MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES: THE SOUTH AFRICAN MASTERS IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (MBA) EXPERIENCE

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Abstract:

Little has been written about the characteristics of mature individuals enrolling in postgraduate management education, what motivates them to study, and what obstacles they overcome to get there. Our research addresses this gap in the literature through exploring student motivations for pursuing a Master in Business Administration (MBA) degree. Our findings show that common reasons for undertaking an MBA include business skills acquisition and enhancement, career progression and change, personal development, networking potential, and the prospect of academic stimulation. Obstacles encountered by our sample included financing the MBA, soliciting support from employers, (re)negotiating family commitments, time pressures, and apprehension in returning to the academic environment. The issues are not exclusive to South Africa and by understanding them, business schools more broadly may benefit.

Keywords:

MBA, mature students, management education, South Africa, return to study

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1. Introduction

Africa has come a long way since Safavi (1981) first painted a gloomy picture of the continent and described its inability to develop capable management. However, despite several positive upward trends, management development, the cornerstone of economic growth, does still lag some way behind international benchmarks. As Kraak (2005) notes, the expansion of high skills within South Africa is crucial, particularly because of the obstacles encountered under apartheid, and universities need to play a pivotal role in addressing current and future workplace needs, along with producing global managers (Kedia and Englis, 2011).

The Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree is the flagship qualification within business and management education (Mintzberg, 2004). A globally-recognised brand, it represents the staple of business schools and a well-trodden path to a management career. South Africa is no exception in this regard (Naude, 2011). MBA graduates are typically seen as a cadre of management professionals possessing a core set of knowledge, skills and competencies and increasingly, an international perspective.

Scholarly discussion about the MBA and its place in management education has tended to focus on its fitness for purpose or on the academic experiences of MBA students on their programmes. Little has been written about the characteristics of mature individuals enrolling in postgraduate management education, what motivates them to study, and what obstacles they overcome to get there. This is important to all business schools, particularly top-tier schools, because they wish to attract the best-suited candidates to their courses and need to understand the student market within which they operate, an aspect particularly pertinent in South Africa. If there are talented or well-suited individuals who are dissuaded or blocked from entering MBA education, then this adversely affects business schools' student recruitment and, in turn, potentially contributes to the underdevelopment of the managerial talent base.

Having an MBA is perceived by many as a passport to senior managerial roles and a fast track career (Baruch and Peiperl, 2000). Prospective students are typically concerned with acquiring managerial competencies quickly and efficiently, thus leapfrogging peers and improving career prospects. There are a number of factors that may motivate and encourage graduates to enrol on an MBA, which might be seen as providing intrinsic (development of the person) and extrinsic (career progression) benefits (Simpson and Sturges, 2007). Limited evidence on entrants to postgraduate courses in other vocational disciplines suggests a similar balance of motivations (Barber *et al.*, 2004; de Boer *et al.*, 2010; Liu, 2010).

In addition to motivations, there are obstacles that potentially block entry to postgraduate education, including the MBA. This is a substantially under-researched area but there are some indications of inequalities by gender, race/ethnicity and socio-economic background (Kelan and Jones, 2010; Montgomery and Anderson, 2007; O'Neil *et al.*, 2008; Schneer and Reitman, 2002; Simpson, 2005; Simpson *et al.*, 2004).

Having determined to enrol on an MBA, students also need to decide where to study. There again appears to be little research on this topic, which is surprising given

that marketing comprises a substantial element of business education. Bruce and Edgington (2008) suggest word-of-mouth plays an important role in choice of MBA programme. Rankings, such as those produced by the UK Financial Times (FT) newspaper, may be important as they are known to have *some* influence on choice of higher education institution in general (Clarke, 2007). For part-time MBA students, cost and location are issues, as are the precise organisation and content of the course (Carrell and Schoenbachler, 2001).

Our research addresses these issues by investigating the perceived opportunities and obstacles to MBA entry, including the challenges for those who take the qualification whilst remaining in the workforce. The issues are not exclusive to South Africa and by understanding them, business schools more broadly may benefit.

