

# Minding the gender gap in MBA study

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Michelle Wood, October 2014

**Ms Michelle Wood**

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## **Abstract**

The research reported in this thesis examined the barriers women face in pursuing postgraduate study in business, and why these 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 (n = 9) and women (n = 29) who are either (a) considering doing an MBA, (b) in the middle of doing an MBA, or (c) MBA Graduate.

The interviews were transcribed, and a qualitative analysis of the resulting textual data was performed. Many of the themes captured by the interview data are grounded in previous research on the gender gap in MBAs, but some of the emergent themes have no obvious counterpart in the literature. This includes that women complete MBAs to overcome perceived personal deficits, that they are deterred from MBA study because they perceive the work/life juggle too difficult to manage (as opposed to the difficulty of the study itself) and that by better linking study with a post-MBA leadership pathway, as well as aligning students with mentors/sponsors, employers have a significant role to play in increasing the numbers of female MBAs.

## Chapter one: Introduction

Despite the numbers and percentages of women in the workforce continuing to grow, as well as increases in the percentage of women in middle management roles, the number of women enrolled in MBA programs has failed 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. This is not an Australian problem – but a global issue. There is not one school in the Financial Times Rankings of Top 100 business schools consistently reporting gender balance in their MBA programs (Smyth, Financial Times, April 2014).

The gender gap in MBA study is significant when considering the role and reputation of the MBA in helping middle-managers progress to executive and senior leadership roles (Kelan & Jones 2010; Baruch et al 2000). Often referred to as a “passport to senior managerial roles” (Baruch, et al, 2000 pg. 1), MBA graduates report being promoted, having increased responsibilities and an increase in their salary package. Given the relationship between MBAs and those in the c-suite or senior management, achieving gender balance in MBA enrolment could have a real impact on the numbers of women progressing from middle-management to senior management, executive ranks and onto the boards of our leading companies.

Research has identified several potential causes of the MBA gender gap:

- A view that the program itself is too competitive/masculine (Kelan & Jones, 2010; MacLelland & Dobson, 1997; Simpson & Ituma, 2009)
- Not as strongly associated with career success by women (Simpson 2000, Simpson et al, 2005)
- Work-life conflict issues are greater for women (Alsop, 2007; Reitman & Schneer 2005)
- Lack of female mentors or role models (Kelan & Mah, 2014; Levesque et al, 2005)

- Persistence of a gender gap in salary for male and female MBA graduates, which limits the returns on human capital, financial and time investment made (Carter & Silva, 2010; Graddy & Pistaferri, 2000; Simpson, 2000).

This thesis examines the factors which women consider in the decision making process prior to commencing MBA study. It examines the barriers to study which may affect women more so than men and the challenges which seem to be either unique or particularly acute for women.

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** for women contemplating or having graduated from MBA study.

It finds that the failure of business schools to improve the number of female enrolments is a consequence of their failure to address the specific concerns women have about undertaking an MBA degree in the first place and the ongoing failures to offer the flexibility and support that women, and particularly mothers, require to complete the degree. Also, there is a failure to offer a career pathway post-MBA to show women that they will receive a return on the time/cost investment they make in MBA study.

This thesis finds that the constraints women face in completing an MBA relate to the broader conflicts women face in terms of managing their often multiple roles as the primary caregiver and CEO of the household, meaning they take on a disproportionate share of the domestic labour (even if they are the breadwinner), as well as a paid work load. Women are also greatly impacted by the 'glass ceiling' which limits their career progression and earning potential post-MBA.

To this end, this thesis discovers a number of motivators and supports for women assisting them in enrolling and eventually completing MBA study. These form part of a suite of initiatives which are needed to improve the overall numbers of women completing MBA study. Significantly (and in contrast to previous approaches) it finds that no one initiative or approach will work on its own in overcoming what is essentially a global, widespread and systemic issue. By addressing the inequality at enrolment level, achieving gender balance in

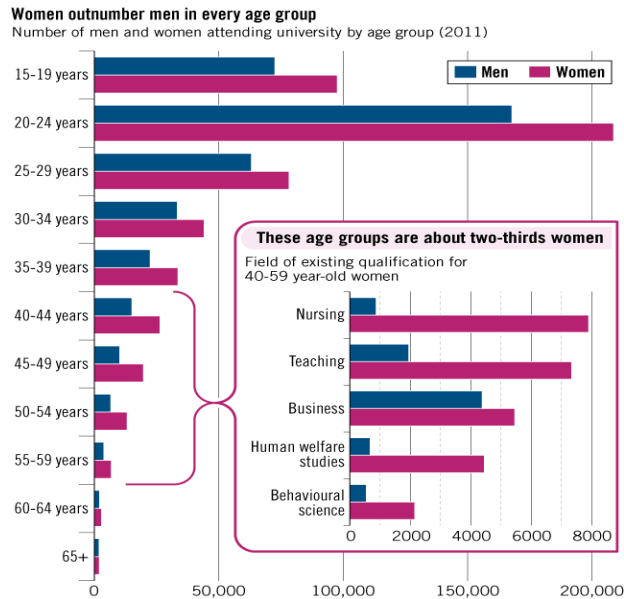
MBA enrolment could have a real impact on the numbers of women working in senior management, executive ranks and on the boards of our leading companies.

## Background

The MBA is the only business postgraduate degree with a pre-experience requirement with most schools requiring their MBA students have at least five years management experience before commencing the MBA. This makes the MBA cohort older than the average postgraduate student with most MBA students in their late 20s and early 30s.

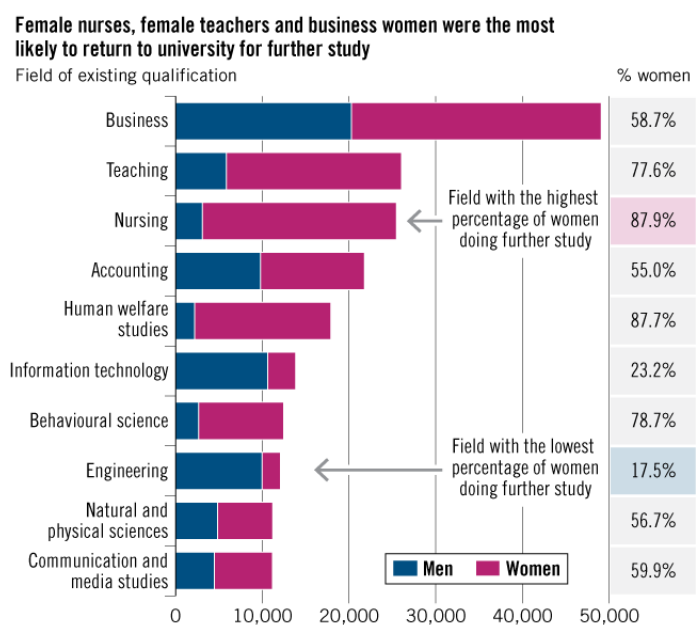
Despite the numbers of women in the workforce continuing to grow, as well as increases in the number of women in management roles, the number of women enrolled in MBA programs has failed to keep pace with male enrolments. In 2014, MBA degree enrolments are 30 – 35 per cent female. MacLelland and Dobson (1997) call it a “disquieting trend” (pg 1201) arguing that while the increasing numbers of women at work would “imply a greater incentive for women to enter business education; the opposite appears to be the case” (pg 1201). In fact, the numbers of women completing MBAs 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). This disproves the theory that women are choosing not to return to University because they are ‘a certain age’ or in their peak childbearing years and shows that there is something, specific to the MBA, which discourages women, more so than men.

**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

Persistent over time, the MBA gender gap is not unique to Australia (Kelan & Jones, 2010; Simpson et al 2005). In fact, according to The Financial Times, (Smyth, Financial Times, April 2014), there is not one business school ranked in the top 100 that has consistently achieved overall gender balance (a 50-50 gender spread) in its MBA program.

This research conducted a detailed examination of the underrepresentation of women in MBA programs. The purpose is to explore the reasons why women choose either to complete or not complete MBA study and better understand what factors act as deterrents, barriers, challenges, motivators and aids in completing MBA study.

While a number of studies (Catalyst 2000, Simpson, 2000, Simpson et al 2005, Simpson 2006, Kelan 2010), have sought to explain the proportionally low representation of women in MBA programs, this thesis seeks to understand not just how specific factors affect MBA enrolments and completions, but also the attitudes and preconceptions that influence the decision making process and how they interact and intersect. It seeks a greater understanding of what drives a woman's decision towards or away from MBA study. It also compares these, to some degree, with how men make decisions and in doing so, examines the underlying reasons for the gender imbalance in MBA programs, as well as discovering a range of strategies for increasing female enrolments into MBA programs.

While the existing literature in this area concentrates on the experiences of female MBA students in the context of US and UK business schools, and the US/UK corporate environment, this research takes an Australian perspective in the context of Australian parental leave policies, cultural paradigms and Australian gender diversity standards.

## Chapter two: Literature Review

### The significance of an MBA

The Masters of Business Administration (MBA) is often referred to as a “ticket to the executive suite” (Kelan & Jones, 2010 pg. 1) or a “passport to senior managerial roles” (Baruch, et al, 2000 pg. 1) with graduates reporting being promoted, having increased responsibilities and an increase in their salary package.

The impact of the MBA is particularly acute in driving middle-managers towards executive roles. In the United States, 40 of the 100 best paid CEOs in corporate America have an MBA (Forbes list of America’s Highest Paid Chief Executives 2013). In Australia, approximately 25 per cent of CEOs in the ASX 50 have MBAs (Suncorp Bank Power Index 2012 report). This is significant when considering that the next most common postgraduate qualification among Australian CEOs in the ASX 50 was the Australian Institute of Company Directors Company Directors Course (4 CEO’s completed this course).

