FAST, FLEXIBLE AND FABULOUS

carringtoncrisp

THE FUTURE OF LIFELONG AND EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

Summary of key findings 2026

INTRODUCTION

Universities and business schools have a genuine growth opportunity in lifelong and executive learning – the global market is projected to grow from $34bn (2024) to $99bn (2030) – but they will need to be fast, flexible, and "fabulous" (high-quality, engaging and impactful). While there is an opportunity, institutions that think this will be easy are misguided – what courses will you offer, who will teach them and will your internal systems meet learner and corporate expectations – this isn't about degrees and many of the learners will be different from those on degree programmes.

This leaflet summarises key findings from CarringtonCrisp's third Future of Lifelong and Executive Education study. Conducted in April/May 2026, it surveyed 1,033 employers and 9,057 individual learners across more than 30 countries.

To purchase the full report, visit www.carringtoncrisp.com/flee

For help developing or growing your provision, get in touch at info@carringtoncrisp.com

CARRINGTONCRISP SURVEYED

1,033 EMPLOYERS

30 COUNTRIES

9,057 LEARNERS

THE EMPLOYER VIEW

DRIVERS OF L&D SPEND

44% WANT TO USE LEARNING TO IMPROVE PRODUCTIVITY

Some things never change. For employers, spending on learning and development continues to be driven by corporate priorities – 44% want to use learning to improve productivity/efficiency, introduce new technology (39%), maintain professional standards (39%), and deal with AI (35%).

However, budgets may not be sufficient. Budget growth has not kept pace with expectations from the previous study. Even so, 53% still anticipate spending increases over the next two years - well ahead of those expecting reductions. Despite the expected growth, limited budget is seen as the main barrier to delivering learning and development, noted by 38%. Just over a third are also concerned about staff turnover after investment (36%), difficulty freeing up staff time (34%) and a lack of tailored programmes (34%).

THE EMPLOYER VIEW

FLEXIBILITY DOMINATES DECISION-MAKING

There's no one-size-fits-all solution and institutions will need to be flexible to meet employer demands for flexibility. Employers want programmes that let staff keep working while studying (87%), will largely use blended learning as their main approach (78%) and consider a mix of custom/open programmes (80%).

79% BELIEVE AI TOOLS WILL HELP MAXIMISE L&D IMPACT

In meeting their needs, employers see a role for AI - 79% believe AI tools will help maximise L&D impact, but they do have concerns; 65% say their organisation's AI use is currently focused elsewhere, while 58% doubt AI can replace human creativity in instructional design.

Given the drivers of L&D spend, it's not surprising that the skills in demand include Business development (43%), Creativity (30%), Change management (29%) and on the technology side, AI (58%), Cybersecurity (44%) and Cloud computing (34%).

THE EMPLOYER VIEW

WHAT EMPLOYERS WANT FROM PROVIDERS

Having decided what they want, employers are most likely to turn to private training companies (45%), professional bodies (44%), online providers (36%) and consulting firms (35%). Universities and business schools are used by 34%, but while interest in the other providers has declined since the last study, use of universities and business schools has remained steady.

Institutions seem to be doing something right as employers seem to stick with them once they start using them. That loyalty may be connected to what employers want from providers - good value (27%), integration of work-based learning (24%), quality reputation (24%) and an ability for staff to keep working while learning (24%).

UNIVERSITIES AND BUSINESS SCHOOLS ARE USED BY 34%

THE LEARNER VIEW

FOR LEARNERS, IT'S ALL ABOUT CAREER, HOWEVER YOU DEFINE THAT

For a quarter of respondents, motivation to study is about improving earning potential while 23% are focused on learning new skills; and 39% say those learning choices are self-driven. When they learn, skill priorities are similar to employers, 30% want business development and 39% are seeking AI. They also want communication skills, change management, cybersecurity, digital marketing and behavioural science; 30 subjects are identified by at least 10% of learners. With AI it's not just about studying the subject, but also how learners will use it in their studies; 63% expect to use AI tools to boost their learning impact, although 59% still doubt AI can replace creative instructional design.

Despite a desire to learn, there are many barriers for individuals. Just over a third (34%) raise cost as an issue, but 29% highlight lack of time, 23% high workload and 20% family responsibilities.

THE LEARNER VIEW

THE COST-QUALITY SWEET SPOT

Choosing a provider is often a trade-off for learners with 23% flagging the importance of value for money and 22% a quality reputation. The flexibility that is important for employers is also key for learners, 22% want the option to personalise their learning and the same percentage want career support from their provider.

The good news for universities and business schools is that 45% of individual learners would use them for their development, placing them second behind commercial online learning providers (55%). Again, the desire for flexibility is clear.

22%

PRIORITISE QUALITY REPUTATION, THE OPTION TO PERSONALISE THEIR LEARNING, AND CAREER SUPPORT FROM THEIR PROVIDER.

THE LEARNER VIEW

ACADEMIC BUT NOT AS WE KNOW IT

Learners prefer industry-recognised qualifications and stackable academic modules when they study.

Master's degrees remain popular, but interest in MBAs has fallen sharply since the previous study - from 23% in 2024 to just 11% today.

Around half favour blended learning, while 33% remain open to face-to-face study.

33%

REMAIN OPEN TO FACE-TO-FACE STUDY

LESSONS FOR UNIVERSITIES AND BUSINESS SCHOOLS

YOU CAN'T CHOOSE WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

Employers and individual learners turn to universities and business schools for the same reasons: a reputation for developing knowledge, qualifications recognised by employers, and the quality of faculty.

The barriers to choosing universities and business schools are more varied. For employers, the main concerns are that other providers better meet their needs (25%), that institutions lack specific expertise (21%), and that provision is too theoretical (21%). For learners, cost is the primary obstacle - 35% consider universities and business schools too expensive - while 19% share the concern that provision is too theoretical. A further 21% may simply be unaware of the full offer, assuming institutions only provide full degrees rather than the short courses they are actually seeking.

THE BIG PICTURE

Lifelong and executive education should sit at the core of university and business school strategy - not as an add-on to research and degrees. Easier said than done: for many institutions, this means building something they have never seriously attempted at scale. So where do you start?

- **Be fast** – respond quickly to emerging skill needs (especially AI) rather than following lengthy degree-development cycles. Ensure courses are frequently available, not something that only takes place once a year on a fixed date.
- **Be flexible** – support blended delivery, stackable/modular credit, and study-while-working models. Be open to participants who may not have the usual qualifications when starting. And think about where and when courses take place.
- **Be fabulous** – invest in high-quality, engaging learning design, applied/work-integrated learning, and strong customer service. Deliver learning with impact and provide the evidence that it works.
- **Improve communication** – many employers and learners are simply unaware of what institutions offer; better marketing (including to non-traditional/older learners) is needed; these aren't undergraduates looking for a traditional university experience, these are people working who want to move on in their careers.
- **Demonstrate impact** – both audiences want clear evidence of ROI (performance improvement, productivity, career advancement) to justify continued/increased investment. Work with employers to co-create the solutions they want, not plucking content off the shelf with little thought as to its relevance.
- **Rethink microcredentials** – microcredentials are the language of institutions, not the language of learners, they are currently poorly understood and underused by both employers and learners. Microcredentials can work, but they need to be better communicated and have their value clearly identified.