2. The study

To investigate these issues we surveyed and conducted in-depth interviews with a selection of full-time and part-time MBA students enrolled on a highly ranked programme in South Africa. The study focusses on both groups of students for two reasons. First, part-time students comprise something of a neglected majority in postgraduate management education and secondly we envisaged that the motivations and disincentives which apply might differ across part-time and full-time modes. Tertiary graduation rates are about 5 per cent for South Africa (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009). Despite this low rate of graduation, there are a number of highly regarded universities and business schools. By surveying and conducting in-depth interviews with students in both MBA formats about their perceptions and experiences, we were able to identify motivations and barriers that seem to apply in general and those that are specific to particular programme formats. This research may also indicate how such motivations and barriers might be manifested for full-time and part-time postgraduate management education in other countries.

3. Methodology

We surveyed 312 students through an online questionnaire which posed open-ended questions and interviewed a representative sample of 28 students enrolled on both full-time and part-time MBA programmes to explore in detail their motivation in pursuing an MBA, any barriers to enrolment that they had perceived and to ascertain their family and educational background and circumstances. Semi-structured interviews were selected to allow an exploratory and in-depth investigation of students' perceptions. Our aim was to understand students' accounts of their motivations and the obstacles they faced, rather than to quantify potential factors and correlate these statistically with student characteristics.

Students were invited to participate through an email request. 312 out of a possible 458 students responded to the survey resulting in a response rate of 68.1%. 28 interviews were conducted face-to-face in and lasted between 25 and 55 minutes each. Interviews were recorded with the interviewees' permission and transcribed in full. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity of interviewees, although programme mode and industry have been noted. All of the research participants were,

at the time of their interview, enrolled on either a part-time (n=159) or full-time MBA (n=153). The students were all based at the same South African institution which is located in a large urban area with a diverse population. The sample comprised of 214 men (68.6%) and 98 women (31.4%). The majority of the participants were South African (76.3%), a number from Southern African Developing Countries (SADC) (8.6%) and the rest were foreign nationals (15.1%). The racial composition was 184 White students (59%), 44 Black students (14.1%), 41 Indian students (13.1%), 13 students of mixed race (4.2%) and 30 foreign nationals (9.6%). Further characteristics pertinent to the sample are included in Appendix 1.

Creswell's (2012) data analysis spiral helped to direct the qualitative data handling and analysis process. In addition to emerging themes, the analysis was also informed by the literature concerning student choice processes, motivations and barriers which aided our understanding of how choice may be constructed and what constraints may possibly have been encountered by the participants. We also considered prominent themes which are present in literature on access to higher education and inequalities in educational transition.

4. Findings

Our findings show that there are several key factors leading individuals to enrol on an MBA and that there is considerable emphasis on choice of institution. Funding sources appear varied amongst the student sample but with similarities across delivery modes. Major considerations prior to the commencement of study include family commitments, levels of employer support and academic concerns. There are some gender differences but, perhaps surprisingly, minimal contrasts between students' perceptions of obstacles and motivations across the two MBA programme modes.

4.1 Motivation to embark on an MBA degree

Students enrolling on a MBA degree do so for a variety of reasons. These included: an improved, broader understanding of business or enhancement of their business skills (26.3%); career progression (22.9%); career change (17.1%); personal development (14.7%); a recognised business qualification (7.3%); potential networking opportunities (5.4%) and the prospect of academic stimulation (5.4%). A difference across gender is noted here. While women from both MBA formats chose a broad range of reasons for enrolling on an MBA programme, men were more narrowly focussed in their reasoning citing improved understanding of business and enhancement of business skills, along with career progression as their most common reasons. Differences between the two modes of MBA were also noted. In terms of ranking, part-time students ranked career advancement as their main rationale for embarking on an MBA; whereas for full-time students, career change ranked foremost in their choices.

4.1.1 Enhanced business 'savvy' and skills development

This was the most commonly cited reason by students for pursuing an MBA. Pedro (part-time student, oil), an engineering graduate, considered his commercial knowledge inadequate:

> My commercial knowledge was zero before I came to the MBA so the main driver for me to come to the MBA was really to improve my understanding of the business world because that's where I wanted to participate where my career is concerned.