According to a McKinseys survey of 60 major US corporations (report authors Barsh and & Yee for McKinseys 2012), both the number and percentage of women fall dramatically in the higher ranks of organisations. McKinsey found that of 325,000 women with entry-level positions; only 7,000 had made it to Vice-President, Senior Vice-President or CEO. Similarly, in Australia, of all board members of ASX Top 200 companies, only 18.3 per cent are women (Australian Institute of Company Directors real-time statistics – 8 September 2014); and of all the board chairs of these companies, less than three per cent are women. Only 3.5 per cent of the CEOs of these same companies are female (2012 Australian Census of Women in Leadership, Workplace Gender Equality Agency). Given that there is evidence of a relationship between MBAs and those in the c-suite or senior management, achieving gender balance in MBA enrolment could have some impact on the numbers of women working in senior management, executive ranks and on the boards of our leading companies.

## Theories on the MBA gender gap

The fact that women outnumber men in every age group returning to complete further study at an Australian University (Australian Census 2011) - and many of these women hold a business qualification (58.7 per cent) - highlights that there are reasons, specific to the MBA, which act as a disincentive to potential female enrolments, or that there are other factors which attract women to other postgraduate study.

Marks and Edington (2006 pg 3) discovered three types of barriers faced by potential MBA applicants:

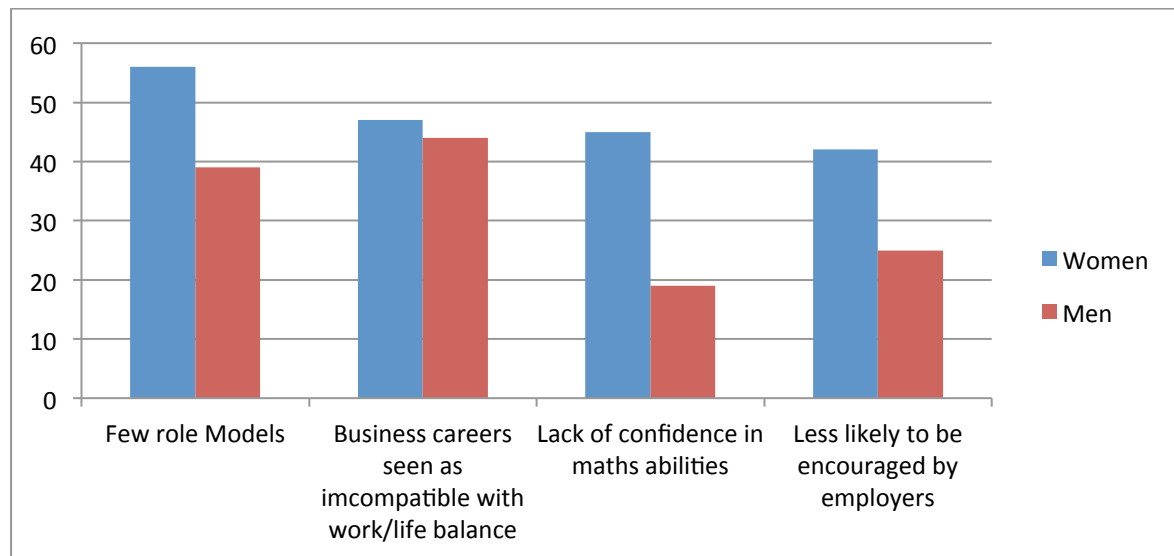
1. *The preparedness barriers – admission concerns which can impact the confidence of future applicants as to whether they meet the ‘MBA standard’*
2. *The financial resource barriers – which refers to concerns about how to finance the degree and their ability to recoup the costs at a later date*
3. *The commitment barriers – which refers to the perceived demands on time and energy*

Although not explicitly referred to in the Marks and Edington study, the commitment barriers also take into account concerns about how to manage work/life conflicts, including family and study conflicts. Kelan and Jones (2010) also offer that the reasons as to why women are said not to enter MBA programmes are varied and include the shortened time they have to recoup the investment if they want to have children (Shellenbarger 2008; Sinclair 1995 as referenced in Kelan & Jones 2010, pg 27).

In 2000, Catalyst, the University of Michigan Business School and the Centre for the Education of Women at the University of Michigan, conducted a survey of MBA graduates from the 12 top business schools in the US (1,684 respondents), as well as conducting focus groups, to ascertain insights into why women aren't pursuing MBAs.

The Women and the MBA: A Gateway to Opportunity report (Catalyst, 2000) recorded the following reasons (Figure 4) why women may not pursue an MBA (by gender).

**Figure 4:**



Source: Catalyst, the University of Michigan Business School and the Centre for the Education of Women at the University of Michigan, 2000.

The results of this survey show that, when asked what would make a difference to MBA enrolments, most said they believed more female role models would encourage more women to take up MBA education. This could be in direct response to a perception that Vinnicomb and Singh (2010) highlight in their analysis of the Catalyst survey. Respondents reported that among their biggest problems with the MBA program was that there “was little acknowledgement that women MBA students were struggling with family responsibilities as well as their MBA education” (Vinnicomb & Singh, 2010 pg 296).

This view is grounded in existing literature which shows that lack of female role models and mentors (Kelan & Mah, 2014; Levesque et al., 2005), concerns about work-life conflicts (Alsop, 2007; Reitman & Schneer 2005) and lack of confidence in maths skills (Shellenbarger 2008; Sinclair 1995), are powerful deterrents to women considering MBA study. However, there are additional reasons identified in the literature not found in the Catalyst (2000) survey and that includes that the MBA is too competitive/masculine (Kelan & Jones, 2010; MacLelland & Dobson, 1997; Simpson & Utuma, 2009) and that it is not as strongly associated with career success by women (Simpson et al 2005).

In addition to work/life conflict issues, the dominant and recurring themes in the literature regarding the potential causes of the MBA gender gap are the ongoing pay gap for male and female MBA graduates (Carter & Silva, 2010; Graddy & Pistaferri, 2000; Simpson, 2000) and that career advancement opportunities are more limited for female MBA graduates compared to male graduates (Cox and Harquail 1991, Simpson 2006, Catalyst 2010 survey).

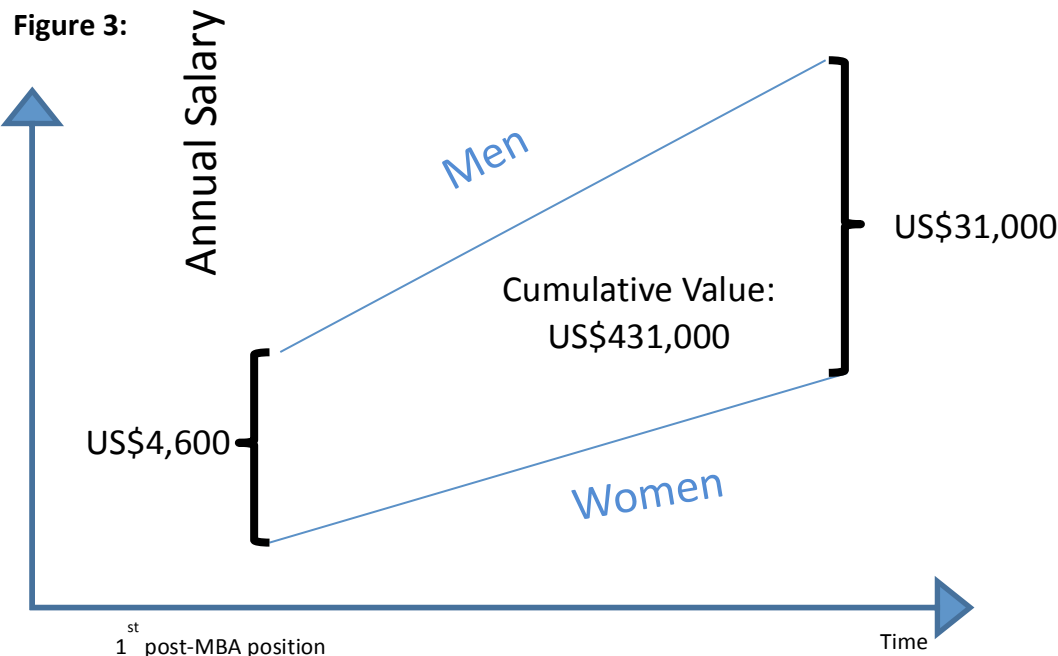
### **The impact of an MBA on career success for men and women**

While there is limited acknowledgement in the MBA classroom of sexism and its impacts on individual success for female students (Kelan & Jones, 2010 pg. 34) there is evidence that the benefits and impact of an MBA differs according to gender.

Simpson et al (2005) considered whether an MBA is effective in terms of career progression and asked whether the benefits vary for men and women. The report found that when it came to factors such as salary and job status (which Simpson calls 'extrinsic factors'), male MBAs had the advantage and women were disadvantaged. Cox and Harquail's study (1991) found that women who had completed their MBA "did not differ from men on total promotions and career satisfaction but did experience lower salary increases, fewer management promotions and lower hierarchical levels compared to men" (pg 54). In fact, they found that "being female had a depressing effect on career success" (pg 65) with women experiencing "somewhat lower levels of career success than men of comparable education, performance, age and experience" (pg 11). Simpson (2000) agrees with the Cox and Harquail findings, further arguing that these reasons underlie why the MBA is not as strongly associated with career success by women.

