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## **Executive education as a tool for workforce capacity development: Evidence from Malaysian private sector employees**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the context of rapid economic change and increasing skill mismatches in Malaysia, understanding how private sector employees pursue continuing professional development has become a critical workforce development concern. This study explores the key factors motivating private-sector employees in Malaysia to enroll in executive academic programs, the benefits they expect, the skills most demanded by industry, and the learning structures and communication approaches that shape participation decisions. Data were collected using a drop-and-collect method and mail surveys, resulting in a final sample of 210 private sector employees. The findings indicate that career advancement, skill development, and networking opportunities are the primary drivers of participation. Leadership, critical thinking, problem-solving, and technical competencies such as financial management and data analysis emerge as the most sought-after skills. Respondents show a strong preference for hybrid learning formats and shorter program durations, alongside digitally mediated and personalized information channels when considering program enrollment. The findings provide practical insights for higher education providers, employers, and policymakers in designing development-oriented learning pathways that support private sector workforce capacity building and sustainable career progression.

**Keywords:** executive academic programs, workforce development, private sector employees, skills development, Malaysia.

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Organizations competing in the global marketplace must innovate, adapt, and learn continuously, making a skilled workforce indispensable. Many private companies now encourage employees to upskill; however, young Malaysians still encounter employability barriers rooted in qualification gaps and misaligned competencies. As Economy Minister Mohd Rafizi Ramli argued, the issue is less about job availability and more about a mismatch between job seekers' skills and employer needs ([The Edge Malaysia, 2023, June 7](#)). Malaysia has expanded access through accelerated school projects, repairs to dilapidated schools, and broader internet under JENDELA, while refining tertiary pathways and TVET to be demand-driven ([Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2024](#)). However, these efforts concentrate on students and the public sector, leaving private sector workers with limited structured opportunities for career-long learning. From a community development perspective, private sector employees constitute an important workforce community whose skill formation and adaptive capacity have direct implications for economic resilience and social mobility. Executive education addresses this gap through research-based curricula taught by expert faculty and designed for immediate application in practice ([Berkeley Executive Education, 2025](#)).

Executive academic programs serve working adults who seek advanced, industry-relevant learning while recognizing prior experience as part of the pathway ([Yunus, 2012](#)). They provide an alternative for professionals who missed traditional routes, updating knowledge, and solving sector-specific problems in schedules that fit evenings or weekends. Despite the clear benefits, opportunities in Malaysia remain limited for private-sector employees, even as corporate competition intensifies and professionals demand quality programs aligned with career advancement. This study examines how private-sector employees perceive executive academic offerings in Malaysian higher education institutions, what motivates participation, what benefits they expect, what skills and competencies industries require, and what learning modes and program structures they prefer. Insights are intended to guide institutions in program design and marketing while supporting the national goals for talent development.

This study addresses the persistent misalignment between workforce capabilities and industry requirements, which constrains Malaysia's move toward high-income status. The Malaysia Economic Outlook Report 2024 notes headwinds such as a high share of unskilled labor and wage stagnation ([Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2024](#)). More than one-third of employed graduates occupy semi- and low-skilled roles ([Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024a](#)), positions that rarely offer upward mobility. Employers report that hiring is feasible, but skills are mismatched and in short supply. Executive education can bridge this divide by delivering targeted and structured learning that advances specialized capabilities and leadership readiness.

Executive education is "management education for people who are in executive roles or who hope to be in such roles" ([Ballou et al., 1999, p. 340](#)). Programs commonly build strategic thinking, decision quality, and leadership impact, pairing theory with cases and simulations led by scholars and industry leaders. Continuous skill development also supports engagement and job satisfaction; employees value growth opportunities, and structured development for managerial staff correlates with higher satisfaction ([Andrew & Sofian, 2012](#); [Rutherford, 2012](#)). Well-designed executive programs help leaders communicate and implement strategies and catalyze organizational change ([Conger & Xin, 2000](#)), strengthening performance when viewed as an investment rather than a cost ([Conger & Xin, 2000](#); [Crotty & Soule, 1997](#)).

Guided by these concerns, this study asks what factors motivate Malaysian private-sector employees to pursue executive programs, what benefits they expect, which skills and competencies are most in demand in the industry, which learning modes and structures they prefer, and which marketing approaches best reach them. The objectives mirror these questions by identifying motivators, clarifying expected benefits, mapping in-demand competencies, determining preferred delivery models, and developing actionable marketing strategies for Malaysian healthcare providers.

The study focuses on private-sector employees in Malaysia and their perceptions of executive academic offerings. Using quantitative methods with SPSS and purposive sampling, the study collected data

through drop-and-collect and mail surveys to ensure relevance and reach. The findings will inform institutions, policymakers, and employers about ways to close skill gaps, strengthen program design, and support career development.

This study is significant for higher education institutions seeking to align with employer needs and working professionals' aspirations. By pinpointing motivations and preferences, providers can recalibrate curricula toward industry-relevant competencies that improve graduate outcomes and employability. Industries can use the results to target upskilling and reskilling where productivity gains are largest, while policymakers can design incentives for lifelong learning, expand financial support, and promote HEI-industry collaboration to keep programs responsive.