This view was echoed by other participants who felt that an MBA would reinforce their management skills and the experience they had gained in industry. Forty five percent of the sample were specialists in their particular areas (engineering, financial services, IT, healthcare, and so on) and expressed a need for a more generalist qualification to be able to cope and fit better within their work environments.

4.1.2 Career progression

Beyond the skills that might be acquired through participation in the academic programme, the focus of gaining an MBA was to enhance the interviewees' career prospects. This was best expressed by Alan (part-time student, IT):

> Career-wise I decided that I didn't want to be doing this type of job in three or four years' time. I wanted to find a bit of an exit strategy to get to do something slightly different. I think the MBA is the right vehicle for doing some career planning.

Our research participants expressed a sense of responsibility around career growth and had clear ideas about where and how they wanted their careers to develop. As Sarah (full-time student, banking) notes, "you know when you get to your 30s, you are so clear about who you are, what you want in life, where you want to go in life."

4.1.3 Career change

This was the foremost reason cited by the full-time MBA students. As Graham (full-time, engineer) explained, "I wanted to broaden my horizons and avoid being pigeonholed as an engineer. The MBA is about giving myself options." Deciding to take a year off work with the resultant implications of a loss of earnings means that full-time students are serious about making a change in their careers. However, as Arcidiacono *et al.*, (2008) note, the expected financial returns for full-time MBA students are higher and therefore compensate for this over the long-term.

4.1.4 Personal development

What was surprising was that so many of the students in the sample (n=46) identified the implicit value of the qualification itself as one of their motivators for undertaking the programme. Kim (part-time student, public sector) explained that, "the purpose of my studies is definitely not about a piece of paper. I am excited at the prospect of the personal development – to be able to look within and develop myself as an individual." This particular reason was highlighted by men and women across both programme formats.

4.1.5 Potential networking opportunities

The potential for networking was a further, yet relatively minor, reason for choosing to enrol on the degree. Seventeen of our sample who highlighted this aspect felt that the MBA would help students make contacts and meet like-minded individuals. The degree, as James (full-time, manufacturing) noted, "offers all students an invaluable chance to meet and make lifelong friends with like-minded, highly motivated and talented individuals." It was also felt that mixing with peers would bring new perspectives on common issues (Grant, part-time, lawyer; and Isabella, full-time, healthcare). Kristos (part-time, IT) summed it up succinctly:

> It's a good investment; it's actually a pretty good investment. I would advise people to do it based on the networking. If you're prepared to make the most of the network here, then it's worth every penny.

However students also linked the choice of a part-time MBA programme to not losing contact with their existing networks, with Greg (part-time, engineering) saying: "I don't want to be out of industry for that long as I want to keep the networking contacts."

4.2 The decision-making process – the role of others

The students in the study were all mature adults who have professional, social and personal lives. The majority of the sample (92%) spoke of the influence of others and different forms of consultation that were undertaken prior to embarking on this academic journey. The most common source of influence (60.9%) around their decision to return to postgraduate study was through an individual who had previously undertaken the MBA. This was primarily accomplished through accessing existing networks with either someone who was a friend or family member, had been a student at the student's university of choice, or a manager within the student's work environment. For both full-time and part-time students, a further source of influence included their immediate superior (25.2%) who they had consulted either around skills enhancement, career development or support for funding. Those students in relationships (30.4%) consulted their partners. Eight percent of the students in the sample did not consult with anyone with previous experience of the qualification or anyone from their working environment prior to their decision to enrol on the MBA. The majority of these students were primarily privately funding their own studies and were single.

