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THE PUBLICATIONS OF RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT WORK OF OULU UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

Anna-Maija Lämsä, Terttu Savela

femaleForum – Competence for the Future

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## femaleForum – Competence for the Future

Leverage from  
the EU  
2007-2013



**OULU**  
FINLAND







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## Presentation of the femaleForum project

The fForum project (femaleForum) is a six-year education, research and development project on women's entrepreneurship and leadership implemented in the Northern Finland region. The implementation period of the project is 1.7.2008–30.6.2014.

Based on the idea of lifelong learning, the fForum offers a training palette, a development model for skills aimed at different target groups and different lifecycle stages of the entrepreneur and the company. The model can differentiate and take into account the participants' different backgrounds, needs and requirements as

well as the company's/entrepreneur's lifecycle and development phase. With the training palette model, it is possible to tailor and differentiate the development and education of entrepreneurial skills according to the needs of participants.

The training palette consists of four education and development entities: fStart, fFirm, fPro Immigrant Entrepreneur and fMBA.

This report focuses on the femaleMBA programme.

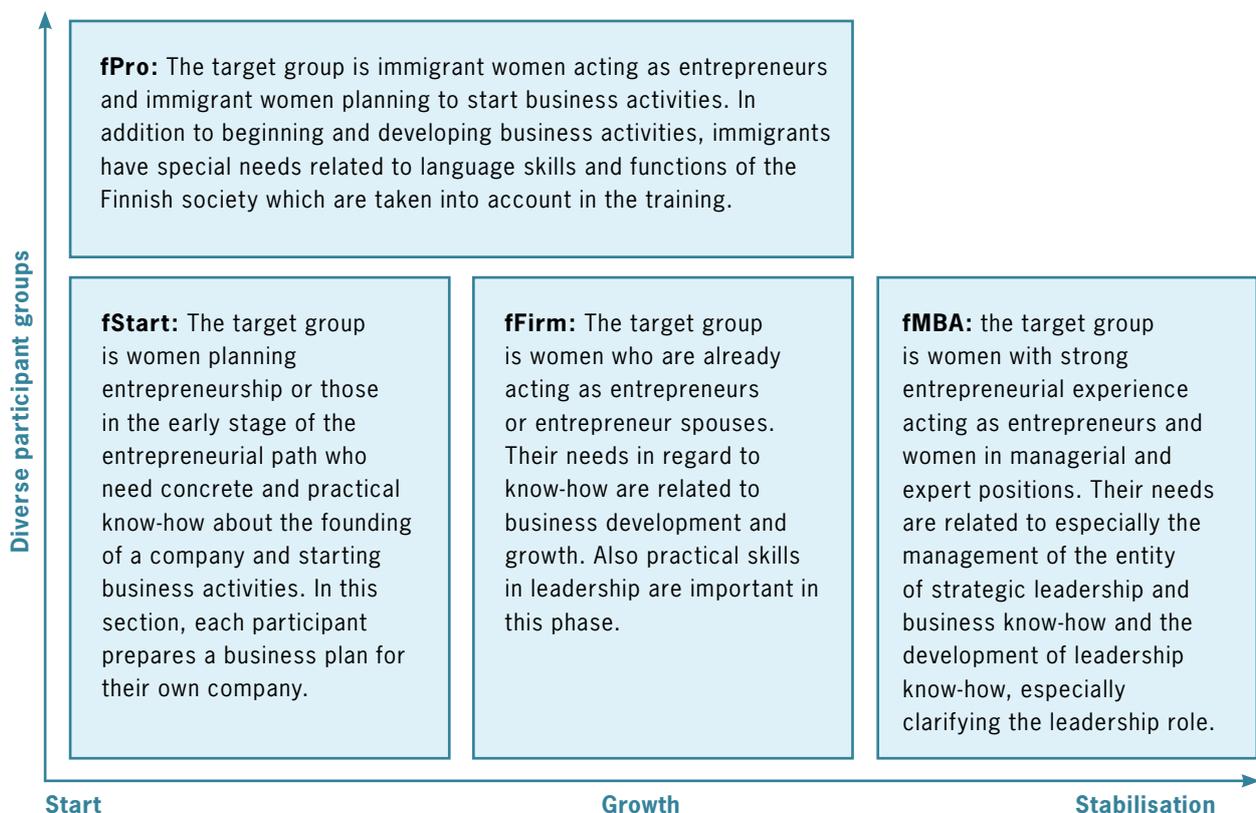


Figure 1. Training palette for the fForum project's entrepreneurial skills

## Presentation of the femaleMBA programme

Since the year 2000, Oulu University of Applied Sciences in Finland has carried out a number of projects to promote female entrepreneurship and the employment of women in executive positions. In the early stages, the focus of the projects was on developing practical entrepreneurial competences and business ideas. However, it was soon understood that women need longer-term and more in-depth education to support their development. As the University of Applied Sciences had developed special expertise in the education of female entrepreneurs and the management of projects related to female entrepreneurship, the decision was made to take advantage of this knowledge capital in a new way.