As reported by BusinessWeek (Symonds 2014), a study of Booth MBAs by the National Bureau of Economics Research (2009) reported that gender differences in earnings across the 10 to 15 years following MBA completion was primarily related to greater career discontinuity, less job experience, and shorter work hours for female MBAs. Additionally, a 2010 study (Bertrand et al 2010) found that across the first 15 years following the MBA, women with children have about an eight month deficit in actual post-MBA experience compared with the average man, while woman without children have a 1.5 month deficit. Similarly, women with children typically work 24 per cent fewer weekly hours than the average male; women without children work only 3.3 per cent fewer hours. Bertrand et al

found that while women and men have almost identical earnings when they begin their career, their earnings “diverge” (Bertrand et al, 2010 pg 228) with the male earnings advantage continuing to grow exponentially, when compared to their female colleagues, a decade after MBA completion (Figure 3).



Source: Catalyst, Pipeline's Broken Promise, 2010

However, the finding about gender differences in future earning returns in MBA study is also evident in higher education in general with higher education not paying off for women in the same way as men. An AMP/NATSEM report found that a 25 year old women with a postgraduate degree will earn \$2.49 million in her career but will take home less that a man with just a year 12 credential who will earn \$2.55 million.

### The role of the 'glass ceiling'

The MBA has a limited impact on broader systemic problems of women progressing into leadership roles or overcoming the 'the glass ceiling' (Simpson 2000 pg 777) and the MBA does little to help women overcome career barriers arguing that “while women may....embark on the programme to enhance individual barriers and so overcome career barriers, structural and attitudinal factors were seen to be continuing problems for women (pg 777).” Carter and Silva (2010) and Graddy and Pisteferri (2000)

also document the persistence of a gender gap in salary for male and female MBA graduates.

The term 'glass ceiling' is a metaphor used to describe an invisible impediment in organisational hierarchies, just below the top management level, that prevents or constrains women from rising into the ranks of senior management (Dreher, 2003 pg 542; Hymowitz & Shellhardt 1986). The glass ceiling and its effect on the difference in the financial and career-progression benefits of an MBA for women compared to men is very real. Marks and Edington (2006), who included perceptions of the glass ceiling in their critique of financial barriers to MBA study, argue that:

*"the expectation of facing a glass ceiling surely affects women's assessment of the potential return on investment and the ability of the MBA to help them to their next career objectives (pg 11)."*

There is no simple, straightforward or 'one single' cause of the glass ceiling but the fact that "most organisations have been created by and for men and are based on male experiences," (Meyerson & Fletcher 1999 pg 129) is one underlying explanation for why it is more challenging for women to reach senior leadership roles in business. Oakley (2000 as quoted in Weyer 2007 pg 483) argues that corporate *practices such as recruitment, retention and promotion, behavioural and cultural causes such as stereotyping and preferred leadership style and*

*1) Structural and cultural limitations rooted in feminist theory are potential explanations for the glass ceiling*

Social role theory (Weyer, 2007; Eagly, 1987) - which outlines that family and occupational roles are defined solely on gender - is also relevant when examining the limitations of the MBA in overcoming the 'glass ceiling' in the workplace. This is largely because work-life conflict issues are greater for women (Alsop, 2007; Reitman & Schnee, 2005).

The work-life conflict and its impact on female careers is supported by a 2013 study by Correll which found that mothers face additional discrimination at work. According to

Correll, when considered for the same job, mothers were significantly less likely to be hired, and when they were, were offered \$11,000 less in starting salary than childless women. Fathers faced no penalty and in fact, according to additional research (Killewald, 2012) married, residential, biological fatherhood is associated with wage gains of about four per cent, but unmarried residential fathers, nonresidential fathers, and stepfathers do not receive a “fatherhood premium”. Rhode and Kellerman (2006) argue that having children makes women, but not men, appear less available to meet workplace responsibilities and that the term “working father” is rarely used and carries none of the adverse connotations of “working mother” (pg 8).

The impact of the glass ceiling (and the fewer numbers of women in leadership roles when compared to men) has a flow on effect in that it means there are fewer role models for women and far fewer (not enough to meet demand) mentors, for those women that seek female mentors. The lack of female role models and mentors has been found to be one of the causes of the MBA gender gap (Kelan & Mah, 2014; Levesque et al, 2005). However, women did seem to benefit more than their male MBA counterparts when it came to ‘intrinsic benefits’ (Simpson, 2000, pg 776) – such as enhanced credibility and confidence, the feeling of greater acceptance and personal status within the organisation. In this vein, there is also a contrasting view in the existing literature that further qualifications, such as an MBA, may act as a potential neutraliser of widespread, corporate and systemic discrimination (Melamed, 1996, Burke & McKenn, 1994) and that many women “embark on high qualifications such as an MBA in order to overcome some of the barriers they face in their careers” (Burke & McKenn, 1994 in Simpson 2000 pg 6) as these are perceived as “objective merits that help to enhance women’s credibility and credentials, and therefore are likely to be more beneficial for women than for their male colleagues (Melamed, 1996 pg 219).

### **Perceptions of gender in the MBA**

The existing research and data (Catalyst, 2010, Simpson, 2006) clearly supports a view that while offering intrinsic benefits to women, the career benefits to a man of completing an MBA far outweigh those achieved by women. Further, that once out in the workplace – particularly in a corporate environment – women continued to be at a disadvantage (Correll



et al, 2013; Bertrand et al 2010) with research finding that career interruptions and working shorter hours is the leading cause of the gender gap in earnings with “the presence of children the main contributor” (Bertrand et al, 2010, pg 230).

This thesis, in part, examined if the impact an MBA can have on a woman’s career, which is limited when compared to the impact it has on a man’s career, underlies the reasons they decide not to enrol in an MBA, and if so, to what extent.

Kelan and Jones (2010) support the theory of a ‘perception problem’ when they refers to “the enduring paradigm ‘Think Manager - Think Male’ as “one of the main factors that deter women from entering MBA programmes” (Schein 1976, Schein & Davidson 1993 as quoted in Kelan & Jones, 2010 pg 27). Kelan and Jones’ research suggests a lack of acknowledgement by women about the role of gender in the MBA program. Accepting the lack of female lecturers, students and lack of female examples in case studies, “many (women) suggested it merely mirrored the male-dominated areas of business, investment banking or consulting (Kelan & Jones, 2010 pg 31). Kelan and Jones refer to this as women ‘accepting the status quo: it’s just how business is’ (Kelan & Jones, 2010 pg 31). The view that gender does not and should not have a role to play in MBA study is consistent with the findings of The Harvard Experiment (Kantor 2013) a program introduced by the Harvard Business School to overcome their MBA gender gap and in essence sought to “change how students, spoke, studied and socialised” (Kantor 2013). The findings showed that women will react negatively if they feel there is an element of ‘feminising’ their MBA learning experience. Many women also suggested that any lack of women in the classroom was reflective of a business reality.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Sample and Procedure

The research methodology for this paper centred on focus groups (3 x 2 hour focus groups) and 38 face-to-face interviews (approximately 1 hour in length).

Focus groups comprised of six to eight participants and an independent moderator. The moderator proceeded according to a semi-structured guide, with discretion to deviate from the guide to explore issues suggested by participants' responses.

Although the focus groups were conducted under the auspices of attracting more women to MBA study, it was not explicitly framed as a study of gender to interviewees but instead as an examination of the experiences and aspirations of MBA students, male and female.

The focus groups:

- Explored general perceptions of MBA students and how they might differ by gender
- Asked - does the perceived importance of an MBA to career success differ by gender?
- Asked - do perceptions of what an MBA should offer in terms of curriculum differ by gender?
- Sought to ascertain the perceived importance of mentors, role models and sponsors and whether this differs by gender?
- Asked - what are the perceived impediments to women completing their MBA?
- Sought to understand the perceptions of women as leaders - are they perceived as different from male leaders; what are the differences in their specific characteristics; are women more ambitious than men; do they hide their ambition? Do women underestimate their own skills and accomplishments?
- Gathered perceptions of the MBA experience: competitiveness of the classroom environment; gender composition of the classroom environment; perception of

MBA as a 'male degree', individual v team work, social events – are they important; internships/work experience components

- Evaluated if an MBA lead to more money and promotions for men and women equally?
- Asked what compromises do women feel they need to make to get an MBA? Do men feel they need to make the same compromises?

Discussion from these focus groups was used to develop the questions and interview guide for the longer face-to-face interviews (Appendix 1).

In total, 38 face-to-face interviews were conducted with men (n=9) and women (n =29). The sampling frame for soliciting participation in the face-to-face interviews was alumni, attendees at recruitment events, and corporate clients. From these lists four sub-samples were drawn with the following specifications:

1. Women who completed an MBA (to be called **Graduate/s** for the purposes of discussion) - 10 women
2. 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) - 10 women
3. Women who started the MBA at the MGSM but did not complete the degree (to be called **Side-tracked** for the purposes of discussion) - 9 women
4. Fathers who were a mix of the top four categories (**Men - mix of above**) - 9 men

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 it was for mothers. The majority of respondents were aged between

30 – 45 years of age. Most were based in Sydney and, if they had completed their MBA, did so at a Sydney business school and/or tertiary institution.

The sampling strategy was intended to explore how women with and without children thought about the MBA, compare their motivations and how they perceive the incentives/disincentives to study. It also reflects upon, to some extent the differences in attitude between fathers and mothers, as well as compares how both men and women think about gender in the MBA classroom and the broader business world (Whitehead 2001 as quoted in Kelan & Jones, 2010 pg 9).

The face-to-face interviews were conducted, in the main, by the author of this thesis. The author was assisted in conducting interviews by three members of a research team. All interviewers received the same interview guide/questions and were briefed that these interviews were to be conducted in a 'semi-structured style' allowing for the interviewer to pursue any dominant or emerging themes. There were several team meetings to discuss and coordinate how the interviews would be conducted and these meetings also led to modifications to the interview guide and procedure. These themes explored how women either directly experience or perceive the MBA and can broadly be summarised as investigating:

- 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 place 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?

