

Advancing Female Careers in Academia and Industry: Lessons from the FAME Program

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Abstract

The Female Academics meet Executives (FAME) program at the University of Graz aims to support female students and academics by providing practice-oriented discussions with successful women from business, academia, and entrepreneurship. This case study examines the program's objectives, implementation, and outcomes. Findings suggest that FAME enables participants to expand their professional networks and develop essential career and leadership skills. Insights from this study offer valuable recommendations for higher education institutions seeking to develop programs that support women in academic and professional contexts.

Keywords: *female academics, female career, women entrepreneurship, female leadership.*

1. Introduction

In response to the increasing demand for gender diversity and equality in leadership roles, the European Union has introduced various initiatives to promote women's participation in business and academia (European Commission, 2024). Despite these efforts, women remain underrepresented in executive positions, facing challenges such as limited access to networks, mentorship, and career development opportunities (André et al., 2023). Addressing these issues requires targeted educational programs that equip female academics with the necessary skills and support to advance in their careers.

As a result, universities across Europe have implemented programs aimed at fostering female leadership and entrepreneurship. These initiatives aim to bridge the gender gap by providing mentorship, networking opportunities, and practical training to empower women in various career paths (Kirkwood, 2009). However, the success of such programs depends on their ability to address specific challenges faced by female academics and professionals, such as work-life balance, career progression barriers, and industry-specific expectations (Brush et al., 2018).

This paper examines the Female Academics meet Executives (FAME) program at the University of Graz, which aims to empower female students and academics through interactive workshops, mentorship opportunities, and real-world insights from experienced executives. This case study explores the program's objectives, implementation, and content, providing valuable insights into the effectiveness of such initiatives.

This paper is intended for educators and policymakers in the field of gender equality, entrepreneurship and leadership education to offer insights into best practices and inspire the development of similar initiatives in the future. The following sections provide a brief overview of gender-focused career development programs before delving into the case study, followed by a discussion of results and concluding remarks on the potential improvements and future directions for similar programs.

2. Theoretical Framework

The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles has led to the creation of targeted programs aimed at fostering female leadership and entrepreneurship. These initiatives often include mentoring, networking, and specialized workshops to address the unique challenges women face in professional settings. The Female Academics Meet Executives (FAME) program at the University of Graz exemplifies such an initiative, offering structured support to aspiring female leaders.

2.1. Mentoring and Its Impact on Female Leadership Development

Mentoring is crucial for the professional advancement of women, providing guidance, knowledge transfer, and psychosocial support. Through mentoring relationships, women develop essential skills, gain insights into organizational dynamics, and receive encouragement to pursue leadership positions. Research indicates that mentoring programs significantly contribute to career progression by enhancing self-confidence and leadership capabilities among female participants (Burke & McKeen, 1990). However, women often face challenges in finding suitable mentors, which can impede their professional growth (Burke & McKeen, 1990).

2.2. Networking Opportunities and Career Advancement

Professional networks offer platforms for women to connect, share experiences, and access resources pivotal for career development. Networking facilitates exposure to diverse perspectives, potential collaborations, and opportunities that might otherwise remain inaccessible. Studies have shown that female business network initiatives can serve as inclusive policies for women entrepreneurship, as they do not distinguish between women with or without children, formal and informal companies, and the motivation to start a new venture (necessity or opportunity) (García & Welter, 2013).

2.3. Workshops and Skill Development

Workshops tailored for women in leadership focus on developing competencies such as strategic thinking, decision-making, and effective communication. These interactive sessions provide practical knowledge and foster an environment of continuous learning. Participation in such workshops has been linked to increased job satisfaction and a greater sense of empowerment among female professionals (Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

2.4. The Role of Female Leadership Programs

Comprehensive programs that integrate mentoring, networking, and workshops are instrumental in addressing the multifaceted challenges women face in leadership trajectories. By providing structured support and development opportunities, these programs contribute to a more inclusive and equitable professional landscape. The FAME program embodies this approach, offering participants exposure to successful female executives and fostering essential skills for career advancement.

2.5. Significance of FAME in Promoting Female Leadership

The FAME program's multifaceted approach addresses critical areas of development for female academics and professionals. By combining mentorship from accomplished women, opportunities for networking, and targeted workshops, FAME creates a holistic environment conducive to personal and professional growth. Such initiatives are vital in bridging the gender gap in leadership and promoting diversity within organizations.

Comparable initiatives exist both nationally and internationally, such as the doc:muv mentoring program at the University of Vienna, the Women Leadership Forum in Austria, and the internationally renowned Women's Leadership Program at Yale School of Management. While these programs focus on mentoring, networking, or leadership training, none combine academic integration, hands-on peer learning, and cross-sector exposure in the same structured and credit-bearing format as FAME. This unique combination makes FAME a model that bridges academia and industry while fostering long-term professional development.