In 2004, a plan was put in motion to develop an MBA-level management training programme aimed at female entrepreneurs and executives. The target group was defined as people with limited opportunities to participate in privately financed MBA studies. The European Union's objective to promote gender equality contributed to the decision to develop the programme. The first femaleMBA (hereinafter referred to as fMBA) programme was carried out in 2005–2008 in the Northern Ostrobothnia region of Finland. The project was financed by the European Social Fund, the Northern Ostrobothnia Centre for Employment and Economic Development (subsequently renamed as the Northern Ostrobothnia Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment) and the enterprises and organisations that participated in the training.

The fMBA was a high-level academic, research and development project in business management for female entrepreneurs and women in challenging expert roles in organisations. At the core of the project was the MBA programme, a two-year continuing education programme in business management with an emphasis on the comprehensive development of enterprises. The main objective was to use management education to improve the management competence of female

entrepreneurs and executives, particularly in the area of business management, as well as encourage them to develop and grow their business operations. In addition to the focus on business management competence, the programme aimed to support participants in seeking challenging expert positions, strengthen their career progress and develop their identities as leaders. Another objective was to promote networking among participants. Furthermore, the project aimed to increase co-operation between universities and institutes of higher education as well as take advantage of and share the experiences and expertise gained from previous entrepreneurial education programmes at the Oulu University of Applied Sciences.

The fMBA programme aimed to develop participants according to the constructionist view of learning, where learners are perceived as having an active role in constructing their own learning, knowledge and understanding. The design of the programme was also influenced by Kolb's (1984) learning theory. Kolb defines the learning process as comprising four elements – concrete experience, reflection on that experience, the formation of abstract concepts based upon the reflection and testing the new concepts – all of which are necessary elements for learning. The elements were incorporated into the fMBA programme.

The target group of the fMBA programme were female entrepreneurs as well as women in executive and expert positions in private enterprises and public administration. For both groups, applicants were required to have management experience, along with a strong desire to develop the operations of their own organisation as well as their own performance as a manager. Due to funding-related reasons, applicants were required to be residents of the Northern Ostrobothnia region of Finland. A total of 41 women applied for the programme, with 22 students selected based on interviews. The selection criteria included the applicants' academic background, work experience and

future development plans. Of the selected students, ten were entrepreneurs and twelve worked in expert or executive roles in various organisations. The average age of the participants was 43 years and they had an average of 12 years of management level work experience.

Feedback on the success of the training was collected immediately after each event for the purpose of evaluating the fMBA project. Despite the positive feedback, a need to study the results of the fMBA

programme over a longer time period was identified. There are very few studies of the long term impacts of executive education and management development projects in Finland. This article presents the key results of a study which aimed to determine the correlation between the fMBA programme and the career progress and management competence of the women who completed it. This study was carried out in co-operation between Oulu University of Applied Sciences and Jyväskylä University School of Business and Economics.

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## Introduction

Finland, like the other Nordic countries, can be characterised as a society with a high degree of gender equality from the perspectives of political activity, legislation and working life. Women's labour force participation rates in Finland are among the highest in the Western world, and unlike women in many other EU countries, Finnish women are in full-time employment (Crompton & Lyonette 2006). Women have held, and continue to hold, prominent positions in Finnish politics, including Ministers, Speaker of the Parliament, Prime Minister and President. Finnish legislation on gender equality in working life entered into force in 1987, several years later than in other Nordic countries.

Despite an advanced level of ideology, politics and legislation with regards to gender equality, the Finnish labour market is, in practice, quite segregated. Management positions are also segregated by gender, both vertically and horizontally. While the number of women in immediate supervisory roles and middle management has increased in recent years, there is no corresponding increase in the proportion of women at the senior management and boardroom level. According to Lehto (2009), women represented approximately one third of all supervisors and managers in Finland in 2008. In 2006, the proportion of women among Managing Directors and Chief Executive Officers was estimated at 7–8 per cent. Female members of Boards of Directors accounted for slightly over one fifth of the total. (Kotiranta et al. 2007.) Among managers of small companies, women represented a 25 per cent share in 2006. The largest proportion of women in management was in the local government sector and in non-profit organisations. (Vallan tasa-arvoa. Naiset ja miehet päätöksenteossa 2009.)

In Finland, women tend to hold managerial positions at lower levels of the hierarchy than men; women tend to be in management roles in female-dominated service industries, while male managers represent a large majority in male-dominated manufacturing and

construction industries (Kartovaara 2003). There are a mere handful of women in the senior management of major corporations, despite the fact that Finnish women have the highest level of education among both men and women across Europe (Lehto 2009).

A great deal of research has been conducted to study the problems encountered by women in career progress. Factors that promote career progress have been given less attention. However, management competence has been identified as one factor that promotes career advancement. Management competence, in turn, can be promoted through management education and development. For instance, the results of a study on MBA education by Sturges et al. (2003) indicate that the competencies gained from MBA programmes reduce the career barriers perceived by women and improve their career opportunities. A study of Finnish female executives and entrepreneurs by Lämsä and Hiillos (2008) also suggests that women perceive a high level of competence as one key factor in career success.

Organisations that offer executive education generally collect feedback from participants immediately or soon after each event is finished. According to Conger and Xin (2000), the problem with that type of reactive feedback is that it tends to reflect the participants' satisfaction with the teachers and trainers and the training situation rather than the long-term effects the training has on the participants.