The students who had consulted others prior to making the decision to enrol in the MBA were further influenced by a number of factors. These included the personal and professional development of the successful MBA graduates from whom they had sought advice. The excerpts below capture the extent and type of that influence as experienced by the students:

> I had a friend who comes from the medical profession who did it full-time
> a few years ago and I chatted to her and I always thought if she can do it

> I can do it and I think she was probably the biggest motivator. And then I know … an engineer and he's just a very bright guy. He was very focussed and he's made a phenomenal success of his life afterwards and that fascinated me (Max, full-time, healthcare)

> He's my best buddy and ... he did his MBA, and I saw what it did for him, and he really kind of went from, zero to, well from a hundred, to three hundred kilometres an hour, and he did very, very well, both professionally, but also personally (Andre, part-time, media)

The notion of the MBA 'hero' or role model can be seen in all these descriptions. This was a person who had shown, and, more importantly, had been seen by students to have shown personal and professional growth; someone who was confident and articulate in the business world. Furthermore, this transformation was seen as being a result of participation on an MBA programme and therefore the success and status of the individual was, in these students' opinions, directly attributable to the acquisition of an MBA.

4.3 The decision-making process – choosing the business school

When considering an MBA, individuals must also decide where they wish to undertake their studies. These decisions are influenced by a number of factors. Within this sample of students, these factors focussed on, in order of importance: reputation or ranking of the business school - where the reputation of the institution of choice was viewed through its position on the FT rankings (43.9%); location or proximity to the student's work or home (21.2%); and the culture or perceived atmosphere of the institution (16.0%); and the learning approach (7.1%). Issues of programme delivery (6.4%) and cost (5.4%) were less significant. However for students for whom the reputational factor is key, this decision is quite complicated. Nick (full-time, consulting) summed up the dilemma of reputation versus convenience:

> I wouldn't have felt as good not saying my MBA is from this institution, so I guess it was an image decision but apart from that, I was staying here, my work is here, my family's here, so I guess the question is if the school didn't have the reputation that it does would I have still done it here? I probably would have because of the location but that wasn't my primary motive.

For working individuals doing the MBA on a part-time basis, time is a major factor and constraint in their lives. Students therefore made practical decisions around the location of the choice of business school, coupled with the school's ranking. This was found to be true for full-time students who, in addition to considering proximity to family and friends, viewed the city's reputation and the exchange programme on offer at the school as contributory factors.

Just over 40% of all students in the sample had previously completed their undergraduate – and in some instances, postgraduate – studies at the university within which the business school was located. This familiarity was another aspect of their choice process:

> The brand speaks to me, like I just think of the institution as being the best. Also my undergrad was there so I know the ins and outs (Lauren, full-time, insurance)

> I chose the institution because I had done another course there and my experience there was brilliant during that (Charlene, part-time, finance)

The familiarity or comfort factor or 'fit' expressed by students in the study speaks to the importance of welcoming higher education environments for adults and how this affected their choice of institution for postgraduate studies. However this comfort may be differentially experienced by potential students from different cultural backgrounds, with consequences for equality of opportunity (in that some may find the MBA environment discomforting). As Vaara and Faÿ (2011) have observed, there is a danger that a particular, self-perpetuating culture results.

4.4 Potential obstacles to MBA enrolment

The individuals in our sample anticipated and dealt with a number of challenges during the decision-making process regarding their MBA. These included: financing the MBA (50.3%); soliciting support from employers (20.2%); (re)negotiating family commitments (13.1%); time pressures (10.3%); and apprehension in returning to the academic environment (6.1%).

4.4.1 Funding the MBA

Finance was the most commonly-cited obstacle to entry, cited by just over half of the sample. Unsurprisingly, finance was a bigger potential barrier for those without employer support for their tuition fees. Family contributions, accessing own savings and securing bank loans were financial sources for full-time students. Many of the part-time students had secured financial backing from their employer, in whole or in part. In some cases this was as part of a 'golden handcuffs' arrangement whereby the employer contribution would need to be repaid if the employee left within a defined time period:

> I have signed a contract, signed something that says if I leave in a certain amount of time I pay back a certain amount of the fees that they have paid. It is actually not a huge amount and I just know that as much as I signed to say I agree that the reality is if something came along elsewhere then I would take that (Jill, part-time, manufacturing)

However, this arrangement also had its advantages, especially in light of the current economic climate, but also because career progression is important to our sample. As

Abdul (part-time, petroleum) noted, "I don't mind the two year payback because I am not running away in a hurry." Other self-payers had saved, taken out loans or were using redundancy payments to cover their fees. Where people had financed the programme from their own funds – either partially or in full – there was a clear expectation that this money would be recouped after the successful completion of the programme, as in Sharon's case:

> At the end of it I want to get my money back. So it's already what I am thinking about 'where to next after the MBA?' I will have a really good salary and all those things (Sharon, full-time, advertising)

4.4.2 Family commitments, time, support and academic fit

Aside from funding, interviewees perceived four other main obstacles to their entry to the MBA programme: family commitments; shortage of time; support (in the non-financial sense) from their employer; and academic requirements and 'fit'. Almost one-quarter of the participants perceived no significant barriers to participation, whilst 14.1% reported virtually no barriers whatsoever. However most of those who experienced few obstacles in their access to an MBA recognised that this reflected their situation *at that point*. That is, they perceived potential barriers to participation conditional on their stage in the life course. Several spoke of this being a "good time" to do an MBA, with this featuring particularly strongly for women:

> I know a lot of it is kids. And even the guys [*sic*] to be honest when they have kids they find that really difficult to shut the door and get the work done. But for me because I don't have that at this point, it was a good time to do it. I had enough experience but didn't have too many commitments (Nkateko, full-time, hospitality)

> This is the best time for me to study. I don't have children yet, and I would like to have children one day. And now would be a good time to start doing the MBA (Sally, part-time, healthcare)

Several men in the sample had young children (16.3%) and reported factoring this into their planning, but only in one case did this jeopardise continuing on the programme. A supportive partner appears essential:

> I definitely had to consult my wife and she was okay with the second strain on raising kids while I was busy with my studies (Andy, full-time, investment).

Conversely, only fifteen of the women (4.8%) in the sample had dependent children. For one particular student, continuing on the MBA, holding down a senior job and being a single parent was exceptionally precarious:

> I'm a single parent with two young children and it has its fair share of moments where I think, I'm either going to commit a murder or I'm going to have to just try and hold on to my sanity (Michelle, part-time, NGO).

4.4.3 Support from employers

Employer support – in the practical and moral rather than financial sense – also figures prominently in the accounts from part-time students. While this was obviously less evident for full-time students, some employer resistance to the MBA was noted:

> The toughest thing was making the employers … getting them on board. They were happy for me to do it in my own time but to do it in a way where I can use my work stuff, then to be supported financially a little bit and show them how it will benefit just was quite tough. I had to fight really hard to a point where, at one point, it was not going to happen (Tony, part-time, engineering).

4.4.4 Shortage of time

Time is mentioned by several participants as a potential barrier. This is hardly surprising as those taking the course in its part-time format are busy professionals. However beyond those in the sample who considered family commitments and the proximity of the business school because of time constraints, it is difficult to be certain whether time as a factor was a serious consideration prior to joining the course or a judgement made in hindsight.

4.4.5 Academic uncertainty

Academic barriers were less evident than we had expected. However, there were some instances of feelings of trepidation and unworthiness:

> I was terrified. I was really, really scared, hey. Because I can't, I didn't even know how to, work Microsoft Excel, and here I am sitting with … these guys who are really bright; some really clever people who know business and law and accounting and that kind of stuff, and finances, and who are very, very clever when it comes to this, and I was coming from ground zero. (Callum, full-time, arts)

> When I came into the course having only done a sub-degree qualification back in the '80s there was a feeling that I am not as clever as those people who have all got degrees. And I certainly had a fair amount of trepidation coming back from 20-odd years out of education into the MBA (Vusi, part-time, IT)

These concerns were almost entirely absent from women's accounts. Women students from both formats of the programme in this study welcomed the academic stimulation of the MBA:

> Because I'd always see myself as someone who'd embraced the concept of lifelong learning, I never thought that I would stop at one degree or two (Kate, full-time, NGO)

> I felt like I did need academic stimulation again (Lauren, part-time, insurance)

> Oh I was quite looking forward ... because I do like studying for its own sake (Kwena, full-time, banking)

Coping with family and family commitments, engendering employee support, and finding ways to deal with issues of academic fit were all challenges highlighted by our sample. It appears however that these were, if not overcome, factored into the overall decision-making process of the student when considering their enrolment on an MBA.

