



WHAT WOMEN WANT

Unlocking the power of business and executive
education for women's career success

SUMMARY REPORT 2025



Introduction

Despite decades of progress, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions across most sectors and regions. Persistent barriers, such as limited access to senior networks, work-life imbalance and a lack of flexible career pathways, continue to slow women’s career progression. Against this background, executive and business education has the potential to unlock opportunities, build confidence and accelerate women’s professional advancement.

The What Women Want 2025 study explores the experiences and perspectives of women and employers and was created with support from: Bentley University, Cambridge Judge Business School, EDHEC, ESADE, IE Business School, IMD, Imperial College, London Business School, Michigan Ross, Monash Business School, Trinity Business School, Trinity College Dublin and UNSW Business School/AGSM.

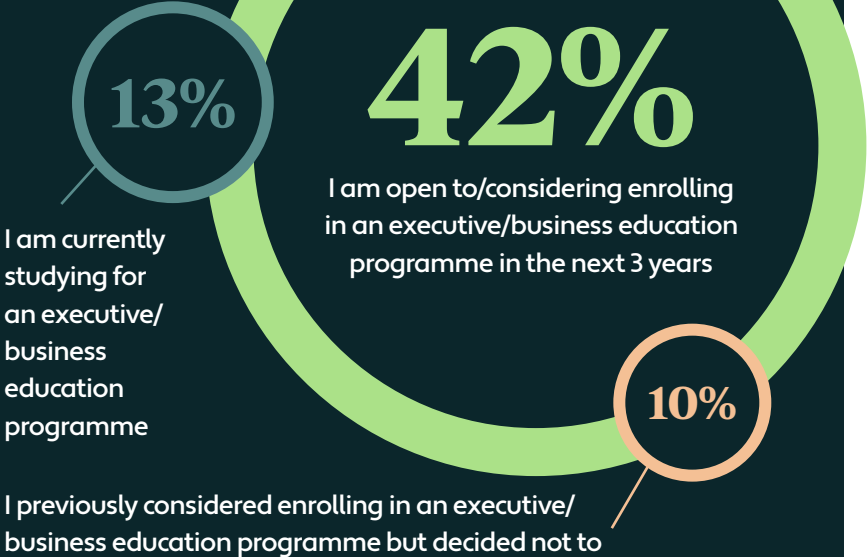
The research draws on two global surveys conducted in May 2025: one with over 5,000 women aged 25–55 from 26 countries and the other by more than 500 employers from 28 countries. In addition, 25 in-depth interviews were conducted with women, who were at different career stages, and 10 employers.

Every woman interviewed who had completed an MBA / EMBA or an executive education programme was happy with her experience. However, women continue to experience barriers in their professional lives because of their gender. With only three exceptions, every woman interviewed for this project reported having experienced or witnessed sexism at work.

The survey’s data paints a clear picture: while both groups, women and employers, recognise the value of executive education for developing women’s careers, significant barriers remain. Women report limited opportunities for advancement, persistent pay inequity and insufficient support from their organisations. Employers acknowledge many of these challenges, yet nearly seven in ten believe they are already doing enough to support women’s progression, revealing a disconnect between perception and lived experience.

Flexible, targeted executive education programmes are seen as instrumental in helping women develop leadership potential, transition roles and gain visibility in their organisations. However, barriers such as cost, lack of managerial support and family responsibilities continue to limit access.

Survey respondents’ participation in executive/ business education



Challenges to women's career progression

Whatever the issues surrounding women's learning and development to support their careers, it needs to be seen in the context of their wider experience of work.

More than 1 in 5 women identify five key career challenges they face at work:

- **Lack of opportunities to advance my career**
- **Pay inequity**
- **Lack of schedule flexibility**
- **Lower pay compared with men in equivalent jobs**
- **Lack of support for my career from management**

More than 30% of employers highlight five critical stages where they face difficulties in supporting women's career progression:

- **Promoting women to senior leadership roles**
- **Building a strong pipeline of future female leaders**
- **Recruiting female talent at entry level**
- **Preparing women for succession to top roles**
- **Increasing the visibility of women in critical positions**

Many employers believe their organisations are already responding to the need to support women's careers and have done so for some time, yet at the same time many face challenges advancing women to senior roles and often the rhetoric doesn't match the reality.

- **69% of employers believe they already do enough to support women's career advancement**

And yet ...