The proportion of women in management development programmes such as MBA programmes is smaller than that of men (Sturges et al. 2003; Ibeh et al. 2008). For some reason, women do not apply for, or are not admitted to, high-level management development programmes to the same extent as men, despite the fact that such programmes are a significant factor in developing and succeeding as a manager and advancing in one's career (Melamed 1996; Simpson

2000; Sturges et al. 2003). A study by Keaveny and Inderrieden (1999) suggests that it's possible that women receive less support than men in participating in the development of managerial competences. One solution for promoting the position of women in executive roles is to create management education programmes aimed specifically at women. This report examines the fMBA programme aimed at women. The objective of this report is to present the results of an empirical study, the goal of which was to find answers to the following questions:

- What types of goals, in terms of career transition and management competences, did the women participating in the fMBA programme have before the programme began?
- What types of career transitions did the women make as a result of the fMBA programme?
- What types of management competences did the women gain from the fMBA programme?
- To what extent were the respondents' goals, in terms of career transition and management competences, accomplished in the fMBA programme?

This study is an explorative interview survey to determine the experiences of the subjects, i.e. women who completed the fMBA programme, as described by the women themselves. In other words, this study provides information on the fMBA programme from the perspective of the women who participated in it. The analysis of the data was focused particularly on career transition and management competences that the respondents associated with completing the fMBA programme. These perspectives were chosen due to the fact that they are commonly perceived as key objectives of MBA education. The study expands on earlier research on management development by taking the temporal dimension of education into account. The study also provides information that can be used for the practical development of female management.

The study programme under review comprised 44 classroom days, seminars, remote assignments related to the themes covered, small team work assignments and an extensive written development assignment,

which in many cases was related to the students' own organisations. The degree programme comprised 90 course credits. The programme's focal areas included strategic management and supervisory work, marketing, financial management, entrepreneurship and internationalisation. In relation to the theme of internationalisation, two student-funded study trips were made, one to Brussels in autumn 2006 and one to Shanghai in spring 2007. The study trips included learning about local business, expert services aimed at newly established enterprises, local culture and the operations of Finnish and local enterprises.

During the fMBA programme, research data was collected on the female students' career paths as a part of their lives. In conjunction with this data collection, the participants' career anchors (Schein 1993) were also identified. The study on career paths was part of a broader national NASTA research and education project on female executives (<http://www.nastaproject.fi>). Based on the data collected in the fMBA project, several presentations were made in Finland and abroad and scientific articles were written. In addition, at the time of writing this article, there have been four Master's Theses written at the Jyväskylä University School of Business and Economics on the subject of the fMBA programme.

## Methodology

The data was acquired through open-ended interviews. Prior to the thematic interview, each respondent was provided with the content areas of the fMBA programme by e-mail and requested to refresh their memories from the time they studied in the programme. The duration of the interviews varied from one to two hours. All of the interviews were recorded with the respondents' permission. The recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed. The transcription was performed by a research assistant. The interview transcriptions totalled 411 single-spaced pages. In reporting the results, the respondents are referred to by number codes 1–20 to protect their anonymity.

The economic conditions at the time of collecting the data for this study in summer 2009 were significantly weaker than at the time the respondents were in the fMBA programme. As such, data collection was carried out during a recession, whereas the planning and implementation of the fMBA programme was done during a period of economic boom.

The period of time between completion of the fMBA programme and the collection of data for this study was approximately one year and a half, which gave the subjects the opportunity to evaluate the programme after a longer period of time compared to a situation where the study would be carried out immediately upon completion of the programme. At the same time, a year and a half is sufficiently brief for the subjects to still remember the contents, process and events of the training programme (Mutanen & Lämsä 2006). The period of time between completion of the programme and data collection is still long enough to avoid the honeymoon effect of training programs (Boyatzis 2008). The honeymoon effect refers to participants experiencing changes in their thinking and actions immediately after completing a training programme, only to see them dissipate over time. The data was collected through thematic interviews.

# Results

## Goals in terms of management competences and career transition prior to training

The respondents' goals for the fMBA training were categorised by content. The categorisation indicated that developing management competence was clearly the most significant goal set for participation in the programme (16 persons). Other goals included finding new content for work and life (6 persons), organisational development (6 persons), promoting career progress (5 persons), acquiring formal qualifications (4 persons), networking (4 persons) and clarifying one's own managerial role (3 persons).

A more detailed examination of the management competences sought by the participants revealed that the subject areas shown in Table 1 were perceived as important developmental goals.

**Table 1.** Management competence sought from the fMBA programme

Competence	Mentioned by
Business competence and strategic management	10 persons
Theoretical and conceptual competence	5 persons
Managerial skills and organisational behaviour	4 persons
Marketing	2 persons
Human resource management	1 person
Financial management	1 person

Business competence and strategic management refer to comprehensive understanding of business operations and business logic. They are at the core of the competence that an MBA programme aims to develop (Hogan and Warrenfeltz 2003; Viitala 2005).