Interviewees were invited to talk about their motivations for commencing MBA study, their careers to date, their experiences while studying the MBA and their plans and aspirations for the future. Interviewees were also asked about practical issues relating to managing the work/life balance issues of day-to-day life and the realities of commencing further study. They were also asked if support mechanisms from the workplace or chosen business school would make a difference to their MBA experience.

Questions which focused explicitly on gender related to perceptions of the MBA as a ‘male-dominated degree’ and the gender balance of the lecturers and other students.

Most of the extracts analysed for this thesis are drawn from the section on motivation for MBA study and the experiences of MBA study; as well as perceptions of work-life balance.

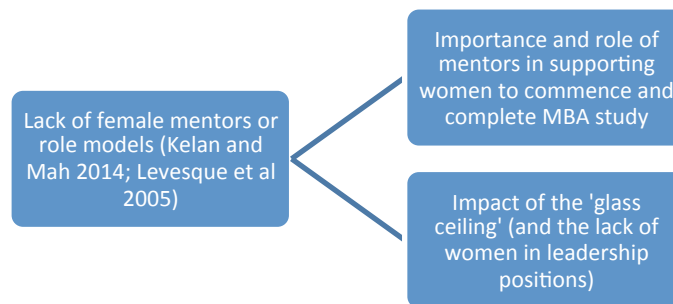
## Data Analysis

All 38 face-to-face interviews were conducted over two months (July and August 2014) using a semi-structured interview guide and approach (Appendix 1). The average length of each interview was 50 – 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed producing almost 800 (794) pages of verbatim dialogue averaging 20 pages and 8500 – 9000 words per transcript. There was no discernible difference between the average length/time of interviews for men and women.

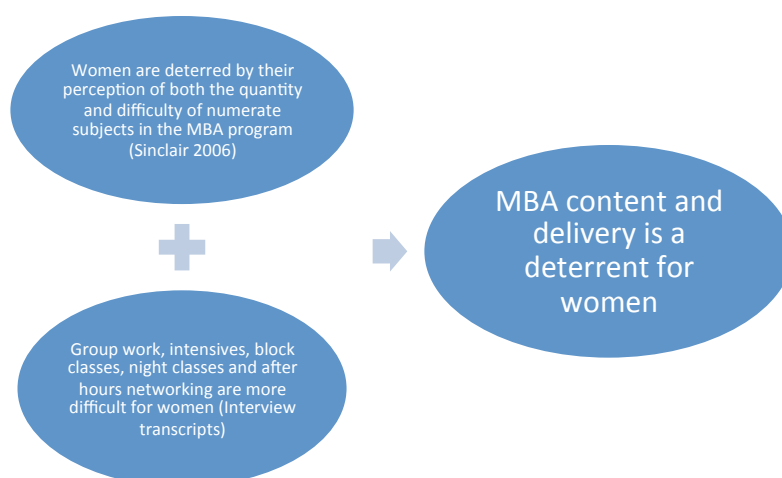
Throughout the two-month period within which interviews were being conducted, the research team met and spoke frequently to discuss the more and less-common themes emerging from the discussions that had occurred to date. The team were then encouraged to explore any emerging themes and follow up with more specific questions, if relevant. Specific themes that emerged in early interviews were earmarked and pursued more closely in later interviews. This included questions about specific subjects and course content, as well as work/life conflict issues and the process of ‘negotiating’ time with a spouse.

Once collected and transcribed in its entirety, the data was analysed to first find common answers and then to identify common themes. The data was analysed in multiple iterations, with the initial phases being mainly (textual) data driven, and subsequent phases involving the examination and re-specification of emergent themes (Spiggle, 1994). Some of these themes were grounded in the literature while others had no obvious counterparts in the literature. The discussions and negotiation of themes often resulted in a theme being split into two separate themes, and in other cases two themes were joined into a single theme with multiple components or aspects. This process is presented graphically using two thematic examples below:

**Figure 4 (below)** shows how the iterative process leads to a grounded theme being divided into two emerging themes.



**Figure 5 (below)** shows an example of the iterative process where two themes – both reflected in the data and one grounded in the literature – are grouped together to form one major theme.



This iterative process led to the discovery of overlaps and interactions between themes that are, as yet unseen in the literature, and this led to the development of hierarchical relationships wherein several sub-themes were grouped under an overarching theme. It also led to the identification of several “emergent” themes, which are identified for further research and examination.

## Chapter four: Results

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. The findings also point to emergent themes which require further research and examination and are highlighted in the discussion section.

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 (return on investment) which are specific to women and which either do not adequately addresses 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

There are factors relating to the design of an MBA program and the way it is delivered which present a challenge to women, more so than men, and which deter them from commencing or inhibit them from completing an MBA. The research findings pointed to two primary barriers - course content and delivery method - which are examined in detail below.



## Course content

Consistent with earlier studies and existing literature (Catalyst 2000, Sinclair 1995), this research found that women across all three groups have a negative perception of the MBA's "core" (Sinclair, 1995 pg 301) subjects that relate to accounting, finance, statistics and other mathematic or quantitative study.

*"They were terrible. At the start, I had absolutely no idea what was going on,"*

*Respondent - Female, mother but no children at the time of completing MBA study, Graduate*

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*"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*

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*"It is (among) my top three reasons why I wouldn't (complete an MBA)." Female, mother, Evaluating*

Sinclair argues that numerate, quantitative subjects are emphasised in the MBA, are treated institutionally and "informally regarded as subjects that employers put most value on, in spite of an increasing demand for more behavioural subjects," (Sinclair, 1995 pg 301).

Concern about maths subjects were greatest amongst 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. There was also evidence amongst these groups of misconceptions about the amount of prior learning required for these subjects or the relevance of the course content itself.

*Interviewer: You don't think you're good at maths?*

*Respondent: No, I don't think I'm good at maths.*

*Interviewer: Was...that a major disincentive?*

*Respondent: Yes. Because...you had to have a business or economics background (to be able to do an MBA). So there were...limited options I could do" - Female, pregnant, Evaluating*

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*Respondent: (I would benefit from) less rigidity around the need to do core units such as accounting and finance. I mean I know they're essential, but perhaps a different model of learning and more of an applied learning thing in that space rather than a theoretical base as the...you know, starting point...I don't need to know the algebraic equations in an accounting formula. I don't need to know that, I need to know how to read a P&L, you know...I need to know how to develop a budget...And the reality is I have an accountant who does that for me anyway, so I just need to know how to read it and how to make sure it doesn't blow out." Female, no children, Side-tracked*

Spencer, Steele & Quinn (1998) discussed the impact of stereotype in a women's perception on her own math ability and found that when women are told that a certain math test should be harder for women than men (the test will produce gender differences and the 'stereotype threat' was high) 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.

There is a notable difference in the views of these numerate subjects from the Graduate group who did feel that these subjects were necessary and as Sinclair (1995) argues "is what management is all about" (pg 301). There seemed to be very little acknowledgement amongst any female respondent group of "business being less about building mathematical models than about building relationships" (Hancock 2010 pg 92).

*"I think it's essential to have a good understanding of all the operations and finances. And I think even in the business context when you're having a conversation with a senior manager you need to be able to understand the finances of the business." Female, pregnant, evaluating*

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*“I guess my major in the MBA is going to be in the finance area, because that’s, you know when you’re running businesses that’s you know you need to know all the other stuff, but you also, you know that’s the bottom line, you’ve got to know your finances...” Female, no children, side-tracked*

It is well documented in the literature that women MBAs “take relatively fewer finance and accounting classes but relatively more marketing classes,”(Bertrand et al, 2010 pg 232 ) and that MBAs are, in terms of their content and emphasis on numerate subjects slanted towards male interests (Sinclair, 1995).

The research has found that numerate subjects are a deterrent for women because they have a perception that they form a large part of the degree, 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. There is a perception that accounting, mathematics, statistics and economics subjects dominate the MBA. While a significant challenge, it may also largely be a perception barrier addressed through tailored marketing of the MBA course.

### **Delivery method**

The high group work component and intensive weekend classes were two features 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 completed MBA study.

In most MBA programs, group work comprises a large percentage of assessable tasks. As Rafferty notes (2012), group work is widely recognised within many academic disciplines as “an important pedagogical tool when instructing graduate students” (Drake, Goldsmith, & Strachan, 2006; Hughes & Jones, 2011; Lejk & Wyvill, 2001; Sharp, 2006 as quoted in Rafferty 2012 pg 2). However, this research has found that the experience of those students- particularly women - who had completed or were completing MBAs 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 (with children) who commenced or completed an MBA 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. This is consistent with literature which found that the gender imbalance in family roles reinforces gender inequalities in career development as “women with demanding work and family commitments often lack time for the networking and mentoring activities that are necessary for advancement,” (Rhode and Kellerman, 2006, pg 13).

Further, for those contemplating MBA study, the prospect of working to group timetables, not being able to control individual study time and having to make additional time (above class and study time) was simply a bridge-too-far and was a leading deterrent for potential MBA students.

