

**Title:** I'll have an MBA with engineering on top ... More candidates are seeking out programmes that cover specialist areas, reports Carly Chynoweth

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Full Text:

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Jill Russell completed a master's in management straight after her undergraduate degree. So two decades later, when the 43-year-old started thinking about boosting her qualifications to embark on her next career step, she felt that the most obvious choice -- an MBA -- would be like going over old ground.

"I had a master's in health service administration, so I had already studied a lot of those main areas," she said. "But over the past five years I had noticed an absence of women at the top of organisations in my sector. I realised that having additional academic education could help me with my transformation and give me confidence to apply for a chief executive role in the future."

With that in mind, she decided on an international master's in practising management, an alternative to an MBA that is taught across five sites -- at Lancaster University in the UK, but also at business schools in India, China, Brazil and Canada.

"It has a light-touch approach to leadership, with less documentation, a little more instinct and a lot more reflection. There is also real attention on management overseas ... and a very direct link between theory and practice," Russell said.

A growing number of students are looking for alternatives to traditional MBA programmes, with specialist courses becoming increasingly popular, said Simon Collinson, the dean of Birmingham Business School. "We have seen a fairly marked decline in generic MBAs, especially full-time MBAs," he said. "The demand is for more flexible options ... and for those that focus on a specific function or industry. Business schools are working on ways to differentiate their MBAs. We are looking at the business plus model -- business plus engineering, business plus health and so on."

These programmes will still cover core business areas such as accounting and marketing but will add much more targeted subjects and sector-specific internships. Birmingham, which already offers a public service MBA, is developing MBAs in engineering and professional services.

This is both in recognition of the university's strengths and in response to demand, said Collinson. "Rolls-Royce is coming to us saying 'we value the MBA but we need a customised model for engineering'," he said. Students, too, are increasingly interested in more focused programmes.

He does not expect growth in specialist MBAs to lead to the demise of more general programmes. For some people, including those who are exploring career options and do not have a clear direction, a traditional MBA may still be the best choice. "And in other cases there will be people like scientists who already have deep technical knowledge but want to learn general management skills so that they can move up in their organisations."

MSc courses designed for people with little or no work experience offer another alternative for those looking for a specialised master's programme. Cass Business School, part of London's City University, has about 400 studying for an MBA, but about 1,300 enrolled on MSc courses, combining finance with topics such as banking, accounting or shipping.

"Each one of our MSc degrees is aimed at a specific industry," said Andrew Clare, associate dean at the business school. "But doing the master's in investment management, for example, does not mean you have to go into investment management. Graduates should be able to adapt that learning to other areas in business and finance."

At Emlyon business school in Lyons, France, one of the most popular master's courses is luxury management, run in partnership with London College of Fashion and a business school in China. "There is huge growth in the luxury industry so it is very useful to have this sort of programme," said Patrice Houdayer, vice-president of graduate programmes at the school. "It is a very popular course."

Between 90% and 95% of those with a master's from Emlyon secure a job within three months of graduation. Most of them have work lined up well before they finish, said Houdayer.

One reason for this is Emlyon's focus on developing programmes that meet industry demand. "That is why we create new programmes but it is also why we close some programmes. A few years ago we closed a programme dealing with knowledge management. It was set up 15 years earlier when it was a key issue for many companies but now they are not offering as many jobs in it."

One of the biggest differences between an MSc and an MBA is that, in Europe at least, MBAs are generally aimed at people who have five or more years' work experience, while MSc courses are designed for people coming straight from university.

"An MBA will teach you how to manage a business," said Clare. "One of the MSc courses will prepare you to be part of the business, part of a specialist function."

"But this does not mean you should rule out an MSc just because you have experience. People do them as a way of changing career -- moving into finance, for example. But if you are already working in finance and you want to move up the management ladder you probably want to go for an MBA."

Either way it is worth looking at options beyond the traditional MBA, said Russell, whose employer, the International HIV/ Aids Alliance, is paying for her programme. "It is important to look at where you are in your career and how practical you want your learning to be," said Russell. "If you are using a master's to change careers it is very different from using it to excel in a career in which you are established."

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CAPTION(S):

International twist: Jill Russell felt that a straight MBA would be like going over old ground

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Carly Chynoweth

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