Theoretical and conceptual competence refer to business management concepts and theories: the participants wanted to put names on and acquire frames of reference for the experiences and challenges they come across in working life. An example of this is Subject 18, who said

*"I was kind of looking for theoretical content, since I have already experienced working life in practice".*

Four of the participants highlighted managerial skills and organisational behaviour as sought after competences, which is in conflict with Viitala's (2005) research on the development needs of Finnish executives. According to Viitala's findings, the key developmental areas perceived by executives are related to managerial skills and managing people. This study highlighted the role of business competence and strategic management as learning objectives, while in Viitala's (2005) study strategic management was ranked as the third most important developmental objective. The participants of the fMBA programme clearly placed more emphasis on this particular area: half of them stated that business competence and strategic management was a significant area of development.

This difference in results may be at least partly explained by the fact that Viitala's data comprised only business school graduates in executive positions, whereas the academic backgrounds of the respondents in this study were significantly more heterogeneous. It can also be assumed that the executives with business school backgrounds studied by Viitala had a good grasp of business operations and strategic management, while the more heterogeneous pool of respondents in the present study, comprising professionals in healthcare, law, technology and other fields, had a significantly greater need to develop their competences in this regard.

**Table 2.** Career transition goals in the fMBA programme

Direction	In current organisation	In another organisation
Vertical career transition (upwards)	2 persons	–
Horizontal career transition	1 person	2 persons

Five of the respondents mentioned career transition (Louis 1980) as a goal for participating in the fMBA programme. One of the comments on this particular goal was

*“I thought it would lead to progress in my career, although in my field organisations are quite flat, there aren’t that many opportunities for career advancement, the ladders just don’t go very high” (6).*

Table 2 shows the career transition goals of the women who completed the fMBA programme.

It is worth noting that none of the respondents stated that their clear goal was vertical upward progress in the organisational hierarchy of another organisation. Those who mentioned the goal of changing to a different organisation did so in the context of horizontal career transition. One of the respondents (11) stated directly that she hoped the fMBA programme would help her find a new interesting job, as her opportunities at her current organisation were limited. The other respondents who mentioned the goal of career transition highlighted the view that the fMBA programme is significant as it can lead to new opportunities. They did not explicitly state

that they were actively seeking a new job role, but rather expressed an open attitude regarding future opportunities.

#### **Achievement of career transition**

Career transition is defined as a change in the career of a participant in the fMBA programme, either in her own company or in the employment of another. Of the respondents, 17 persons mentioned career transition. Of these, 16 perceived a link between the transition and the fMBA programme. One respondent indicated that the transition was due to other reasons. All those who experienced a career transition and linked it to the fMBA programme spoke of voluntary transition.

Five of the women who experienced a career transition were SME entrepreneurs and the remaining 11 worked for someone else. Nine respondents transitioned to a different position or significantly changed their job role in the same organisation, while seven respondents transitioned to a different organisation. Four of the SME entrepreneurs had adapted their role in their existing company, while one had moved to a new company. Table 3 specifies the career transitions with a perceived link to the fMBA programme.

**Table 3.** Career transition linked to the fMBA programme

Direction	In current organisation	In another organisation	Total
Vertical career transition (upward)	5 persons	5 persons	10 persons
Horizontal career transition	4 persons	2 persons	6 persons
Total	9 persons	7 persons	16 persons

Slightly less than two thirds of the transitions were vertical: the respondents stated they had progressed to a hierarchically higher and, in terms of status, a significantly more challenging position. In addition to vertical career progress, six respondents described horizontal career transitions that were perceived as having made their work more diverse, enriching its content and making it more motivating. The majority of the respondents who had experienced a horizontal career transition suggested that they maintained their previous job title but were given more responsibility. One such comment was

*"I am largely responsible for HR management and financial management for the whole unit ... not that it's written down anywhere, but that's how it is in practice" (16).*

The majority of horizontal moves occurred in the respondents' existing workplaces, with only two of those who experienced horizontal career transition having moved to a different organisation. The respondents held varied views on the significance of the fMBA programme in the career transition. Some perceived the role of the fMBA programme in their career transition as fairly minor, despite mentioning the connection. The following comment exemplifies their views:

*"at least it gave me the courage to leave, you know, when you have been in the same work community for decades, you start to have a narrow view of things, so changing jobs is actually a fairly healthy thing to do" (3).*

Others, however, viewed the role of the fMBA training as significant, as evidenced by the following comments:

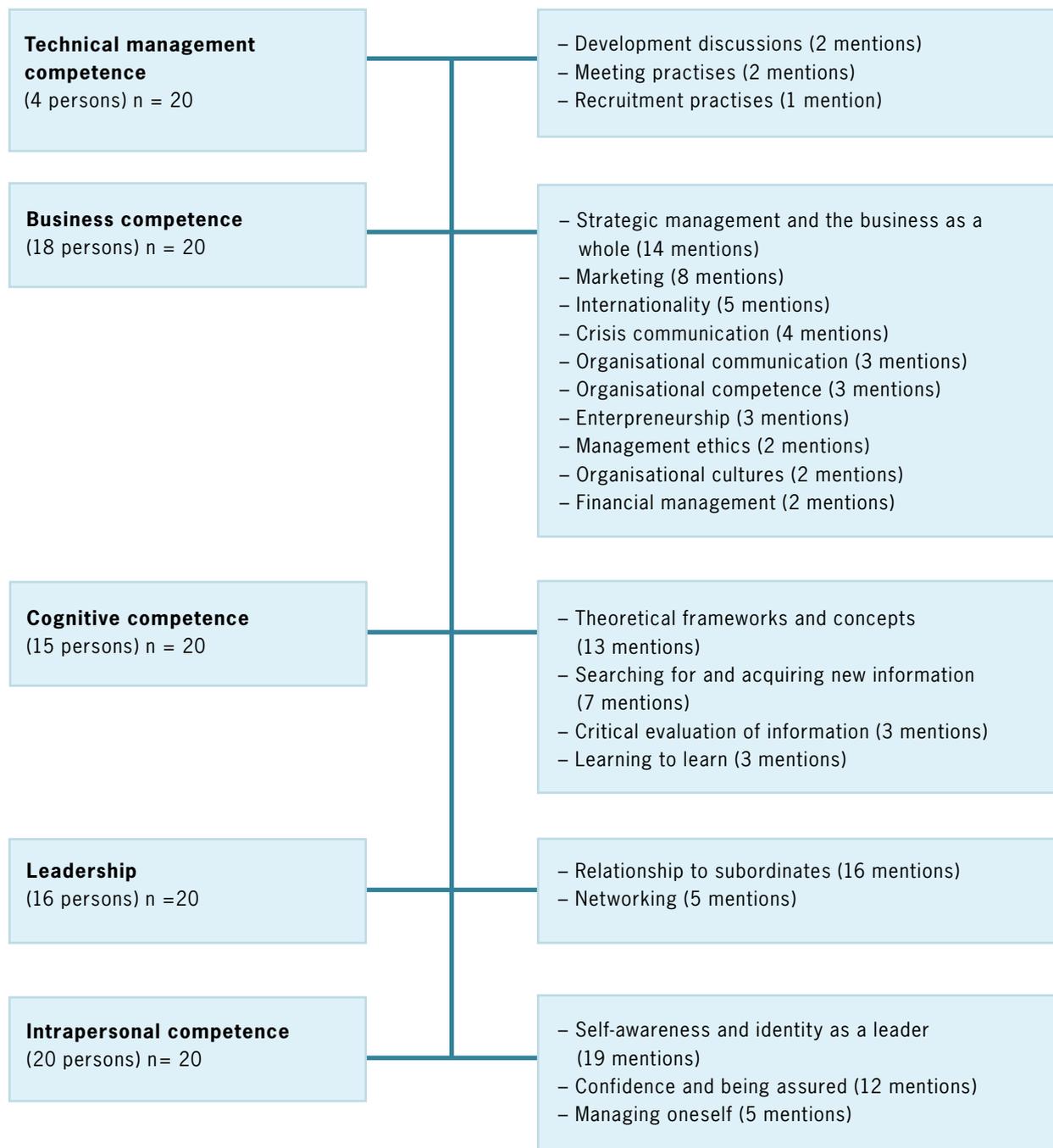
*"It has made a difference. It is a degree that is recognised and valued and many others in my organisation followed in my footsteps, in a sense, studying in various MBA programmes. And also, being in the programme improved my skills and competences and gave me confidence in my abilities. When it came to assuming increased responsibility, I had to decide whether to embrace it or fight it. ... It did make a difference. It shouldn't be underestimated at all." (17)*

Overall, the percentage of respondents who reported having experienced a career transition can be considered high: 80% (n=20) had experienced a career transition or multiple career transitions. None of the respondents who perceived a link between career transition and completing the fMBA programme viewed the transition as a negative one, but rather a positive career advancement in a hierarchical sense or in the sense of being assigned motivating new tasks. A closer analysis of the reasons for which completing the training programme was perceived as promoting career transition revealed three primary factors: increased competence (8 persons), improved self-awareness and confidence (8 persons) and increased recognition and credibility (6 persons).

The answers of respondents who reported having experienced career transition were compared to the career transition goals they had set themselves before the fMBA programme (Table 2). Of the five respondents who had set career transition goals prior to the fMBA programme, four reported having achieved career transition, while one did not. Of the four who had set career transition as a goal and subsequently experienced career transition, three reported the transition being of a different nature than what they originally set out to achieve: Two of them experienced vertical transition instead of horizontal, while one who had set vertical transition in her own organisation as a goal experienced vertical transition to another organisation. It is worth noting that 11 other respondents (n=20) reported having experienced career transition and linking it to the fMBA programme despite not having set it as a goal before entering the programme, at least not according to their interview responses.

### **Development of management competence**

Chart 1 summarises the respondents' perceived development of management competence. The left-hand side shows the five primary competences that were seen as the most significant in terms of development. The right-hand side shows the more detailed content of each primary competence.



**Chart 1.** Perceived development of management competences among fMBA graduates

Technical management competence was the area least frequently mentioned by the fMBA graduates. It appears that technical management competence was not a key area of learning, which is in line with the general objectives of MBA programmes. Business competence, like technical management competence, is focused on the management of things. Business competence refers to comprehensive and primarily generic expertise in managing a business: 18 out of 20 respondents reported having developed their business competence. Strategic management and managing the overall business (14 persons) and marketing (8 persons) were mentioned particularly frequently.