- **72% of employers agree that more needs to be done to support career advancement for women in our organisation**
- **71% of employers agree that more women should fill leadership roles in our organisation**
- **22% of employers believe that women in their organisation do not face any challenges**



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- **Only 9% of employers have greater than 50% women in senior leadership, despite claiming supportive cultures**
- **37% of women believe their decision not to study negatively impacted their careers**

What employers do and don't

Employers agree (77%) that more interventions earlier in women's careers would create a larger talent pool later for senior positions. Yet as logical as this is, it doesn't seem to be happening. Almost a third of employers (32%) recognise they face challenges in building a pipeline of future talent. Three in ten (30%) of employers identify lack of senior leadership support in their organisation as a barrier to women's involvement in study.



Top 5 reasons employers invest in women's executive education

An executive from a multinational organisation reported that, while the company offered numerous opportunities for development, men tended to benefit more than women. She acknowledged that there were insufficient mentoring opportunities for women and described the culture at the top as 'a boys' club'. This disconnect is not only an internal issue, but also a strategic concern, as she noted: 'our clients are way more diverse than we are.' The organisation's internal culture is not keeping pace with the diversity of its customer base, a gap that risks undermining its relevance and credibility.

Male and female employers expressed notably different perspectives in several key areas. Male interviewees often emphasised men's growing involvement in childcare, as well as the positive effects of remote work and increased flexibility for women. However, they were also more likely to attribute women's slower career progression to personal choice, suggesting that women pursue different priorities, and to frame the main challenge as a lack of self-advocacy.

- 35%** To help them develop a specific new skill
- 34%** To support a change of role within our organisation
- 34%** To help women develop presence or influence skills
- 33%** To support a promotion
- 32%** As part of a company-wide initiative

Motivations and influences for business and executive education

The decision to pursue executive or business education is shaped by a range of influences. Among those who have either completed their study or are currently studying, managers (31%), mentors, coaches and peers (27%), and family or friends (36%) are the most common sources of encouragement.

Executive and business education is broadly seen as a key enabler of career progression, with 81% of women and 80% of employers agreeing that business education can help address the workplace challenges faced by women. Only 5% of recent learners said they would not consider further study.

Women express a strong interest in shorter, more flexible learning options, such as executive programmes, professional qualifications and certificates. With their flexibility, faster time-to-impact and lower cost, these programmes are often seen as a more efficient route to professional advancement

than traditional degrees. 43% of prospective women learners cite cost as a barrier to study; 51% cite it as the main reason for rejecting study.

Women, whether they had studied, are studying, considering study or rejected study, tend to focus on five barriers to study:

- **Cost of fees**
- **Lack of time**
- **Family responsibilities (children/caring for parents, etc.)**
- **High workload**
- **Loss of income from studying**

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5%**

of recent learners said they would not consider further study.



While women identify cost as the primary barrier to study, employers believe family responsibilities are what most discourages women. In the survey, although 40% of women said family and caregiving responsibilities were a barrier that they will manage, almost the same percentage, 38%, indicated that these responsibilities were a significant barrier to study which causes difficulties in pursuing a programme; 41% of employers believe family and caregiving responsibilities are a barrier to women's involvement in learning.

Perhaps not surprisingly, childcare responsibilities featured prominently in conversations with women who have children (16 of the 25 interviewees). Of the 9 women interviewed who did not have children, half were in the early stages of their career, and half held senior roles. Yet even among younger participants, the tension between career and family was already a major concern.

Access to networks

Many women spoke about male networks they didn't have access to, often described as the 'boys' club'. For these women, exclusion from those informal spaces where trust is built and opportunities are shared meant missing out on career-defining conversations, reinforcing the sense that advancement was harder to achieve without access to such networks. Other women noted that important meetings or networking opportunities often took place late in the day, but family responsibilities meant they had to leave and were unable to take part.

There was this annoying thing happening in board meetings where there is a debate going on and I would make a contribution and it's not picked up. Then a male colleague would say the same thing and then it's a wonderful idea, which drove me crazy.'

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Survey respondents also suggested that business schools might create networks for women participating in their programmes, not alumni groups necessarily, but instead networks with a specific purpose to support other women, their career advancement and an environment more open to women's career success.

Sexism at work

When asked whether they had experienced sexism at work, respondents often replied 'not really', but then went on to describe clear examples of sexist behaviour. Most participants agreed that little had changed for women in a generation. As one noted: 'There is a lot more tokenism and a lot more box ticking.' Another added: 'I do find that women need to work much harder to reach the same level as men.' A third concluded: 'It's all empty words.'