This research found that group work for those who had completed or commenced an MBA was particularly challenging for those with families:

*“The weekends are basically study. If you have children and you've got kids' sport you want to take kids to, you need to be flexible in terms of what hours you spend. So doing more than one unit, really the people (in your group) would expect you to at least do have a day on a weekend or a day on the weekend. If you do more than two units then it (group work) gets up to a day or day and a half. Then if you're doing more than that, then it really is -your whole weekend goes doing group work because that's the only time people who are working get together anyway.” - Male, Father, Side-tracked*

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*Respondent: I constantly needed to do work so I didn't let my team down because there are parts of it you're marked as a group, yeah.*

*Interviewer: What about your home life? How did it...*

*Respondent: It was just a mess - Female, mother, Graduate*

Discussing her experiences with group work as a woman without children and comparing it to her views now as a mother, one MBA graduate respondent said:

*Respondent: I just wouldn't...You would be the slacker in the group work, you would be really hard to make appointment times with because you've got... you know, sometimes five or six people, busy lives, trying to make an appointment time to finish their course, so you'd be the pain in the butt all the time. I just don't... I don't think it would be done well (if I had a child) - Female, mother, Side-tracked*

While noting the significance of networking as one of the primary benefits of the MBA program and cautious to downplay its significance, Evaluators were notably deterred by the group work component of the MBA program. These women had a view of group work as the antitheses of flexible learning which they regarded of paramount importance to enable them to complete the degree. When faced with this, group work was viewed as simply too constraining and limiting:

*"I understand the group work is incredibly time-consuming, and so although I understand why because that's part of the skills that you're learning, if you're asking me purely how could I make it happen, what would make it more convenient and therefore more accessible, probably less group and more just individual work..." – Female, mother, Evaluator*

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*"I guess my biggest concern, again, is that flexibility, being able to - and control, 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, whether it be that they want to get everything done really quickly and I am unable to meet that because of work*

*commitments, or they leave everything till the last minute and me not having control over that.” - Female, Mother, Evaluator*

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*“I like managing my own time, so with team work you have to find a time when you can all work together, which is really hard to do when you have...lots of other demands on your time.”- Female, Mother, Evaluator*

Reflecting on the block classes and intensive classes specifically:

*“So one of the things ...were doing the sort of, not retreats but sort of offsite-type intensives. So they, from my understanding, were incredibly intensive. It was first thing in the morning going all the way through the whole evening. It's very hard to carve that kind of time out from a day. It's hard enough doing it between sort of ordinary work hours and going a little outside of that even. I found that that would have made it really difficult. If there were things that came up at work that I needed to look after, it sounded really, really hard to try to fit that sort of thing in,” - Female, no children, Evaluator*

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:

*“I know my wife found it to be a challenge, you know, with me out of action for a week at a time, you know with the two kids. She was very supportive 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*

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*“I loved it actually; I got...the most out of my MBA that final year. I found it fantastic. Going into it, I was a little bit apprehensive, it's you know, I'd have to spend four*

*weeks a year away from my family, which is a big time commitment,” – Male, Father Graduate*

While there is strong opposition to online learning becoming a large component of any MBA program, with many questioning its value and 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.

*“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 at (school)...” – Female, mother, Side-tracked*

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*“How can it (an MBA) be done? 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. I have contemplated trying one subject [laughs]. When I look at that I still go - I still need to be here from six to 10 pm or I have to do two weekend blocks. It's the study around that. What would be a potential solution is not having to be here from six to 10, being able to control your study time at your time. If that happens to be at 8 o'clock at night till 12 o'clock at night where you log on, do a two-hour lecture and then you do your own - and then you do your group work in your own space - a potential solution. Is that ideal? I'm not convinced it is ideal for the learning that you're looking for. But with technology these days, we've got to find better ways to do it, that would be a potential solution,” - Female, mother, Side-tracked*

In a similar vein, networking, while perceived as among the primary benefits of an MBA degree, 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, being at the mercy of others time.

*“It’s (networking) is 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 so it does limit you in that regard.”- Female, mother, Evaluator.*

Commenting on her experiences returning to study as a mother, one respondent outlined the different experiences mothers and fathers have whilst studying, compared to those without children:

*“I realised that being a kind of older, part-time student going to one lecture a week -- because I only did one subject --I was not going to get that experience. So there was that. 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*

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*“I think networking's important in that (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*

The respondents also drew parallels between the structure of the MBA in the context and nature of business more broadly, one Evaluator respondent outlined why the MBA format has deterred her from study:

*“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*



Another respondent (a first time mother with a young baby) agreed with the sentiment that business reflects largely male constructs:

*“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, that it’s hard to compete with that still. 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 is by being in the office and I know I can’t be in the office those long hours,” - Female, mother, Evaluator.*

This view is supported by Vinnicomb and Singh (2010) who 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. Sinclair (1995) goes further, describing the MBA education as a “masculinising management”(pg 310) which is reinforced by a male dominance as males are in the majority of faculty members, students and the leading role-players in case studies. She also highlights that the lack of recognition of gender in the MBA classroom, by both women and men is part of the problem and “rather than equipping men and women to comprehend and value sex as a dimension of diversity in management, MBA programs typically render sex undiscussable, rather than providing an opportunity to challenge traditional management practice, the MBA rehearses and endorses the values of an exclusive and masculine executive culture,” (pg 310).

The view in the literature that the MBA is too competitive or masculine (Kelan & Jones 2010; MacLelland and Dobson 1997; Simpson & Utuma 2009) is not supported by this research on the whole, however there were strong perceptions of the MBA as a male-oriented degree:

*"I guess what drives my perception of the MBA as a male-oriented degree is that there are more men in business, I guess." - Female, Evaluator*

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*"I think the reason is because men don't need to look after family that much, women always have to look after the kids, and then, say on the weekend classes they have to take them to sport activity as well, and probably this is the limitation for women in completing an MBA," - Female, mother, Graduate*

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*"In the current environment, you can see the male is always in the higher position than a woman," - Female, mother, Graduate*

Male respondents also noticed the gender breakdown in the classroom and reflected on the 'disquieting trend' (Marks and Edington pg 1201) :

*"I did notice that if the females that there were very few of them who had families, most of them were married but they didn't...you know, have children. Or if they did they were adult children. So, whereas when you talk to the guys a lot of them were married and had kids too. So, yeah, there was a definite gender sort of breakdown." - Male, Father, Graduate.*

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 represent 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 of the degree. Women are also deterred by negotiating for time, whereas their male partners assume the time. 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.

### **Return on Investment (ROI) deterrents**

This research finds that 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 views about its impact on their career. It shows that 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, dominate concerns from those considering undertaking MBA study. However, the 'value proposition' of an MBA is called into question further by the impact of the glass ceiling and a lack of female role models at the top which create and add to negative perceptions about the benefits of an MBA to women, compared to men. It leads to concerns about the perceived benefits of the MBA program and its impact on career advancement.

### **Time and work/life conflicts**

Grounded in existing literature (Alsop, 2007; Reitman & Schneer 2005) that women feel and experience work/life conflict issues more acutely than men, the 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.

As Hunt and Michael (1983 pg 476) argue "whether traditionalists or career women, whether in their twenties or their thirties, women seem to have had to juggle and integrate

family and career.” April and Soomar, in their research on the feelings of guilt and resentment often felt by breadwinners, referred to a women’s biggest challenge being role conflict and owning all the responsibility.

*“The conflict between roles can emerge when the requirements of one life domain (e.g., work) directly interferes with the burdens of another life domain (e.g., family). As a result of these participants having to manage multiple roles and owning the financial responsibility, they ended up making many sacrifices.” (Hecht 2001as quoted in April & Soomar 2013 pg 43)*

Marks and Edington (2006) also make the point 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. This view is directly reflected in extracts from the research interviews with largely 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*

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*“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*

Given that “women are still the primary caregivers...and despite a significant increase in men’s domestic work over the last two decades, women continue to shoulder the major burden” (Rhode and Kellerman, 2006 pg 12), 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 how having children impacts their decision to complete an MBA, women were clear that it most-often removed it as an option.

*“It took it off the table”- Female, mother, Evaluator*

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*“If I had children it would impact my decision to study because I’d want to be there for my children and that’s more important than getting an MBA.” – Female, no children, Side-tracked*

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*“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*

The female respondents also seemed to have a strongly held view that women who completed MBAs 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 were opting out of study as a result of their feeling that a woman cannot be successful at study, work and family life.

*“The issue though is when generally, and this is a generalisation, but generally when people are in their early to mid-30s, for a woman that's a difficult time in your life because, if you're a career woman, that's at the same stage that your body clock's ticking [laughs]. So I was in a difficult situation. I do have - I am the primary income earner. I do have a supportive husband at home who looks after the kids. I have all the wonderful benefits of being able to drive a career but, at the end of the day, there are only so many hours in the day.” - Female, mother, Side-tracked*

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*“You know, if you want to have kids and be the CEO...you can’t have it all... That is an unrealistic expectation.”- Female, no children, Side-tracked*

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

One possible explanation is, as Vinnicomb and Singh discuss, that success means something different for women and men, "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 respondent, a single mother with four children, reflected on the how men and women might make decisions differently when it comes to how they manage work/life conflicts and weigh the decision to complete MBA study.

*"Maybe there is a feeling that, you know, for men I am in this for the long-haul, I'm going to be working all the time, I should take priority in terms of career progression as opposed to a woman thinking well, you know, maybe my pathway is going to be working and then eventually having children and, you know, so...I think that's embedded into our psyche," – Female, mother, Evaluator.*

Most respondents appear caught in a schism of their own guilt about the quality of time an MBA might take away from their children and notions about their traditional role in the house. 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 notions 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.

For example, one respondent purported to earn 'slightly more' than her husband but that:

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

It is well established in the literature that women take on a greater share of the household duties than men, even if they are the primary breadwinner. In their 2010 study, Drago et al found that working more hours of paid labour doesn't necessarily result in women doing less in the household. The female breadwinner increasingly finds herself in a role-reversal

scenario without there being a genuine role-reversal in terms of who-does-what on the home front. In fact, as one study of high-achieving women highlights, 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) that many men, struggling with the perceived emasculating situation that their wives earn more than them, disproportionately hold-on to traditional gender roles at home by doing even less domestic work.