Comparing the development of business competence with the respondents' goals, it can be seen that strategic management was highlighted as both an important goal for studying in the fMBA programme and a perceived area of improved competence. Respondent 11 described what she gained from the fMBA training in terms of improving her business competence as follows:

*"in my opinion it's largely the management of business operations, and the operation of the corporate organisation in general, you know, how decisions get made and where strategies come from, what are the underlying things there."*

Cognitive competence refers to the ability to acquire, process and store information as well as conceptualise information and experiences. Cognitive competence comprises both information and the individual's motivation to learn. The key content in cognitive competence identified by the fMBA graduates was the learning of theoretical frameworks and concepts, which were mentioned by 13 respondents. Searching for and acquiring new information was also perceived as a relatively important area of development (7 persons). The extensive developmental project was viewed as particularly important in developing the ability to search for information.

Interestingly, only five respondents stated that they had set the development of theoretical and

conceptual competence as a goal for themselves prior to the start of the fMBA programme (Table 2). However, a significantly larger share of respondents reported having developed in that particular area after completing the fMBA programme and highlighted its importance in their work. Respondent 14 described her views on the matter as follows:

*"I hadn't really grasped the actual meaning of the word 'marketing' before. I always thought of it as advertising. I had also related it to a kind of a cheap-jack approach to selling, so my impressions about marketing were a little negative. But then we had this instructor that was really into branding. A lot of it was quite theoretical, but it made me see that there was actually something to it."*  
(14)

Leadership refers to the manager's ability and desire to influence others, particularly subordinates and co-operation partners. Acting as a part of a network as well as building and maintaining networks are important leadership skills. Of the fMBA graduates, 16 mentioned that their leadership skills had improved as a result of the programme. A total of 16 respondents mentioned that they had developed their leadership skills in terms of managing the relationship between manager and subordinate. Five of the respondents also mentioned that networking with others both within their organisation and outside the organisation had improved. However, the reports of improvement in external networking were rather scarce and, as such, it should not be interpreted as one of the key areas of development in the fMBA programme.

The participants provided plenty of detail regarding social relationships within the fMBA group and the open and supportive atmosphere of the group as a key factor in promoting the development of leadership skills. While theoretical learning was also seen as important, the group's support was perceived as even more significant in the development of leadership skills. In particular, discussions and exchanging experiences were seen as necessary and valuable forms of peer support. The high level of diversity in the fMBA students' backgrounds in terms of work experience, industry and

education was seen as a strength in sharing leadership experiences and learning from classmates. The diverse backgrounds were also seen as important because the participants did not represent rival organisations, which also facilitated open interaction. The respondents gave positive feedback about the programme being restricted to women only. This was seen as having promoted openness. It was observed that the respondents' attitudes to the programme being women-only were significantly more positive after completing the programme than before.

Also worth noting with regards to participants' networking with each other was the non-instrumental nature of the networking. The respondents indicated that their participation in the fMBA programme rarely led to business relationships between the students or their organisations, although a few such examples were provided. In most cases, the relationships were seen as a form of social support or even friendship. The existence of the fMBA group can be interpreted as a positive social resource that the respondents perceived as important. They suggested that they felt they could turn to their former classmates for help and assistance later on.

Comparing the development of leadership skills to the goals set for participation in the fMBA programme, it should be noted that only four persons (Table 2) indicated that they had originally set leadership as a goal for their participation in the fMBA programme. This observation is similar to the one in the area of conceptual and theoretical competence: the fMBA programme was perceived as having produced a significantly greater improvement in competence in these areas than the students had expected. A more detailed analysis of the perceived development in leadership skills highlighted the aspects shown in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Key aspects of development in leadership skills in the fMBA programme

Area of development in leadership skills	Mentioned by
Assertiveness	6 persons
Ability to delegate	5 persons
Taking subordinates' perspectives into account	4 persons
Motivation and encouragement	4 persons

Assertiveness was defined as convincing, clear and consistent actions in relation to subordinates. The respondents stated that they gained a better understanding of the fact that a manager or supervisor does not have to, and sometimes cannot, please others, and that it is more important to make the right decisions from the perspective of the organisation's operations. None of the respondents associated assertiveness with being tough or unfriendly, but rather acting in a clearer manner, more independent of other people's opinions. In particular, workplace conflicts and difficulties with subordinates were seen as challenges that were easier to manage with the assertiveness gained from the fMBA programme. The ability to delegate, taking the perspectives of subordinates better into account as well as motivating and encouraging subordinates were also highlighted as areas of perceived development. An example of a comment related to the ability to delegate more effectively comes from respondent 15:

*"I can do less, I have learned to delegate more and to assign tasks to men as well as women."*

Intrapersonal leadership skills are part of the deepest aspects of one's personality (Hogan & Warrenfeltz 2003). A key part of these skills relates to the leader's self-image, or identity: who I am as a leader and what kind of leader I am. Generally speaking, questions of identity are challenging for women in executive positions, probably more so than for men, because building the leader's identity is more complicated for

women. This is the result of the traditional – albeit often subconscious – view that the leader is a man and, in a certain sense, masculine. As women are still a minority, particularly in senior management, a woman in an executive role or striving to achieve an executive role may not have very many female role models and ideals that would provide cultural and social interpretative resources for the construction of her identity as a leader.

