

Won over by social enterprise

Emmanuelle Smith



Malcolm Kirkup: applicants are seeking a 'competitive edge'

The underrepresentation of women on boards and in other positions of responsibility is one that, arguably, begins at business school.

Historically, women students have always been in the minority on MBA programmes. According to Financial Times data, the average proportion of women on MBA courses in the current academic year among schools taking part in FT rankings is 31.6 per cent, down from 32.2 per cent in 2008.

However, the picture is beginning to change. At the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, for example, this year's incoming class consists of 45 per cent women, compared with a 36 per cent female intake in 2009. At Stanford Graduate School of Business the number of women MBA students hovers at about 36 per cent, too.

Traditional explanations for the failure of business schools to attract women have pointed to women's desire to start a family, which often coincides with the time women are considering studying for an MBA, and a reluctance to follow a corporate career. But as schools focus their offerings they are finding a more willing audience among female students.

Of the 46-strong cohort on the One Planet MBA at the University of Exeter Business School in the UK, 68 per cent are women, a figure the school is proud of. The One Planet MBA was launched in September 2011 in association with WWF, the international conservation campaign group, and has a strong emphasis on sustainability. A pilot group the previous year comprised 55 per cent women and applications so far for 2012 are in line with 2011, suggesting the 68 per cent figure is not a fluke.

"This wasn't intentional," says Malcolm Kirkup, director of MBA programmes and the One Planet MBA. "It reflects the applications. A lot of female applicants are looking for that competitive edge in the jobs market, a reason to stand out from the crowd – and having a specialism offers that."

But are women attracted to this particular course because they are more interested in making a difference than making a profit? At the Aspen Institute, the international non-profit organisation, Judith Samuelson, the executive director of the institute's business and society programme, says that research it has conducted into the attitudes of MBA students has found that women are more interested than men in taking courses about sustainability.

"Women feel more deeply the conflicts that arise in managing to multiple objectives, and are more likely to think in terms of complexity – and sustainability is complex – than just the financial gain," she says.

At Rotterdam School of Management, too, there are signs that women are focusing on sustainability – the MBA programme has 32.6 per cent women this year – steeply up from 23.4 per cent in 2009, something the school attributes in part to its increased focus on sustainability.

Gail Whiteman, professor of sustainability, management and climate change at RSM, says that women are very interested in sustainability as a topic. "As women get older, they have a longer-term perspective on the world, on business, on community."

For Prof Kirkup, it is the content of the Exeter course, compared with the traditional MBA, that sets it apart and that is likely to be attracting women.

"Within sustainability, there's a lot more about collaborating, and a more heavy emphasis on social enterprise. It's not all about profit," he says.

"It's a more qualitative programme, not all about hard finance but more about leadership," says Prof Kirkup.

One programme that has consistently seen more women participants than men is Forum for the Future's programme in leadership for sustainable development. Forum for the Future, another non-profit organisation, teaches the 10-month masters programme – similar in much of its content to an MBA – in association with Middlesex University in the UK. The course has been running for 16 years and consistently has two-thirds women participants.

Sara Parkin, a founder-director of Forum, says the female students want to have a life-affirming career.

"Women don't see that happening through the hard, competitive lifestyle offered by [traditional] MBAs."

For women, adds Ms Parkin, a career in sustainability is "another way" to succeed while, importantly, not surrendering one's ideals.

"It's the same as women going into leadership roles in companies and organisations – only a very small number make it through to the top. What you have to do, the way you have to behave to get there and stay there is not attractive to women."

Fonte: Financial Times, London, 26 Mar. 2012, Internacional, On-line.