5. Discussion

5.1 Motivation factors

The research findings show that despite the heterogeneity of the sample, common reasons for undertaking an MBA are evident across the two programme formats. The key motivations stated by our participants are: improved understanding of business and enhancement of business skills; career progression; career change; personal development; a business qualification; networking opportunities; and the prospect of academic stimulation. On balance, the reported motivations of the students surveyed and spoken to gave more emphasis to factors attracting them to the MBA than compelling them to enroll. Most of the students communicated a desire to challenge and develop themselves in relation to their career, with the MBA conceived as a means for supporting this general ambition. There was also a networking aspect detected, which is supported by other studies: "MBA studies, especially in a reputable institution, can serve as a vehicle for the creation and maintenance of a valuable network" (Baruch and Peiperl, 2000, p. 83). Although networking appears as a motivation for our sample in their rationale to pursue an MBA degree, the relatively low ranking of this factor as a reason appears slightly contrary to the literature. It must however be borne in mind that our sample were all professionals with an average of almost seven and half years of work experience who already have some form of established networks in place and, as such, would differ from newly graduated, younger MBA applicants for whom establishing networks would be crucial.

The value of a business qualification such as the MBA is well documented (Ainsworth and Morley 1995; Carmichael and Sutherland 2005; Schoenfeld 2007; Baruch 2009) and this brand value was seen in the choice process, particularly with the younger interviewees. Although almost every participant in our sample had a first degree – indeed 16% held Masters degrees – they recognised the need for a business qualification that would improve their current standing within the environments in which they now found themselves.

The influence of peers in the decision-making process cannot be underestimated. When making a decision regarding an MBA, evidence suggests that buying behaviour is complex and making a decision takes some time. Most interesting is that:

> Students will seek endorsements from trusted sources when choosing a university, especially personal sources of information, such as a recommendation from a current or ex-student, as this creates tangibility for the university and its benefits (Donaldson and McNicholas 2004, p. 349).

In other words, conventional advertising from business schools is less effective than personal endorsements. The role of the MBA 'hero' as a factor cannot be ignored. For participants in our study, this influence was clearly expressed. The overwhelming majority of participants in the sample (92%) had consulted with at least one person during their decision-making process.

5.2 Obstacles: not just money and time

Our interviewees reported various obstacles and challenges to part-time MBA study. One might anticipate that money, time and academic level would be the most salient aspects; whilst funding and coping with demanding job and degree were important for part-time students, other factors were also stressed. Academic challenges were much less apparent.

MBA degrees are known to be amongst the most expensive of higher education qualifications. At the top end of the market internationally, tuition fees can easily reach more than US$50,000 for full-time study and around US$17,000 in South Africa. Students are usually liable for the cost of tuition fees themselves with only very small number of scholarships typically available. State-supported student finance packages are rarely available to postgraduates and MBAs are no exception. While employer funding is available for MBA programmes, guarantees in terms of the employee's future are typically sought. Given the likely expense, it is to be expected that finance would be perceived as a significant hurdle to be overcome for MBA students. Of course many potential students will be ruled out on grounds of affordability and are therefore absent from MBA classes and hence our sample. Nevertheless, the cost of an MBA means it is perhaps, after a house and a car, the third most expensive discretionary purchase our interviewees will make.

Our participants did indeed raise finance as a potential obstacle to MBA study, with a minority of them (13.8%) being assisted in part or completely by their current or recent employer. As Baruch states, "organizations can pay or subsidize MBA fees, be flexible in time allocation, and accept the sharing of commitment during the studying period" (2009, p. 394). In our sample, 'golden handcuffs' were commonly used by employers as a form of retention for the part-time students. This practice was not seen by the affected individuals as punitive as many indicated that either it would be

relatively easy to circumvent or that it suited them to remain with their respective organisations during the current economic uncertainty.