Women limiting their own potential

Several interviewees felt that women did not put themselves forward for promotion or more challenging projects because of caring responsibilities for children and/or elderly parents.

Impostor syndrome was mentioned by several women, together with a feeling that they needed to be incredibly well prepared before they could put themselves forward for a new role or challenge:

A third of employers identified a lack of internal prioritisation for women's advancement as a barrier to their career development, while 30% said there was a lack of senior leadership support. Just over three in ten (31%) employers believe a lack of female role models in leadership put women off applying for executive education. However, 9% said there were no barriers.

Career enablers for women

Supportive organisational structures play a vital role in enabling women to pursue executive education.

The most valued forms of employer support include:

- flexible working arrangements (51%),
- study leave (42%), and
- financial contributions (39%).

Among those receiving financial support, most report that their employer covers between 25% and 50% of tuition fees, while personal savings remain the primary source of additional funding, followed by bank loans.

The research shows that 43% of employers currently have specific leadership or learning and development initiatives targeted at women, while a further 16% have such initiatives in development. Also, 57% have made a strategic decision to sponsor women specifically for executive education programmes, with the two main drivers being to enhance the performance of high-potential female employees and to grow diversity among senior leadership.

After women come back from a programme, they might feel better themselves, they might have become more confident and self-assured and they may come back with a kind of a renewed energy to deal with males in a more constructive way and to kind of navigate around the barriers. But then they would slowly fall back into the day job because nothing really changed around them. If the whole system is working against you, it's quite difficult to truly make a difference unless the business is behind you and rooting for you.'

EMPLOYER



What women want to study, what employers want women to study

Both women and employers identify key areas of learning that are likely to support career development. These include:

- **technology skills** (selected by 19% of employers and 25% of women)
- **artificial intelligence** (34% of employers and 22% of women)
- **business analytics** (31% employers; 21% women)
- **communication** (27% employers; 24% women)
- **creativity** (20% employers; 21% women)

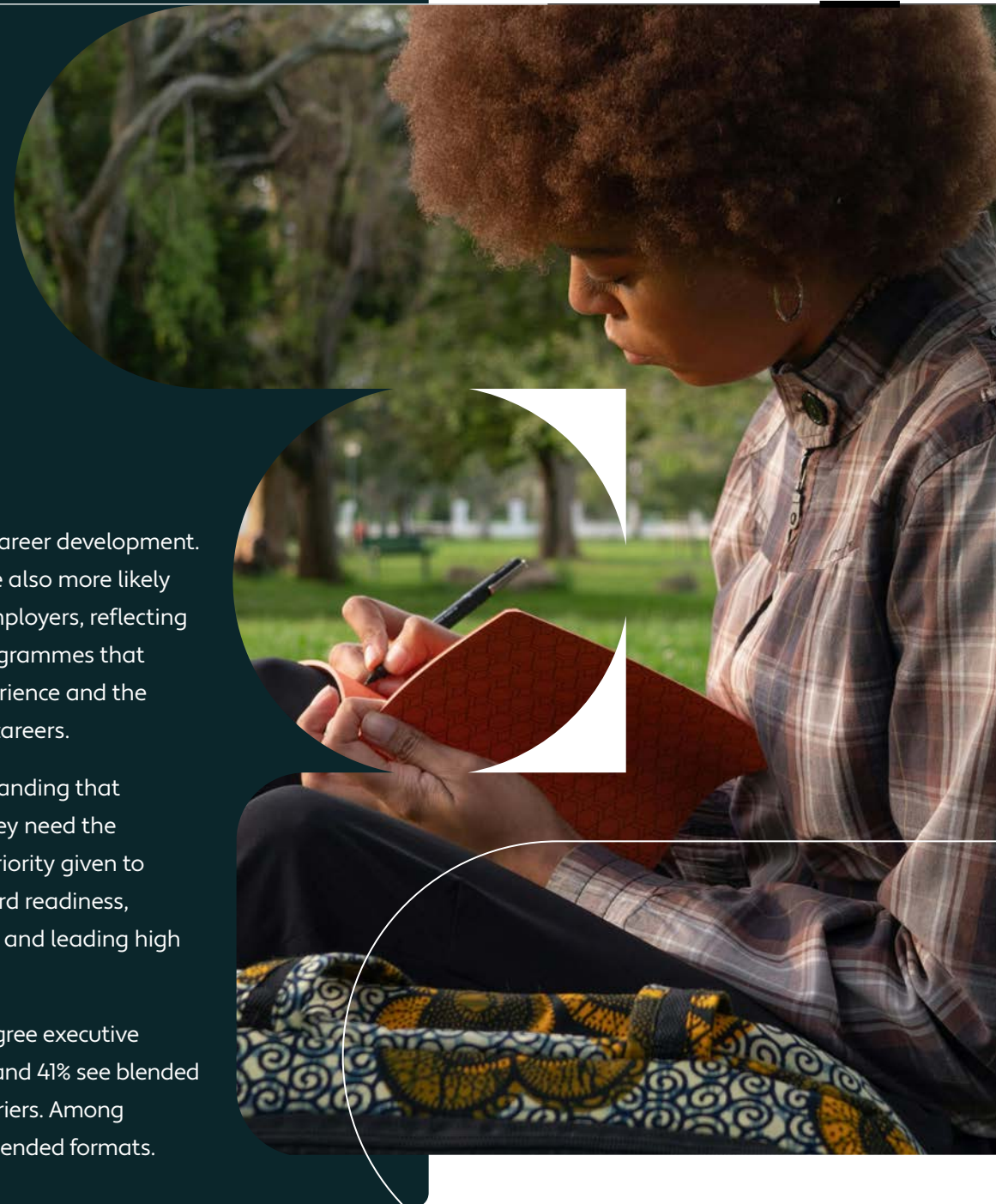
In addition to content, women also value inclusive and supportive learning environments, peer networking (particularly with other parents and caregivers) and opportunities to engage in real-world challenges, such as high-profile projects, competitions or investor pitches. For women re-entering the workforce or pivoting to new career paths, flexible, career-responsive programme design is especially important.