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. One female respondent with children who represented the Graduate sample group felt that negotiating with their partner for time to study became a core part of their relationship and household dynamic.

*"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*

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*"Negotiation has been a massive learning curve in the relationship to be able to do stuff," - Female, no children, graduate*

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*"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 on the way decisions were made in the household:

*“Not much for me...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, when asked if having a small child impacted his decision-making around what classes to do (blocks, intensives, night-classes)*

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*“My wife was very understanding and flexible, you know, I would study on the weekends.” - Male, Father, Graduate*

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*“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, what are you waiting for, come and join us. They said we’ve got your families, we can juggle it, you’ve got no excuse.” - Male, Father, Graduate when discussing what motivated his decision to enrol in an MBA*

However, 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:

*Respondent: 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.*

*Interviewer: Why is that?*

*Respondent: 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*

This research has found that many women want to study an MBA but are overwhelmed by the work/life conflict problems. Burdened by being the primary caregiver and taking on the lion's share of domestic labour, women cannot see how the MBA will actually benefit them in ways that outdo or overcome the drawbacks of managing this conflict. 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 groups 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 and they do not need to put in place contingencies to manage the children or the house to allow them 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, examine ways of structuring and delivering their program to offset the difficulty not of the study itself but of managing their work/life conflicts.

### **'Intrinsic' versus 'Extrinsic' outcomes**

In terms of outcomes of MBA study, women sought 'intrinsic gains' (Simpson et al 2005) rather than the 'extrinsic' gains most commonly sought by men. Women highlighted gains such as enhanced credibility and confidence, the feeling of greater acceptability and personal status with the organisation, as key reasons for undertaking MBA study.

*"The things that used to stress me, don't stress me anymore. I trust my ability to get things done," - Female, Mother, Graduate*

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*"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*

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*"It is important from a self-empowerment point of view," -Female, mother, Graduate*

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*"It's more about personal growth and learning, rather than career," – Female, mother, Graduate*

However, the tone of the responses suggests that women undertake or consider MBA study to overcome perceived deficits in their personal or professional capacities.

*"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*

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*"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. I wanted to fine-tune some of that expertise. I wanted to learn some new skills within finance and those kind of areas that I wasn't as strong in, or didn't think I was until I came here and realised I was stronger than I thought I knew,"- Female, Mother, Graduate*

Even confident, successful women tended to frame the idea of doing an MBA in terms of overcoming deficits.

*“Pretty much the whole time I’ve been working, for the vast majority of the time, of the 14 years since I’ve been in fulltime work largely, I haven’t ever really felt that I was using my full capacity, like using my full capabilities...if I got into a position where I felt that I needed to fill gaps in my capability...I mean that would definitely apply.” -Female, no children, Evaluator*

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*

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*“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*

Women also perceive the value of the MBA as a ‘leveller’ to assist them in the discrimination they face in moving up the ladder, largely as a result of having children. Many saw an MBA as one way through the glass ceiling:

*Interviewer: Did having a child impact your decision to do an MBA?*

*Respondent: Yes...it makes me more likely to do one because I feel like I am at a disadvantage because I have a child, in my career (and the MBA is a leveller).” -Female, mother, evaluator*

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*“I was working for (company name withheld) as a category manager at the time and I wanted to step up into general management and it’s very much, you know it’s a glass pyramid you know there are not many roles above a category manager (for*

women), and so the research I did indicated that (school name withheld) was... one of the best in Asia” – female, no children, Side-tracked:

In this context, women were concerned about the reputation and value of the MBA and whether it would give them the desired advantage.

*“But I just didn’t feel I was going to...I could...I could walk out of there and I could invest in a massive amount of time but I was going to end up with an MBA that was a dime-a-dozen, it wasn’t going to put me ahead of the curve of anybody. And at this stage of my career probably wasn’t...you know, it really wasn’t going to deliver a return on the investment. And an investment in terms of more of time rather than money...I do really believe that they’re going to be a dime-a-dozen,” - Female, no children, Side-tracked*

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*“I know everyone’s always sort of put it to me that it’s just about getting extra letters after your name and that there’s a lack of value in it now because everybody has one,” - Female, no children, Evaluator*

This again is a question of return on time invested with women asking - “What will I get from my time invested and how will it give an advantage if everyone has one?” Concerns that women have about the value of an MBA are validated by the impact of the glass ceiling. However, in contrast to the literature 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.

### **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 play a role in their MBA experience (Kelan & Jones, 2010). Most women argue that lectures should be conducted by “*whoever is best for the job*” or a “*leader in their industry*” and that gender should not be a consideration.

Tellingly, of the 30 women interviewed as part of this research only two women answered that there should be a 50/50 gender spread of lecturers stating:

*"There's no reason why, in business today, there aren't ample number of senior women leaders, and I think sometimes it's good to hear different perspectives." - Female, pregnant, Evaluator*

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*Respondent: Well ideally it should be something reflecting the gender...split of the community, so something around fifty-fifty.*

*Interviewer: Yeah, ok, that seems reasonable.*

*Respondent: Yeah. Well, you know, and, but look, I'm in a role here where... we have a gender problem in terms of getting foreign policy researchers, and for every one female that applies a hundred men apply. So it is hard and I appreciate that, but, yeah, I think that... I think that, you know, it's great to see both sides. And especially if part of the role of the MBA is to make networks and to find people that you can look up to. And if you're a woman and all you see is white men, Anglo-Saxon men, the ability to connect with them and understand how you two can find the path through is a lot more limited -Female, no children, Evaluator.*

The view that gender should not 'play a role' in MBA study reflects the findings of a 2005 JWT study which found that women "do not like to be singled out for special treatment, as this raises questions about whether they are as well-qualified as their male counterparts." (JWT report 2005 as quoted in Kelan & Jones 2010 pg 5).

This is consistent with the findings of the Harvard Experiment which 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.

### *The Harvard Experiment*

In 2011, Harvard Business School (HBS) conducted an 'experiment' designed to address an "intractable problem" (Kantor, 2013), that "year after year, women who had arrived with the same test scores and grades as men quickly fell behind." In particular, women lagged in class participation, which made up 50 per cent of final scores. Further, HBS had difficulty not only attracting but retaining their female faculty.

Cultural issues, such as women not being assertive enough in class, 'boys club' networking dynamics and male-dominated social dynamics were sought to be addressed by the school. According to Kantor's New York Times analysis, administrators and professors agreed 'That one particular factor was torpedoing female class participation grades: women, especially single women, often felt they had to choose between academic and social success.'

HBS sought to "change how students, spoke, studied and socialised" (Kantor 2013). Some of the specific measures introduced included in-class solutions such as offering training and lessons for women in how to raise your hand, speak-up in class, feminising the case studies to reflect a female voice and employing and engaging more female professors or guest lecturers. Outside the classroom, Harvard also began conducting female-only networking sessions and breaking down the 'boy-club' sexist socialising rituals.

The Harvard Experiment found:

1. That women have to be more aggressive and assertive than usual in order to be successful in business. Further, they must choose between being assertive and successful in business and being attractive to men
2. Women would fare better in an MBA program where more of the lecturers were also female (feminising the MBA). Also, that women would fare better in an MBA program where female student mentors led formal study sessions and informal social events. This is consistent with earlier research (Kelan & Jones, 2010; MacLelland & Dobson, 1997; Simpson & Utuma, 2009) which found the MBA to be masculine and too competitive.

3. Women do better in MBA programs where more of the coursework and activities involve working in teams. However, according to the findings of this research, group work is difficult for women with families and is a significant disincentive for study.
4. That women who promote their own accomplishments are more successful (post MBA) than women who are more reserved about discussing their achievement. However, self-promotion has been found to have a positive effect on both male and female career advancement (Siswanti 2010).

These findings of the Harvard Experiment are grounded in research by Vinnicomb and Singh (2010) which outlines the benefits of women-only management training as an additional resource (or complement) to traditional MBA programmes. Reflecting on how women “disregard their differences, values and preferences in order to make themselves like their male peers” (Vinnicomb & Singh, 2010), in women-only programs “women can contribute openly, their femininity can be freely expressed, and they can demonstrate authenticity to their values” (pg 300).

By-and-large, the Harvard Experiment was unpopular with both male and female students with some referring to it as a “painful experience” because women were viewed as receiving favourable treatment when compared to their fellow male MBA students (Kantor 2013).

Additionally, there is no support for female-only MBA training in this research. Gender is viewed as largely an irrelevant factor in the classroom; this is despite the known statistical gaps in the student numbers, as well as in the lecturer numbers and female representation in case studies. The respondents have a view that MBAs reflect the business culture which is dominated by men and male constructs. This was articulated by one Harvard Professor in her response to the Harvard Business School ‘Gender Experiment’ when she asked: “Are we trying to change the world 900 students at a time, or are we preparing students for the world in which they are about to go?” The respondents agree that while it isn’t ideal, the MBA should and must reflect “real-life” in a business sense.

Kelan & Jones (2010) argue that failing to acknowledge “systemic gender inequity...carries with it a powerful and attractive message that the world is gender egalitarian. This does not mean, however, that gender ceases to shape a women’s experience,” (pg 33).

This view articulates how the glass ceiling and its impact in failing to produce an adequate number of female role models in leadership, or bring about adequate cultural change in the workplace, is having a negative impact on the numbers of women pursuing MBA study. It highlights a self-perpetuating and longstanding social problem whereby the glass ceiling produces a lack of female role models in business which, in turn, creates a perception that gender inequality in MBAs is acceptable because it reflects this unacceptable reality.

