

From base camp to boardroom

Steve Coomber
finds the gender imbalance can be redressed by a positive approach

In the last week of September 2011, a group of female MBA students from **Rotterdam School of Management (RSM)** at **Erasmus University** celebrated their ascent of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania as part of a new, women-only elective. While the MBA students may have climbed the highest mountain in Africa, statistics suggest scaling the heights of senior management is likely to be a tougher proposition.

Cranfield University School of Management's Female FTSE board report 2010 revealed that women held just 12.5 per cent of FTSE 100 directorships. Business school initiatives such as RSM's women-only elective may help to redress the balance, but business schools can do much more.

They can encourage more women on to MBA programmes. Figures from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business suggest

that the proportion of women on MBA programmes is about 35 per cent, while the Association of MBAs puts it at 31 per cent. Some schools are focusing on the admissions process. London Business School (LBS) recently stated its aim of ensuring that at least 30 per cent of the MBA intake are women – it is now 31.4 per cent. Diane Morgan, associate dean of degree programmes and career services, says: "We make sure the admissions process gives women the best opportunity to demonstrate they could be successful at business school."

Dianne Bevelander, associate dean of MBA programmes at RSM, says

that business schools should look at the curricula because it is very male dominated in many respects. "Faculty composition is predominately male in business schools. Something like 15 per cent of business school deans are women. There are too few business cases that feature women as dominant characters in executive positions."

Alice Eagly is professor of psychology at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, Chicago, and co-author of *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders*. "At the minimum, business schools should have a course that considers topics like gender and leadership, gender and organisations," she says. "They should confront the fact that few women are rising to high positions and bring in the social sciences that address the causes of that."

At RSM Bevelander has introduced a women-only elective. Referring to the ascent of Kilimanjaro, led by British mountaineer Rebecca Stephens, Bevelander says: "We wanted to encourage women to work together, take calculated risks together and rely on each other in team situations."

Women-only activities are also offered at other schools. Susan Vinnicombe, director of Cranfield's International Centre for Women Leaders, runs a two-day "women as leaders" workshop. "It gives them a space on the MBA to work together, to process the experience of being in a minority, and talk about some of the challenges so that they can prepare for going out

into a business world with a male-dominated culture."

At Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School in Belgium, the part-time format is nine hours a week on weekdays, one afternoon and two evenings. Acknowledging that the format was not family-friendly, a weekend option has been introduced. Other measures schools can take include women-only scholarships and networks such as Women in Business. Attracting more women to the MBA, and preparing them for senior management, makes sense for business schools and society.

A pathway to trust

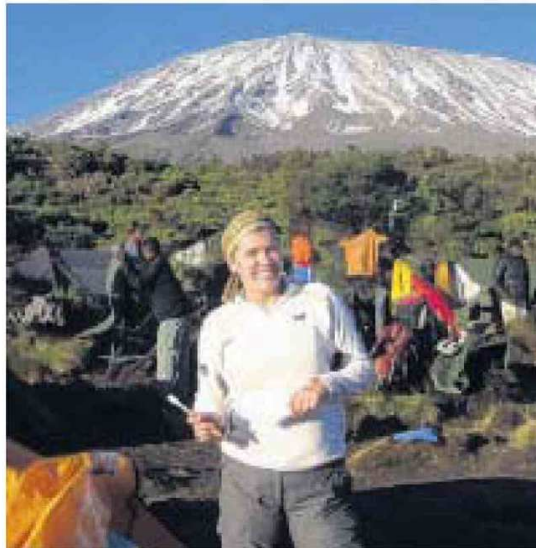
Elizabeth Dyas was one of the group from the RSM who climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. Working in media and publishing in the US, she wanted a one-year MBA programme and when the women-only elective was suggested, Dyas, from New Jersey, applied.

She joined a 14-strong group of MBAs heading up Kilimanjaro's Rongai route. "Every day we walked for at least four hours. It created a safe place for people to talk about different issues, about being in business, and about their career paths."

All 14 made it to base camp, Most, including Dyas, reached Gilman's Point (5,681m), and a few climbed to Africa's highest point, Uhuru Peak (5,895m).

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"By putting us on the mountain where you need to gain the support of others, you create a strong network founded on trust. I found the achievement extremely empowering."
Steve Coomber



Elizabeth Dyas found climbing Mount Kilimanjaro extremely empowering