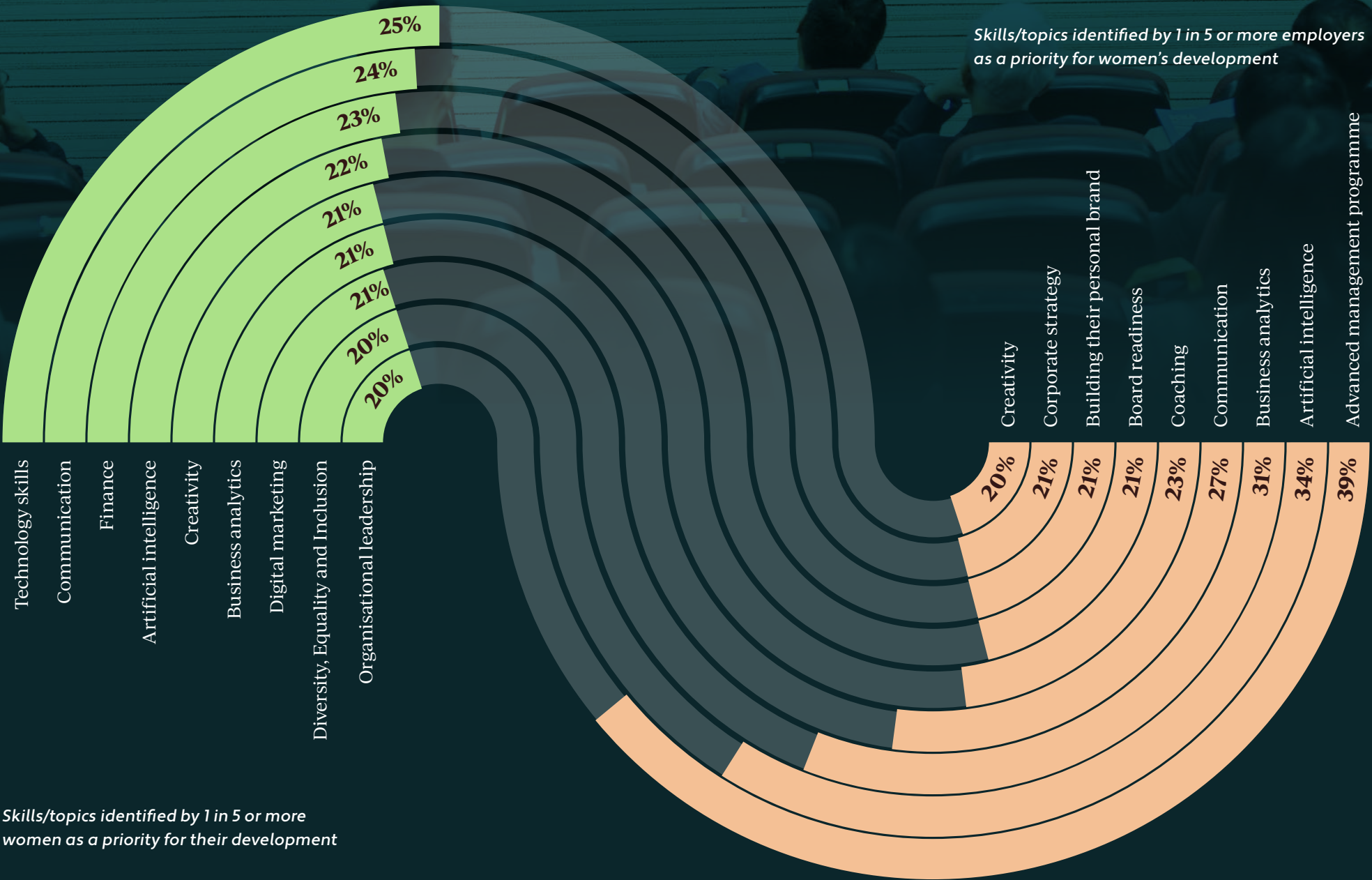
Women notably put a greater emphasis on Finance than employers do, perhaps looking for a subject understanding