### **Motivators and aids**

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 a graduate business school, finance their education and devote time and energy to their studies (Marks and Edington 2006). This research has identified a number of ‘motivators’ and ‘aids’ - which on one hand incentivise women to complete MBA study and on the other, combat deterrents and provide support for MBA study.

### **Building a pathway for women post-MBA**

The research has found that a woman is 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. In this sample, a majority of the women who started or completed MBAs 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, these concerns largely evaporate 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 following exchanges occurred with women who, when initially asked for their reasons for not enrolling in an MBA, cited time and cost as the two largest deterrents:

*Interviewer: “If they said, look, you know, you’ve got your... you could be the CEO of this organisation, all you need to do is an MBA. What would that do, if you...”*

*Respondent: “Oh, I’d definitely do it. Yeah” – Female, mother, evaluator*

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*Interviewer: If someone at your work came to you and said, (name withheld), you've got leadership potential. We think you should do your MBA or some other post-grad study to skill you into business". Would you ...(do an MBA)?*

*Respondent: Yeah – Female, mother, evaluator*

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*"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 responding to the question: 'What does work/life balance mean to you?', most answered flexibility at work. Given that one of the leading deterrents for MBA is concerns about work/life balance, it is not surprising that the likelihood of a women undertaking MBA study increases if the employer accommodates her through flexible working hours.

The support of the employer also helps build in a return on investment by providing women with a leadership and career pathway:

*Respondent: Oh well, you know, it's this whole thing, there's no sense to it, that the pay gap starts immediately...you know, like there is no...there is absolutely no...good reason for that. Like I actually can't rationalise that except for the fact that I do think that men are better at asking for promotions, are better at asking for pay rises, so it's... there's so many points of failure in the system... I mean this is the reality that we live in so it's...there needs to be a lot of change.*

*However I think that, you know, maybe the time to get women locked into this in some way is actually when they're doing a graduate degree so...there is a pathway, there is a pathway, and maybe it's like well I need a break but you almost commit in some way to that pathway after a period of time 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*

The role of the employer in increasing the participation rate of women in MBAs is grounded in existing research which finds that providing relief to women from a variety of non-work concerns can affect the likelihood that they will 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).

This research has found that the employer has a significant role to play in helping women commence and complete MBA study. By offering encouragement and support in the form of a leadership pathway, women are more inclined to think themselves capable of study. They are more inclined to see that MBA study is worth the time investment. They are also more likely to perceive that the juggle of negotiating the work/life conflicts is worth the struggle.

### **Mentoring and role models**

Mentoring is an important training and development tool with mentors reputedly becoming counsellors, guides, tutors, coaches and sponsors for their mentee (Hunt and Michael 1983). According to Hunt and Michael, mentors are often 'highly placed, powerful, knowledgeable individuals who are willing to share their expertise but who are not threatened by the protégé's potential for equalling or surpassing them,' (pg 481).

Career mentoring is associated with increased promotions and pay. Most corporate presidents have had mentors who were vital to their success (Jennings 1971 as quoted in Hunt & Michael 1983 pg 475) 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 (Phillips, 1977; Missrian 1980, as quoted in Hunt & Michael 1983 pg 476). Mentoring is a widely recognised career resource in an organisation (Whitely et al, 1992; Ragins & Scandura 1994; Dreher & Ash 1990). It has been found to be related to promotions, career mobility and career satisfaction (Ragins & Scandura, 1994); as well as greater satisfaction with pay and benefits (Dreher and Ash, 1990). The ability of entry-level employees is also increased by mentoring (Athey et al 2000). Mentoring has been found to be of particular significance to

women (Burke & McKeen 1990, Kanter 1977) assisting them to 'break through the glass ceiling' and move up the ranks of organisations by offering organisational recognition, a loyal base of support, career rejuvenation and improved job performance (Ragins & Scandura 1994; Kram 1985). Mentors can also "buffer women from discrimination and help get them on the 'fast track' to advancement." (Ragins & Cotton 1991 pg 939). The Evaluators group in this sample identified support from sponsors, former students and ideally, mentors as something that, once they commenced an MBA, would assist them in completing it. This was identified by women in the Side-tracked of the sample.

*Interviewer: If you had had a mentor when you were doing your MBA the first time, perhaps someone that had had a similar experience to you...How do you think that would have impacted your decision to stop, and, you know, or whatever, or was that...you know, if you'd had someone to sort of model your behaviour on would it have made a difference?*

*Respondent: I think definitely...Because 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*

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*Interviewer: So a mentor would have been valuable, but even more valuable if they had a similar experience...*

*Respondent: Yes. And probably I would have restarted my MBA a lot sooner," - Female, mother, Side-tracked*

Most women remarked that their ideal mentors are people who shared similar life values and characteristics. This reflects research that the most effective mentoring relationships typically arise among individuals who share similarities, such as sex, race, ethnicity and background and interests (Levinson et al 1978, Rhode and Kellerman 2006 pg 23). 'Like'

mentors are especially important for women as they can serve as role models as well (Ragins et al 1994):

*“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.” - Female, Side-tracked*

Mentoring and role models are a significant and important factors for both men and women and this research has found that they 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.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

MBA's are different from other postgraduate degrees given their impact on a graduate's career, often driving middle managers into senior management roles (Kelan & Jones 2010, Baruch et al 2000). In Australia, few degrees cost as much or arguably demand as much of students in terms of face time, group time and study time.

It is the only postgraduate business degree requiring students to have previous experience in business and management. This means the cohort is generally older than the average postgraduate cohort (with the average age of 33, as opposed to 25) with many students balancing families, work and study time – creating conflicts which women feel more acutely, as most-often the primary caregiver.

In interview after interview in this research, female respondents cited time and money as their two primary deterrents to MBA study; with flexibility the most commonly offered solution. However, on analysis it is evident there are other issues at play which limit the numbers of women enrolling in and graduating from the MBA. Specifically, 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 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 MBA investment, even though there is some awareness that this return could be remote in light of the systemic limitations of an embedded and omnipresent 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.

However, 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. While public policy (paid parental leave, subsidised childcare) has had an enormous impact in supporting a mother's participation and retention 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 that managing this conflict is so difficult to contemplate (far more difficult than the study itself) that they opt out altogether.

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’. The difference in attitudes between the genders reflects the literature (Eccles 1987) which found that at the core of the MBA gender gap problem is that men and women have different notions of what it means to ‘achieve’. Eccles argues that “research has focused on the question “How are women different than men?” rather than “What influences men’s and women’s achievement behaviour?” (pg 166) .

These interviews also revealed an emerging theme about women and how they perceive their role as the primary breadwinner - the guilt they feel, the resentment they feel and the difficulty of ‘doing it all’. It revealed wider cultural and attitudinal roadblocks that prevent women from settling into their roles as both mothers and workers. While part-time work, does offer some solution to the conflict that women face between wanting to work and wanting to be with their children, as well as the need to support their household income, part-time work is often not available at the level and quality of a women’s pre-maternity grade, seniority or salary that would compensate a women considering an MBA to the requisite level.

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 husbands cannot get work or do not earn as much as 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.

An MBA at one of the top Australian business schools costs around \$70,000 and takes a significant amount of time (at least 40 hours per week plus 120 hours per semester or term). It is clear from this research that women want to see a solid a return on their investment.

What is 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. Symonds (2014) argues that "solving gender inequality at later career stages may help improve the pipeline into business school" but "beyond the wage gap, the return on investment of an MBA for a woman in her late 20s or early 30s does not look the same if she wants to start a family in the prime of her childbearing years." Although women tend not to openly admit the influence of gender on their working lives, this is largely because there is an underlying acceptance of the status quo (Kelan & Jones 2010). However, 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 flexible hours and peer support for time off and study. This needs be a top-down and culturally supported organisational initiative. Dreher (2003 pg 557) points out, the real issue is the "removal of barriers that limit the career attainment and contribution of otherwise talented individuals," (Dreher 2003, pg 557). Initiatives from business schools obviously have an important role to play in supporting women through these conflicts and the care of their children.

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 (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). Employers have the ability to introduce specific education and leadership pathways to support women which, coupled with a mentoring or sponsorship program (providing supports and role models) could have a powerful impact on the numbers of women pursuing MBA education.

Women thrive on support and guidance from others and particularly 'like' women - with children, husbands and conflicts - who have gone before them and succeeded. Most women who did not complete their MBA in this sample cited mentors as the single factor which may have kept them studying when it all seemed too much. Mentoring and role models are found to be powerful instruments in encouraging women to start as well as continue with MBA study. The impact of mentoring on career development and progression, and its impact on women, is endorsed in the literature (Ragins & Scandura, 1994; Dreher and Ash, 1990, Whitely et al, 1992, Burke & McKeen 1990, Kanter 1977, Ragins & Cotton 1991 pg 939) but a growing emphasis on an emerging concept - sponsorship - could potentially have a greater impact. 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. A Harvard Business Review study (Ibarra et al 2010) suggests that while valuable, women are actually 'overmentored' and 'undersponsored' relative to their male peers and this could be one reason why they are not putting themselves forward, or attaining, the top roles.

This research revealed evidence of an emerging theme that women do MBAs to overcome perceived deficits whereas men do MBAs to build on perceived strengths. This is a potential area for further examination and research.



In a majority of the interviews when asked why they had either decided to commence an MBA or were considering it, women responded that they wanted to improve in some way, overcome a professional or personal deficit, as well as build their confidence and credibility. Men on the other hand, focused on 'taking themselves to the next level' and maximising their skills. While both men and women were focused on self-improvement to a certain extent, the female responses had an overtly negative and self-deprecating tone when compared to the men. This negative tone can, in part, be explained by the theory expressed in some of the literature (Melamed 1996) that women complete MBAs to combat the impact of the glass ceiling. In other words, women are aware that they have barriers to face to get into senior leadership roles and perceive the MBA as one way to help "slingshot" women (Lindsay N, April 2014) into senior management.