One of the key objectives of management development, particularly when aimed at women as in the case of the fMBA programme, is to support the participant's self-awareness as a leader. A total of 19 respondents stated that they had improved their self-awareness and clarified their own identity as a leader, while 12 respondents reported having improved confidence and being more assured. Five persons mentioned having improved their self-management skills. A similar result was reported by Simpson (2000), whose data collected in the United Kingdom suggested that women, in particular, gained improved self-understanding and self-awareness from executive training. At a more general level, the results of this study of the participants in the fMBA programme support Boyatzis' (2008) argument that people can develop their self-awareness and self-image in adulthood.

Clarification of self-awareness and identity was, in most cases, linked to recognising one's own strengths and weaknesses and accepting them to a larger extent than before. The respondents also analysed their own traits and characteristics in relation to various managerial positions in different types of organisations. This helped them distance themselves from the role of a specialist and associate more with general managers, and vice versa, as the following interview excerpts suggest:

*"And then that career anchor exercise, that really opened my eyes. It made me realise that I am a specialist, helped me understand why I don't want to be an entrepreneur ... I am a specialist and that's kind of what I want, to be recognised as a professional. I don't have to be a manager, but I could be.*

*a manager of people, I think I could be quite good at that."* (10)

The majority of the respondents indicated that the programme had helped them achieve a clearer understanding of what types of tasks and positions were the most suitable for them. With many, although not all, of the respondents who subsequently experienced career transition, the increased self-awareness was also perceived as having contributed to the career transition. Furthermore, several of the respondents suggested that a clearer identity as a leader and improved self-understanding helped them develop their confidence and be more assured in performing their work tasks. The improved confidence and being more assured was also perceived as stemming from improved business competence, particularly a better grasp of theories and correct concepts and a greater understanding of strategic management and business operations as a whole. The following excerpt from an interview demonstrates the increase in confidence:

*"I would say that the fMBA programme made me more assured in my role as a manager in an industry dominated by men. Interviewer: In what way did it help? It gave me the courage to speak up."* (2)

A number of things were mentioned as reasons for the improvement in intrapersonal competence. The most highlighted aspects, however, were the same as for leadership competence: the group's peer support and discussions within the group. In addition, various personal development tools and assessments used in the fMBA programme (e.g. 360-degree appraisal, career anchors, personality assessment) were perceived by many as supporting intrapersonal competence. The application of these tools assisted in self-reflection, which can be considered a key element of intrapersonal competence. The development of self-reflection and the ability to be aware of oneself, one's relationships with others and the ability to have insight into processes related to the self are considered fundamental and deep learning experiences.



## Conclusion and discussion

Based on this study, it can be concluded that MBA training – in this case a women-only fMBA programme – provides participants with career transitions perceived as positive. The majority of the respondents who completed the fMBA programme indicated that they had subsequently experienced a career transition. The majority of the transitions were vertical, upward moves in the organisational hierarchy. Horizontal transitions were also frequently mentioned by the respondents and viewed as positive. The horizontal moves were perceived as having made work more diverse and motivating.

A comparison of the career goals set prior to the fMBA programme and the subsequently achieved career transitions indicates that the goals were clearly exceeded as a result of completing the fMBA programme. The result supports the findings of previous studies suggesting that participants in MBA programmes perceive that they receive career benefits from the training (Baruch & Peiperl 2000; Simpson 2000). A study by Simpson (2000) in the United Kingdom argues that the career progress of female MBA graduates tends to involve horizontal transition to more challenging tasks compared to men, who tend to experience vertical transition, moving up in the organisational hierarchy. The incidence of vertical career transition among the fMBA graduates interviewed in this study was higher than that of horizontal transition, which does not support Simpson's (2000) conclusion of horizontal career transitions being dominant among female MBA graduates. That being said, the present study does not allow for a comparison between men and women such as the one in Simpson's study. Future research should focus on a more extensive analysis of the relationship between gender and career transitions after executive training, particularly MBA programmes.

While the career transitions experienced by the women in the present study can be partly explained by their

completion of the fMBA programme, it is rather likely that there were also other contributing factors. Those who seek continuing education and executive training opportunities are often oriented towards career transition even before the training takes place (Viitala 2005). While a relatively small proportion of the fMBA graduates indicated that they had set career goals for their participation in the programme before it started, it doesn't necessarily mean that they did not have such goals. Women are often expected to be humble and reasonable in setting ambitious goals, at least in public (Fels 2004). This factor may have influenced the respondents' answers in the interview setting.

The present study suggests that the fMBA graduates perceived their management competence as having improved to a significantly larger extent than what they had originally expected in terms of their goal-setting. Competence was perceived to have improved particularly in strategic management and managing the business as a whole, conceptual management competence, leadership and intrapersonal competence. All of the respondents reported having developed their intrapersonal competence. The most pronounced developments in that competence area were perceived in having a clearer identity as a leader, an improved self-awareness and a stronger confidence and a sense of feeling assured. In the area of leadership competence, the respondents perceive improvement particularly in the areas of assertiveness and delegation skills.

All in all, the achievement of the fMBA learning objectives appears to be in line with the achieved competences observed in international studies on MBA programmes (Hilgert 1995, 1998; Baruch & Peiperl 2000; Simpson 2000). The authors of this report found no previous studies conducted in Finland to compare the results to, but it can be assumed that the competences achieved by participants in Finnish MBA programmes are similar to those of MBA programmes internationally.