perceived to be key to business success and career development. DEI, Strategic Networking and Innovation are also more likely to be priorities for women compared with employers, reflecting issues set out elsewhere in the report for programmes that support the circumstances that women experience and the need for stronger networks to support their careers.

For employers, there seems to be an understanding that to advance women in their organisations, they need the skills and support to do so, reflected in the priority given to advanced management skills, coaching, board readiness, building personal brands, corporate strategy and leading high performance teams.

Just over three-quarters (76%) of employers agree executive education needs flexible options for women, and 41% see blended learning as most effective for overcoming barriers. Among women considering future study, 34% prefer blended formats.





There's no doubt about the impact

That executive education has a role to play is something both employers and women agree upon.

81% of women and 80% of employers believe business and executive education can address workplace challenges. Return on investment is clearly demonstrated - women report increased confidence (34%), involvement in significant projects (26%), and salary increases (26%); 79% of employers see executive education increasing women's leadership readiness.

However, fewer than half of the organisations surveyed currently collect data on women's career progression. Despite this, a large majority (80%) believe their organisational culture supports gender equality in leadership.



81%

of women believe business and executive education can address workplace challenges

More than 70% of employers agree that women have historically faced discrimination in the workplace and that further action is needed to support their career advancement. However, 69% also believe their organisation is already doing enough in this area. While many recognise the broader challenges, fewer see the need for further action within their own organisations.

Employers identify three benefits of business and executive education as being particularly valuable for women in their organisations - developing leadership skills, supporting career advancement and building strong professional networks.

Among those who had completed or were currently undertaking executive or business education, 41% reported a noticeable impact on their careers, while 35% observed more subtle changes. The most frequently cited outcomes, each noted by at least a quarter of respondents, included increased confidence at work, involvement in more significant projects, salary increases and greater recognition from management. However, 15% have seen no difference, and 4% feel their contributions are now less valued.

Expectations of programme quality and impact are generally well met, with 29% of past learners saying their experience exceeded expectations and 48% saying it met them. Among current students, the corresponding figures are 21% and 53%.



Survey results confirm that employers recognise the value of executive education for women's careers:

74%

say it significantly helps
women advance their careers.

79%

say it increases women's
readiness for leadership.

75%

believe it helps women compete
equally alongside men.

What women and employers want from business schools

The challenge to business schools is to Grow Awareness-Educate-Advocate, but also Evidence. If schools can work with employers to clearly demonstrate impact of their provision, it will encourage more individuals and employers to engage, but more will also need to be done to build flexible and affordable pathways, create inclusive learning environments, build strong alumni networks and advocate for systemic change with employers.

Among women, the most important factors in selecting a provider are programme availability, provider location and programme content. Other factors include flexibility of delivery, faculty quality and cost. For employers, the most desirable factors include programme relevance, flexibility and cost-effectiveness.

There is also a clear expectation for business schools to play a more active role in advancing women's careers. Nearly 60% of employers would like to see greater efforts from schools to support women's progression. Two-thirds (67%) agree that business schools should offer different approaches for women taking executive education courses compared to men, while 79% believe schools should proactively encourage and facilitate women's participation.