Interestingly, only a minority of participants reported any financial struggle. Only one student reported any real financial hardship which involved having to sell a house and car to keep afloat. Instead financial issues are reported as inconveniences, but not ones which dominate the individuals' thinking about their MBA participation. Considerations of price were discussed (such as in choosing between different institutions' MBA programmes) but were rarely the clincher. Students, while considering the luxury of a full-time MBA, did not simply select the cheapest option available to them, with reputation, accessibility, the learning approach, perceived institutional culture and format of the programme being more important.

Clearly, any socioeconomic inequalities in access to MBA programmes will be manifested in large part through access to managerial or similar positions in the first place. Entry to the programmes attended by participants in this study requires significant work experience in appropriate managerial or professional roles, which implies a certain level of remuneration. Except where individuals have a particular combination of disadvantages or unfortunate circumstances, this means affordability is not the principal barrier to greater equity and diversity, except in the case of full-time MBA programmes. It also perhaps surprising that there appeared to be little variation in the importance of finance to students' decision-making; perhaps for students in South Africa "because the MBA is an internationally acclaimed business qualification, the prestige attached to it may be the deciding factor for some students to enrol" (Crous and Cooper 2005, pp. 57-58).

In addition to financial sponsorship, a supportive working environment is essential for part-time students both at the start and during an academic programme as this support is integral to students' success on the programme (Ronnie, 2009). In South Africa, employers emerged as largely supportive; there is no discussion by the participants that there is any need to convince employers of the value of an MBA. A possible reason is the severe managerial skill shortage experienced in South Africa (Kraak, 2005).

5.3 Gender and family

Literature notes that there are a number of differences cited by men and women when making a decision to pursue an MBA. Research indicates that:

> a higher proportion of males put forward aspirations such as improved
> income gain or an increase in general experience, whereas more women
> tended to look for a new cultural experience and twice as many women
> as men were interested in a career break (Baruch and Leeming, 2001, p.
> 594)

The 98 women in our study chose a broader range of reasons than the men. Improved understanding of business and enhancement of business skills along with career progression and the attainment of a business qualification were the most common

reasons cited by men; while, in addition to those mentioned, women cited starting their own businesses as a motivating factor along with a focus on personal change and development. However a focus on the learning potential of the academic environment was only highlighted by the women in the study. What our findings may indicate is that, despite the relatively low numbers of women MBA students worldwide (Simpson, 2000, 2005), and beyond the professional focus on career progression and skills acquisition, women return to postgraduate study for a number of reasons, including the potential for enjoyment of the learning experience itself. This supports Simpson and Sturges' (2007) view that women are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to pursue an MBA than men. Similarly, in Reay's (2003, p. 304) study "mature women students were more likely to evoke a love of learning as their reason for further study".

It tended to be male participants expressing the concerns about academic fit and vulnerability that are common in studies of adult returners and non-traditional entrants to higher education (Wilson, 1997; Davies and Williams, 2001; Osborne *et al.*, 2004; Kimmel and McNeese, 2005). These concerns were almost entirely absent from women's transcripts in both formats of the programme, very much to the contrary of findings in most other studies of higher education participation (Edwards, 1993; Christie *et al.*, 2008). The students we surveyed were aged between 25 and 49, with the majority in their thirties. Three people reported being too young to start an MBA at an earlier attempt, having to return at a later point. Entry to the MBA programmes within both formats in this study requires appropriate work experience and the majority (53.8%) of our sample were in junior or middle management positions. The alignment of experience and sufficient seniority thus occurs at an age when many people are planning or have already started a family. In their study, Davies and Williams note that,

> for the over 25 year olds, the risks were perceived as important and interrelated: the uncertain cost in terms of time, money and pressure set against the possible outcomes. There was also a sense that they were not risking just their own but their families' situations – in terms of money but also in terms of time ... it was more about desiring and needing to spend time with family; and to give children especially a sense of being cared for and to ensure that relationships were not neglected. (2001, p. 200)

Individuals in our sample who had child-rearing responsibilities all expressed the challenges of juggling their multiple roles as student, partner and parent. Consultation with their partners appeared an integral part of these students' decision-making. As Norton *et al.*, (1998, p. 86) explain, a lack of partner support produces, "the effect of stress on the relationship itself and on the student's psychological well-being".