The results suggest that the fMBA programme was particularly effective in developing intrapersonal management competence, which is very noteworthy as that area is considered to be the most difficult one to develop (Hogan & Warrenfeltz 2003; Viitala 2005). Developing intrapersonal competence has been said to be particularly challenging in the case of female executives due to the relatively small number of role models (Simpson 2000). Why was the fMBA programme successful in improving intrapersonal management competence? One reason for this may be the fact that the programme was restricted to women only. The fMBA graduates emphatically highlighted the open and dialogue-oriented atmosphere of the group of women. The atmosphere was perceived as more open than that of mixed groups experienced by many of the respondents in the context of other training programmes.

The respondents' comments regarding the benefits of an all-female group can be interpreted in the light of Tannen's (1995) suggestion that women, when "behind the public stage", felt free to exchange experiences, engage in discussion, enjoy safe peer support and obtain models from classmates to apply in their own activities. This type of atmosphere is likely to support the development of self-reflection and provide a mirror to identify one's own strengths, needs, values and weaknesses. The development of an open and equal culture of dialogue can be assumed to have at least taken longer in a mixed group based on the finding that men have a tendency to be more vocal than women and thereby occupy the space in mixed groups (Tannen 1995). It is also likely that the open atmosphere and discussions contributed to the respondents learning assertiveness and delegation skills. Developing these qualities is often challenging for women (Martelius-Louniala 2007). The personal coaching and appraisal methods used in the fMBA programme, such as personality appraisal, analysing career anchors and performing the 360-degree management style evaluation, were also likely to contribute to the development of intrapersonal competences.

The study revealed that the women had originally set relatively modest goals for improving their management competences: the emphasis was on developing strategic management and business skills. As the women subsequently perceived as having improved their competences significantly more than they expected, it can be concluded that the quality of the fMBA programme was good. This conclusion is also supported by the fact that the participants had a diverse background in terms of education and experiences prior to the programme. In other words, it can be assumed that their expectations were high. The result also indicates that it is not practical to design and implement MBA programmes strictly on the basis of participants' goals and needs. It is clear that successful implementation calls for consideration of both the participants' perspectives and the views of the organisers.

The fMBA programme was a publicly subsidised training programme with low tuition fees, estimated at approximately 10 per cent of the actual market price. From the viewpoint of publicly subsidised female MBA training, it is important for the organisers to identify and target participants whose opportunities to participate in non-subsidised executive training are limited. Otherwise, the foundation for public funding is lost. Based on this study, it can be concluded that certain female target groups perceive that they need publicly subsidised executive training. In particular, such target groups comprise female SME entrepreneurs and women who work in middle management and as immediate supervisors in larger corporations or in public administration. In small enterprises, which companies owned by women commonly are, obstacles to participation in non-subsidised executive training include financial and, in part, ethical and moral considerations. In addition to the limited nature of financial resources, small business executives may consider it more justified to develop the competence of all personnel rather than just one person.

Among younger women in the lower levels of middle management in larger organisations who are at least a few years into their careers, there is an evident desire

to progress in their careers and develop management competences, but the opportunities for participating in long-term and expensive executive training are perceived to be minor. This result is supported by previous research on career obstacles faced by women. Women in expert positions, particularly if they are career oriented and have academic backgrounds in fields other than business and management, also appear to benefit from subsidised executive training.

The aforementioned groups would primarily not have had the opportunity to participate in privately funded MBA training. As the majority of the participants would not have been able to participate in non-subsidised programmes, it can be concluded that the fMBA did not compete with privately funded MBA programmes. From the perspective of potential future implementation and development of the fMBA programme, it is important to highlight the significance of student selection in legitimising the provision of the programme.

The present study suggests that a diverse group of women is a richer social and psychological resource for participants in an executive training programme than a group where participants represent a single industry or organisation. The presence of both entrepreneurs and employees can also be seen as contributing to positive diversity compared to a programme where only one group or the other is represented. The organisers of future executive training programmes should consider that a diverse group of participants, when skilfully managed, is an effective alternative for promoting diverse and extensive management competence among women. Also important is ensuring that the companies represented by the participants are not in direct competition with each other.

This study also produced theoretical information by creating a new conceptual outline of management competence. Based on the present study, management competence can be divided at the conceptual level into five primary competence areas. Technical management competence and business competence are focused on managing things, while leadership competence is

focused on managing people. These competence areas have traditionally been perceived as key aspects of management (Bennis & Nanus 1985; Lämsä & Hautala 2008). Previous research has also highlighted the role of intrapersonal competence (e.g. Kirkpatrick & Locke 1991; Hogan & Warrenfeltz 2003; Viitala 2005), which was also conceptualised in the context of this study. The cognitive competence presented as a separate competence area in this study, however, has not traditionally been mentioned separately in models of management competences. Rather, it has been perceived as one aspect of information management (Viitala 2005). The present study contributes to conceptual information by describing the contents of the main elements of management competences in an analytical and detailed manner.

However, the theoretical modelling of management competence requires continued research. Management competence frameworks may need to be supplemented by introducing the perspectives of emotions, ethics and responsibility. They are themes that have been of increasing interest to management researchers in recent times, but they have rarely been linked with management competences.

References by request.



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