There is a sense among some interviewees that business schools can, at times, be too academic and disconnected from the realities of the workplace. These comments highlight a recurring challenge for business schools: the need to balance rigorous, research-based teaching with content and approaches that are current, practical and directly relevant to the fast-changing demands of the workplace.

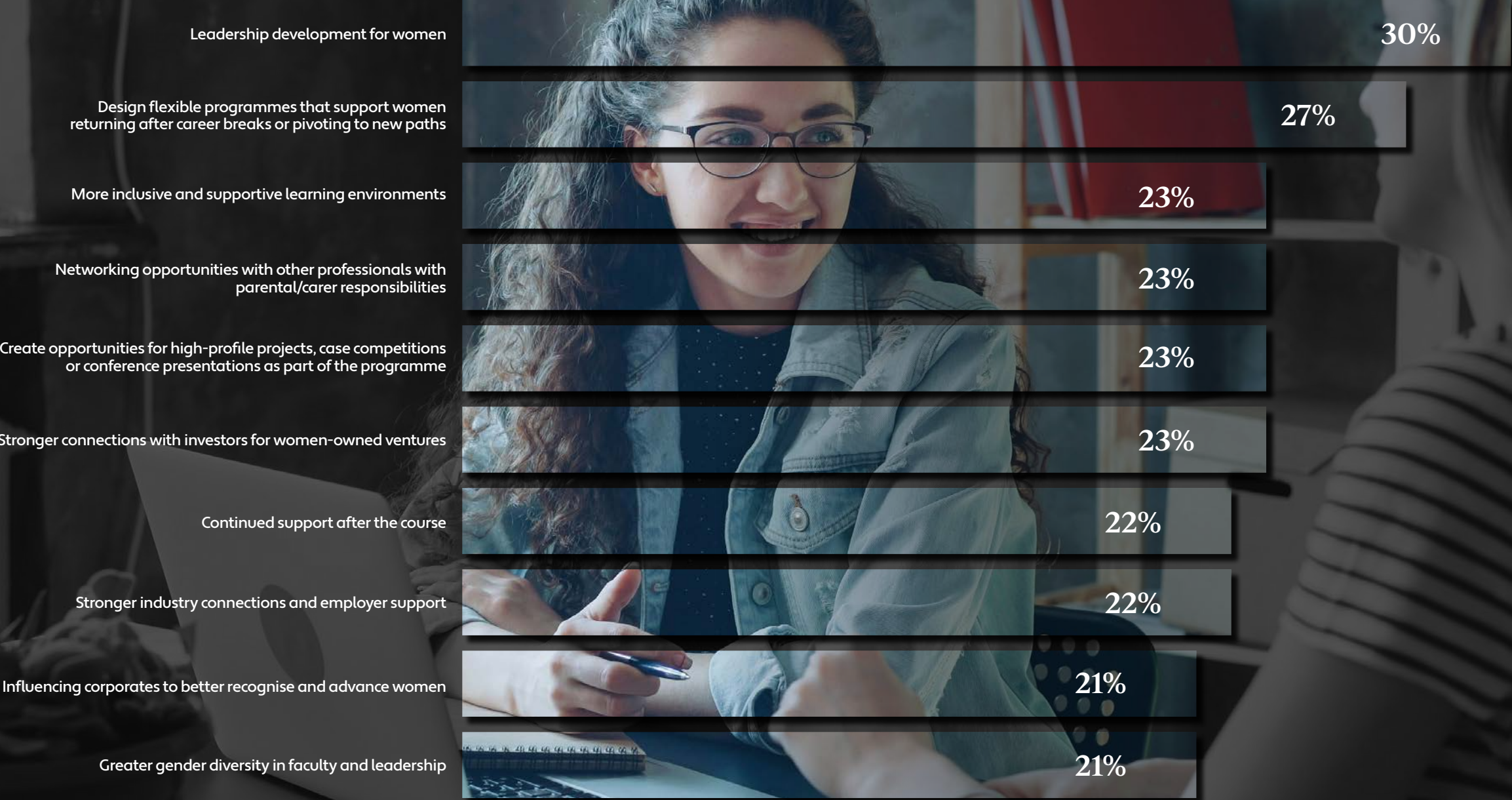
While more affordable costs are the top reason given by employers to drive greater engagement with business schools, 47% are also seeking evidence of impact of programmes. Stronger evidence would mean the ROI of programmes and their potential value for money would be clearer.



**'I never felt discriminated against,
but I did feel very lonely.'**

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Most important requirements for women from business schools





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