5.4 Which school for me?
A final aspect of access to the MBA was the decision about where to, not simply whether to, enroll. In choosing the best-suited business school, our participants used

ranking and reputation, proximity/convenience and school culture as primary filtering mechanisms. This is in contrast to Arbaugh *et al.*,'s (2010, p. 410) finding that, "older students found school reputation to be less of a factor and convenience to be more of a factor in the MBA program enrolment decision." The Financial Times rankings appeared to be the measure used as external validation of both the quality of education these professionals would receive, along with the perception of the value of the MBA in the labour market. Indeed Danko and Anderson present the view that:

> like it or not, management education is a *business*, driven by market forces. Like it or not, we live in a world where consumers *want* and *purchase* school rankings, which is why the rankings have flourished (2005, p. 26; original emphasis)

A welcoming and inclusive business school culture was particularly important to our participants. Mature-age students contemplating a return to study typically experience feelings of doubt and uncertainty (Wilson, 1997; Kimmel and McNeese, 2005/6). Pre-admission events, along with familiarity of the institutions, played a role in shaping participants' decision to choose a particular university.

6. Conclusion

In this article we have investigated the factors that encourage enrolment in part-time and full-time MBA programmes in South Africa. Our participants had carefully considered the reasons they wished to undertake the programme. As mature individuals they also faced challenges within their working environment and personal lives. A postgraduate qualification, and particularly an MBA, is an expensive investment; not only in terms of the cost of study but the loss of personal time. In particular, it "means that emphasis and devotion that could be placed on work and family must be shared now with study demands" (Baruch, 2009, p. 392). These challenges, along with those of garnering employer support, have been carefully weighed up by our sample before undertaking the programme. For our respondents, these potential barriers had not proven sufficient to dissuade them from enrolling, but in some cases had led to various personal strains. Others will have been discouraged at an earlier point. Those factors identified as obstacles by our participants could combine to deter completely many potential students from certain backgrounds. Thus the underrepresentation of women on MBA programmes (as reported consistently in the literature and anecdotally by our participants) would seem, on the basis of our findings, to be related to the improbability (perceived or actual) of managing the triple burden of job, study and childcare when childcare responsibilities in South Africa continue to fall principally to women.

If MBA 'heroes' are an important source of inspiration and encouragement to potential students, then there is a risk that a narrow demographic of available role models will perpetuate the underrepresentation of certain groups. The risk is that talented individuals who could benefit from the MBA are being lost, but there is also an

opportunity for 'MBA heroes' from underrepresented groups to take a key role in enabling diversity in student recruitment.

We found many similarities across both programme modes with similar factors and obstacles to enrolment cited. Students in both programme formats placed considerable emphasis on choice of institution. In South Africa, the MBA appears to have higher cachet and may be related to the nature of the firms in which the students were employed which were larger and likely to emphasise formal qualifications. In the more fluid and developing South African economy, the knowledge and skills developed by the MBA appear to be more favoured.

From a practical perspective, all business schools need to ensure that the experience of current students is a high-quality one. From both a recruitment and alumni management perspective, the personal and professional growth of alumni is a major influencing factor and, as we have seen, their role as MBA 'heroes' is central to the decision-making process for prospective students. In promoting their programmes, our evidence would suggest business schools need to emphasise the positive, developmental aspects of the MBA over its value as a mere credential. Schools also need to consider how they might mitigate the barriers to MBA enrolment which our study has highlighted. This is particularly important in an emerging economy. In addition to helping to ensure fair access, this would also represent enlightened self-interest for business schools as it would increase the pool of applicants for their programmes.

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Appendix 1: Survey participants' characteristics

Total sample	312
Age range	25 – 49
Mean age	30
Men : women	214:98
Full time : Part time	153:159
Average years' work experience	7.4
First degree subject	
Engineering	116
Sciences	19
Social sciences	50
Commerce	97
Medical/healthcare	6
Law	9
Other (marketing; communications; etc.)	9
No first degree	6
Completed at least one previous qualification at postgraduate level	165
First degree from same institution as enrolled at for MBA	47
At least one graduate parent	222
First in family to obtain a degree	45