In summary, programs like FAME play a crucial role in empowering women by providing the necessary tools, networks, and support systems to succeed in leadership roles. The integration of mentoring, networking, and skill development workshops within these programs addresses the unique challenges faced by women and fosters an environment where they can thrive professionally.

3. Case Study

In this section, we analyze the FAME (Female Academics Meet Executives) program at the University of Graz and elaborate on its objectives, implementation, and content. The program, initiated by the Department of Corporate Leadership and Entrepreneurship, has been running successfully for over ten years. More than 500 participants have benefited from this initiative, which exclusively admits female students and academics. Admission to the program is competitive, requiring an application process where a select number of participants are accepted each semester to ensure quality and diversity. The program is open to students from all disciplines, fostering a rich mix of perspectives and experiences. It offers elective modules designed to support female students and academics in their career development by providing networking opportunities, mentoring, and practical insights from professionals in academia, business, and entrepreneurship.

3.1. Objectives of the Program

The primary objectives of the FAME program are to empower female students and academics by providing insights into career development opportunities in academia, business, and entrepreneurship. The program builds a strong professional network among participants and role models from different industries while offering practical knowledge and strategies for career advancement through hands-on experience and expert-led discussions. It encourages participants to explore their strengths and develop strategies for their personal and professional growth. In addition, it promotes an environment of peer learning and support, where participants can share experiences and challenges with like-minded individuals, and enhances the visibility and confidence of female participants in their respective fields. By focusing on interdisciplinary participation, the program ensures that participants can learn from diverse fields, broadening their understanding and opportunities.

3.2. Implementation of the Program

FAME is offered as an elective course program at the University of Graz, allowing participants to earn ECTS credits upon successful completion. Initially launched as a single course, all participants—regardless of their career goals—were grouped together. Over time, it became clear that participants had distinct career aspirations and faced different challenges, prompting a restructuring of the program into three specialized courses:

- FAME Career: Tailored for participants aiming for careers in industry, focusing on overcoming challenges in male-dominated sectors, breaking the glass ceiling, and balancing career and family life.

- **FAME Startup:** Designed for those interested in entrepreneurship and self-employment, covering topics such as determining the right time to start a business, managing risks, and balancing entrepreneurship with personal life.
- **FAME Science:** Focused on academic career paths, addressing topics like pursuing a PhD, career progression in academia, becoming a professor, and navigating challenges in technical and scientific fields as a woman.

This restructuring enabled the program to maintain its small-group format while responding to growing demand and varied interests. Each course continues to attract students from a wide range of academic backgrounds. Participants often value the program not only for its academic credits but also for its relevance to their personal and professional development. Many join out of intrinsic motivation rather than curricular requirements.

FAME is open to students from all disciplines and universities in Austria. Applicants must be enrolled at the University of Graz or co-registered as guest students. Successful participants receive a FAME certificate, which serves as a meaningful credential for future career opportunities. Admission is competitive. A selection process ensures a diverse and motivated cohort, with attention to disciplinary balance and participants' readiness to engage with the program. Criteria include motivation, prior experience, career aspirations, and academic progress, ensuring a fit between program content and participant needs.

4. Content of the program

The FAME program offers a structured learning experience that blends theoretical input with practical application. Each semester starts with a Kick-Off Event outlining the program's objectives, structure, and the three specialized modules—FAME Career, FAME Startup, and FAME Science—helping participants align the content with their career goals. The event also fosters networking among participants and facilitators. Figure 1 illustrates the key phases and components of the semester.

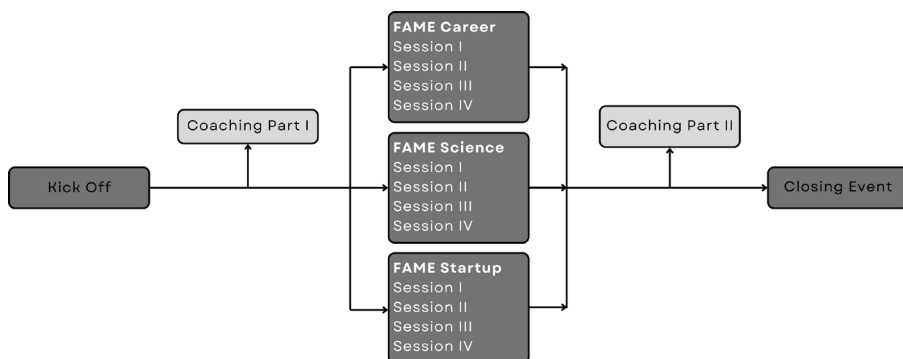


Figure 1. Structure of the FAME program per semester. Source: Authors' illustration.