However, this may also be consistent with research that shows that women tend to underestimate and men overestimate their perceived strengths. Discussing the reasons why women face barriers in male-dominated fields, Eccles (1987) finds that "institutional barriers, although highly important, are not solely responsible" and that "psychological factors also contribute to women's underrepresentation in certain high-level and scientific careers," (Eccles 1987 pg 136). These factors, Eccles argues, could limit women's "professional and educational accomplishments through their influence on the training young women seek and the skills they acquire," (Eccles 1987 pg 136).

Taking this psychological perspective further, Beyer and Bowden (1997) assessed the gender differences in self-perception. Using three measures - accuracy of self-evaluations, calibration for individual questions, and response bias- significant gender differences were found. Beyer and Bowden (1997) found that "females' self-evaluations of performance were inaccurately low, their confidence statements for individual questions were less well calibrated than males; and their response bias was more conservative than males" (Beyer & Bowden 1997 pg 157). None of these gender differences were found for feminine and neutral tasks. Accordingly, Beyer and Bowden argue that these inaccurate self-perceptions "might negatively affect achievement behavior and curtail their participation in masculine domains is discussed" (Beyer & Bowden 1997 pg 157). Obviously, the business environment is one such masculine domain.

This is evidenced further in research from Spencer, Steele & Quinn (1998) who discussed the impact of the stereotype that women lack math ability and found that when women perform math, unlike men, they risk being judged by the negative stereotype that women have weaker math ability. The researchers found that when a test was described as producing gender differences and the 'stereotype threat' was high, women performed substantially worse than equally qualified men. In other words, women are no worse than men at math, but they think they are and as a consequence, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. In many cases, particularly those in the Evaluator group in this research, the lack of confidence in their maths ability is enough to deter women altogether, thinking they will need to do twice as much work as their male peers in order to pass these subjects. Of course, women do just as well as men at graduate level, which is seemingly why the Graduate group of females refer to how 'necessary' and 'important' the numerate subjects are to an overall understanding of management.

A woman's tendency to underestimate her own skills also makes it difficult for women to negotiate strongly for their own advancement and for additional benefits at work with female MBAs found to be less willing to negotiate aggressively for pay and promotion (Babcock and Laschever 2003). This means that one of the key incentives for women to complete MBA study in the form of encouragement and support from their employer may be less successful if left to individual women to negotiate with their employer one-on-one. Babcock and Laschever's work on women and negotiation found that women are much less likely than men to see the benefits of asking, and recalled "story after story of women not realising what could be changed simply by asking" (pg 20).

The findings of this research highlight what business schools can do to better their MBA offerings and attract more women. By outlining their 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 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. 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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## Appendix 1

### In-depth Interview Guide

- A. Introduction: Profiling the informant
  - 1. Family demographics
    - a. Marital status (if married, when?)
    - b. Children (gender, age?)
  - 2. Timeline for the MBA
    - a. When did they (consider, start, complete?)
    - b. Family situation at that time?
- B. General Theme: What are the perceived barriers or constraints on completing an MBA and do they differ by gender?
  - 1. What are the main reasons you completed an MBA (*you have not completed an MBA at this point in your career*)?
  - 2. What does the phrase “work-life balance” mean to you?
  - 3. Do you have work-life balance in your current situation?
    - a. If no, what are the key barriers or constraints that prevent you from achieving work-life balance?
    - b. If yes, what are the key factors that allow you to achieve work-life balance?
  - 4. How would (*did*) completing an MBA affect your work-life balance?  
  
(*If time-related*)
  - 5. What changes would (*did*) you have to make in your life in order to have the time to do an MBA?
    - a. In terms of your career?
    - b. In terms of home life?
    - c. Do you have dependent children?
      - i. If yes, how many children and list their age(s)?
      - ii. Are you a single parent?

- iii. If yes, how does having children impact your decision to complete an MBA?
- 6. What things could the MGSM do (*have done*) to make it easier for you to have time to do an MBA?
  - a. Class meeting times/days?
  - b. On-line activities and assessments?
  - c. Support with child care
- 7. What things could your employer do (*have done*) to make it easier for you to have time to do an MBA?
  - a. Flexible working hours?
  - b. Flexible working location – eg home office?
  - c. Understanding employer and colleagues who provide support as needed
  - d. Support with child care
- C. General Theme: Does the perceived importance of an MBA to career success differ by gender?
  - 8. Completing an MBA takes a substantial investment of time and money. Do you think this is a good investment?
    - a. Do you think you would receive (you have received) a positive overall return on your MBA “investment”?
    - b. Why or why not?
    - c. What kinds of “returns” would be most important to you?
  - 9. How important is obtaining an MBA to somebody who wants to be a managing director one day?
  - 10. Does this depend on the profession/industry? Is an MBA more important for some careers than others?
  - 11. Does this depend on whether one works in the private versus public sector?
  - 12. Is an MBA more important for large companies or small ones?
  - 13. What are some of the benefits of completing an MBA?
  - 14. What are some of the drawbacks of completing an MBA?

D. General Theme: Do general perceptions of the MBA degree differ by gender?

15. How competitive is the classroom environment?
16. How competitive should it be?
17. What is the gender composition of the lecturers in an MBA degree?
18. What should the gender composition be?
19. How assertive do you need to be in classroom discussions and debates? Is this harder for women?
20. Is the MBA essentially a male-oriented degree?
21. How much individual versus team-oriented work is there?
22. How much should there be?
23. How important are student mentors?
24. How should student mentors interact with incoming students? What are the benefits?
25. How important are social events outside of the classroom?
26. Internship/work experience components

E. General Theme: Are Mentors Important?

27. (Ask participants about their career aspirations)
28. (Ask them to name a specific person who has served as a mentor in the past. Ask them to describe that person. What were the key benefits?)
29. "If you could pick anybody, past or present, no matter how famous, who would be your ideal mentor? Why?"
30. "What general characteristics should mentors have?"
31. "Do you have a mentor at your current company?"
32. "How important would it be to have mentor in completing an MBA?"

## Appendix 2

### Ethics Application - Final Approval

Send to: Chief investigator/Supervisor

CC: Co-Investigator or Co-Investigators

RE: Ethics Application Ref: 5201400185 - Final Approval -

Dear Professor Areni,

RE: 'Women and Leadership: Understanding the Gender Gap in MBAs ' (Ref: 5201400185)

The above application was reviewed by the MGSM Ethics Sub-Committee. The MGSM Ethics Sub-Committee wishes to thank you for your well-written application. Approval of this application has been granted, effective "18/03/ 2014". This approval constitutes ethical approval only. This research meets the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). The National Statement is available at the following web site:

[http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/\\_files\\_nhmrc/publications/attachments/e72.pdf](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/publications/attachments/e72.pdf).

The following personnel are authorised to conduct this research:

Chief Investigator: Professor Charles Areni Other Personnel: Michelle Wood

NB. STUDENTS: IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO KEEP A COPY OF THIS APPROVAL EMAIL TO SUBMIT WITH YOUR THESIS.

Please note the following standard requirements of approval:

1. The approval of this project is conditional upon your continuing compliance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).
2. Approval will be for a period of five (5) years subject to the provision of annual reports.

Progress Report 1 Due: 18/03/ 2015  
Progress Report 2 Due: 18/03/ 2016  
Progress Report 3 Due: 18/03/ 2017  
Progress Report 4 Due: 18/03/ 2018  
Final Report Due: 18/03/ 2019

NB. If you complete the work earlier than you had planned you must submit a Final Report as soon as the work is completed. If the project has been discontinued or not commenced for any reason, you are also required to submit a Final Report for the project.

Progress reports and Final Reports are available at the following website:

[http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how\\_to\\_obtain\\_ethics\\_approval/human\\_research\\_ethics/forms](http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/human_research_ethics/forms)

3. If the project has run for more than five (5) years you cannot renew approval for the project. You will need to complete and submit a Final Report and submit a new application for the project. (The five year limit on renewal of approvals allows the Committee to fully re-review research in an environment where legislation, guidelines and requirements are continually changing, for example, new child protection and privacy laws).

4. All amendments to the project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee before implementation. Please complete and submit a Request for Amendment Form available at the following website:

[http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how\\_to\\_obtain\\_ethics\\_approval/human\\_research\\_ethics/forms](http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/human_research_ethics/forms)

5. Please notify the Committee immediately in the event of any adverse effects on participants or of any unforeseen events that affect the continued ethical acceptability of the project.

6. At all times you are responsible for the ethical conduct of your research in accordance with the guidelines established by the University. This information is available at the following websites:

<http://www.mq.edu.au/policy/>

[http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how\\_to\\_obtain\\_ethics\\_approval/human\\_research\\_ethics/policy](http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/human_research_ethics/policy)

If you will be applying for or have applied for internal or external funding for the above project it is your responsibility to provide the Macquarie University's Research Grants Management Assistant with a copy of this email as soon as possible. Internal and External funding agencies will not be informed that you have final approval for your project and funds will not be released until the Research Grants Management Assistant has received a copy of this email.

If you need to provide a hard copy letter of Final Approval to an external organisation as evidence that you have Final Approval, please do not hesitate to contact the FHS Ethics at the address below.

Please retain a copy of this email as this is your official notification of final ethics approval.

Yours sincerely,

Chair  
MGSM Ethics Sub-Committee

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Email: [ethics@mgsm.edu.au](mailto:ethics@mgsm.edu.au)

Web: <http://www.research.mq.edu.au/>