could be remote in light of the systemic limitations of an embedded glass ceiling.

Achieving gender balance in MBA programs has an important role to play in overcoming the perpetual difficulties women face in reaching leadership positions in business. In helping to build the pipeline of women ready to assume senior roles in our top companies, gender balance in MBA programs can assist in breaking through the glass ceiling.

This underscores the important role that the employer has in helping address many of the concerns women have about MBA study. This is supported by evidence that employers can provide relief to women from work/life conflict and that this affects a women's likelihood to compete for and move into leadership positions at work. Further that firms which offer support to women through flexible work options, as an example, are the firms with the highest percentage of senior management positions held by women.

Employers have the ability to introduce specific education and leadership pathways to support women which, coupled with a mentoring or sponsorship program (providing support and role

models) could have a powerful impact on the numbers of women pursuing MBA education.

A growing emphasis on the emerging concept of sponsorship – could potentially have a greater impact than mentoring on the numbers of women in senior roles.

The findings of this research highlight what business schools can do to better their MBA offering and attract more women.

By offering more diverse subject choices and taking the emphasis of numerate subjects, compulsory intensives, group work and in emphasising flexible study and delivery modes. They must also restructure their delivery modes with a strong preference shown for individual based learning modes which enable women, and men with children, to manage their own time. Online learning should be considered as part of a suite of flexible study options for women, as should a mentoring or support program, to support students throughout their MBA.

Gender-based concerns such as the 'glass ceiling', a lack of female role models and perceptions of the MBA as a 'male-oriented' degree do guide a woman's decision making process when it comes to MBA study but business schools can make it easier for women by acknowledging their concerns and putting in place a flexible range of measures to address their needs.

However, any initiatives introduced must maintain the integrity, rigour and impact of the MBA program to truly provide all students with a return on their MBA investment and drive female MBAs towards leadership roles in their organisations.

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