Following the Kick-Off, participants take part in an **initial career coaching session** aimed at identifying their strengths, aspirations, and areas for development. This session offers self-reflection tools and personalized guidance to support informed career decisions. A unique feature of FAME, this coaching provides tailored advice typically available only in corporate environments at a high cost.

Throughout the semester, each module includes four interactive three-hour sessions, led by experienced professionals from academia, industry, and entrepreneurship. These sessions allow participants to engage with experts who share insights into career challenges and opportunities. Discussions cover gender-specific topics such as career advancement in male-dominated fields, work-life balance, and entrepreneurship. Participants gain practical knowledge and strategic approaches applicable to their careers.

A distinctive feature of FAME is its emphasis on peer-to-peer learning and leadership development. Participants take an active role by moderating at least one session per semester, collaborating with guest speakers, facilitating discussions, and ensuring key topics are covered. This experience enhances essential skills such as communication, leadership, and event coordination. After each session, participants submit a summary report to document key takeaways for future reference.

To further strengthen networking, all participants receive a comprehensive contact list with details of fellow participants and guest speakers. This initiative fosters long-term professional relationships, enabling alumni to reconnect with their peers even years after completing the program.

Towards the end of the semester, a final career coaching session helps participants consolidate their learnings and strategize their next steps. This session builds on previous insights, providing personalized guidance to prepare for future career decisions and address challenges.

As part of the program's commitment to fostering professional relationships, each semester concludes with a Closing Event, which includes a panel discussion featuring speakers from all three modules. The panel discussion revisits major themes explored throughout the semester, providing further insights and encouraging reflection on the participants' career paths. This event also serves as a prime networking opportunity, where participants can establish meaningful connections with role models and fellow participants.

Overall, the structure and content of the FAME program are designed to provide a holistic experience that empowers female students and academics with the knowledge, skills, and networks necessary to succeed in their chosen fields. The program's evolution from a single course to a specialized three-module format demonstrates its adaptability and responsiveness to the diverse career aspirations of its participants. In addition, an internal evaluation conducted

during the 2024/25 winter semester provided first insights into the program's impact, which are discussed in the following section.

5. Discussion

The FAME program has proven to be a successful model for promoting career development among female students and academics through its interdisciplinary, practice-oriented, and highly interactive approach. By combining theoretical input with real-world experiences, the program enables participants to gain valuable insights into academic, corporate, and entrepreneurial career paths. Particularly effective elements include structured networking, mentoring, and peer-to-peer learning. These components not only foster skill development and self-confidence but also empower participants to take initiative and build lasting professional relationships.

An internal evaluation conducted during the winter semester 2024/25 offers further evidence of the program's impact. Based on feedback from 29 participants, the guest speakers' advice and experiences were rated highly (average score: 4.7/5), and 83% of participants reported gaining new perspectives for their professional futures. Moreover, the program influenced career planning (3.9/5), improved participants' sense of preparedness (4.25/5), and strengthened their confidence in tackling career-related challenges (4.2/5). Importantly, nearly 80% of respondents reported expanding their networks, and nearly half initiated or intensified mentoring relationships.

Despite its success, FAME also faces certain challenges—most notably the limited capacity due to consistently high demand. Expanding the program while preserving its quality and mentoring intensity remains a key consideration for future development. Content-wise, the program must continue to adapt to evolving professional landscapes across sectors.

Looking ahead, several avenues for expansion have emerged. These include tailored modules for women in technical disciplines and STEM fields, where gender disparities remain significant, as well as adaptations for other educational institutions such as universities of applied sciences or even high schools. Finally, incorporating a broader, intersectional approach that considers additional dimensions of diversity—such as ethnicity, disability, or socioeconomic background—would make the program even more inclusive and impactful.

Overall, the FAME program demonstrates how targeted, well-designed educational initiatives can contribute meaningfully to the advancement of women in leadership and professional contexts. The combination of participant feedback, continuous evaluation, and flexible design makes it a replicable model with strong potential for broader application.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the FAME program serves as a valuable initiative that empowers female students and academics by equipping them with essential career skills, fostering a supportive professional network, and offering tailored guidance for their individual career paths. The program's interdisciplinary approach, small group structure, and strong focus on mentorship create a unique learning environment that addresses the specific challenges women face in their professional journeys. The success of the program highlights the significance of offering specialized career development initiatives for women in academia, industry, and entrepreneurship. Moving forward, expanding access to the program while maintaining its personalized approach, continuously adapting to emerging career trends, and further strengthening alumni engagement could enhance its long-term impact.

Ultimately, the FAME program provides a replicable model for other universities and institutions seeking to support female career development through a structured and comprehensive approach.

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