



# Fostering alpha females

Business schools are stepping up efforts to entice women to apply for an MBA, an area of study still dominated by men, writes

**Gabrielle Monaghan**

**T**he master of business administration (MBA) has traditionally been perceived as the preserve of the alpha male, with classrooms dominated by men striving to boost their earnings power and leap up the corporate ladder.

While the reality may not be this stark, women still occupy fewer than one-third of MBA places globally, according to rankings compiled by the *Financial Times* and the *Economist*. Concerns about juggling the intense course with family commitments and a shortage of female role models in business contribute to the lack of women studying for an MBA.

The programmes often require participants to have several years' work experience, meaning women who apply for the course are usually in their late 20s, a time when they may have strong personal demands, such as starting a family. As Nick Barni-

ville, director of the MBA programme at UCD Michael Smurfit School of Business, notes: "The age of applicants usually ranges from 25 to 32, and men and women face different choices at that stage in life."

At UCD Smurfit, women make up between 20 and 30 per cent of MBA students, ranking the school 20th in Europe by the *Financial Times*. But this year, it has set out to promote its MBA

programme to women in an effort to increase the number of women on the course to 50 per cent.

Last month, it teamed up with *Image* magazine to offer a €15,000 scholarship. A two-year executive MBA programme at UCD Smurfit typically costs €27,500.

UCD Smurfit is just one of a growing number of business schools worldwide seeking to appeal more to women. London Business School, for instance, designed a brochure dedicated to women and set up a "women in business" club that holds one-to-one chats with prospective female students. The measures helped increase the percentage of women on its programme to 28 per cent from 22 per cent in just one year.

Helen Prendergast, project director of asset and liability management at Bank of Ireland, is just one of a growing band of women who see an MBA as a critical stepping stone in an executive career.

She began a part-time, international executive MBA course when she was 32 and graduated almost seven years ago. Prendergast was married but had not yet had children at the time.

When she began the programme, she was an assistant

manager at Bank of Ireland's corporate banking division. Upon graduation, she was immediately given a strategic role and has since climbed further up the ranks.

One of the biggest benefits of an MBA is the confidence it brings, according to Prendergast. "After two or three weeks in a classroom full of directors and executives, I realised that... I was just as good."

Barniville believes that if more women do the MBA programme, Ireland will see more women in the upper echelons of business.

While women currently account for 50.35 per cent of the Irish population, just 4 per cent of chief executives in Ireland's top 100 companies are female. Irish women are also under-represented in start-up companies, with just 5.5 per cent involved in early-stage entrepreneurial activity, the 2005 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor showed.

More female MBA graduates should help bridge the gender gap in the workforce. However, a recent survey by the MBA Association of Ireland found that, while one in four male MBA graduates were paid between €100,000 and €150,000 in 2006, the proportion of women with the same qualification on the same pay scale was just 17 per cent.

Regardless of the lag in pay for female MBA graduates, Prendergast has no regrets about doing the course. "Employers often feel that women in their late 20s and 30s are soon going to be off having babies - my MBA is a declaration of intent that I will be around for a long while."