Key terms used in this study include executive academic program, defined as specialized, intensive non-degree learning for managers and professionals focused on practical, workplace-ready knowledge; higher education institutions, understood as entities authorized to award postsecondary qualifications (Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad (PNMB), 2006); private-sector employees, meaning workers engaged by non-governmental organizations (Lazear & Shaw, 2007); competency, conceived as measurable blends of skills, knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and behaviors that drive performance and advantage (Athey & Orth, 1999); and performance, viewed as outcomes that reflect effectiveness, efficiency, and contribution to organizational goals and marketing strategy, a plan to position offerings through informed targeting and resource allocation to achieve business objectives (Cacciolatti & Lee, 2016).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section Two reviews the literature on executive academic programs and related constructs that inform the research model of this study. Section Three explains the methodology, sampling, instruments, and analysis. Section Four presents the results and their interpretation. Section Five synthesizes the findings, offers recommendations for practice and future research, and concludes the study.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. What Is an Executive Education Program?**

In a competitive labor market, executive education functions as a targeted means of deepening managerial capability and leadership readiness. Ballou et al. (1999) define it as “management education for people who are in executive roles or who hope to be in such roles” (p. 340). The broader literature presents it as a suite of specialized programs designed for experienced managers and executives to build business acumen and strategic competence aligned with senior responsibilities in the organization. Amdam (2016) emphasizes structured initiatives that develop decision-making, leadership, and sectoral expertise, with an emphasis on experiential learning, real-world application, and professional networks. Compared with comprehensive, theory-anchored degrees such as the MBA or MSc, executive education targets mid-career needs in compressed formats, relying on case discussions, peer learning, and immediate workplace applications to produce rapid performance gains (Imperial College Business School, 2024). Historically, Conger and Xin (2000) traced the field's shift from lecture-centric delivery in the 1980s to interactive, experiential, and customized approaches under the pressures of globalization and technological change. Contemporary practice integrates cross-disciplinary content, digital platforms, coaching, and personalization to address complex organizational challenges and leader development on a large scale.

### **2.2. What Motivates Professionals to Enroll in Executive Education Programs?**

Evidence indicates that the prospect of enhanced performance and competence motivates learning, with employees attracted to new knowledge and methods that keep work engaging (Andrew & Sofian, 2012). Satisfaction increases when organizations offer robust career development tailored to managerial and professional roles (Rutherford, 2012). Executives often view enrollment as an accelerator of career growth. Rapid technological shifts create pressure to acquire industry-relevant skills, and programs that surface current

ideas for immediate application are particularly valued by students. Graduates of effective executive development report a stronger capacity to communicate and execute strategy, build alignment, and cultivate change agents across the firm (Conger & Xin, 2000). Delivery by leading academics and practitioners through classes, cases and simulations supports translation from classroom to workplace. In a knowledge-driven economy, firms increasingly treat executive education as an investment that advances individual careers and organizational outcomes (Conger & Xin, 2000; Crotty & Soule, 1997). While these benefits are well documented, the literature has paid less attention to the particular motivations of private-sector employees. This gap is addressed in this study to ensure closer alignment between program design, career aspirations, and market needs.

### **2.3. Anticipated Benefits and Support Needs for Executive Education Enrollment**

Learning that augments skills and knowledge tends to improve job performance and professional fulfillment (Andrew & Sofian, 2012). Employees are more satisfied when development pathways are well-structured, especially for managerial and professional tracks (Rutherford, 2012). Executives typically view continuous skill building as essential for competitiveness, pursuing programs for leadership growth, recognition, and stronger networks. As technology renders credentials perishable, lifelong learning becomes imperative, and demand rises, particularly among mid-career professionals seeking momentum in dynamic industries (Kumar & Kumar, 2022). Organizations encourage education to sustain talent and align competencies with their strategy (Freyn et al., 2021). To serve diverse needs, providers offer short courses for immediate utility, modular sequences that build depth, certificates that consolidate specialized areas, and executive master's or doctoral options for formal postgraduate attainment (Salah, 2020). Instruction commonly blends professorial expertise and industry practice through cases and simulations, and firms increasingly view these investments as drivers of both talent and organizational value (Conger & Xin, 2000; Crotty & Soule, 1997). However, working professionals must balance demanding roles with study, which elevates the importance of flexible formats such as hybrid or online delivery (Kumar & Kumar, 2022) and wraparound support, including mentoring and networking. Despite the wide recognition of benefits such as advancement and skill development (Conger & Xin, 2000), cognitive growth and mobility (Bulger et al., 2018), innovative behavior (Tan et al., 2023), and theory–practice integration through partnerships (Gomez et al., 2019), research has less often detailed the supports that enable successful enrollment and completion. Therefore, this study considers both the benefits participants anticipate and the support mechanisms they require to achieve their goals.

Recent empirical findings have reinforced these themes. Negm (2023), surveying 270 students in Egypt, finds that in traditional formats satisfaction hinges on self-regulated learning, perceived future financial rewards, course ease, instructor quality, and course design, while in online formats self-regulation, financial expectations, and design dominate. Tan et al. (2023), studying employees in Singapore, show that executive education strengthens creative role identity and innovative behavior, effects that deepen over six months and are amplified by transformational senior leadership. Gomez et al. (2019) demonstrate that strong academic–industry collaboration narrows the gap between theory and practice. Bulger et al. (2018) identify personal outcomes such as cognitive development and career mobility alongside practical outcomes in consulting, coaching, and policy influence.

### **2.4. Skills and Competencies Required by Industry**

Competence captures the capacity to perform independently and responsibly to agreed-upon standards, varying by person and organizational context (Mruk-Tomczak & Jerzyk, 2024). As technology and globalization reshape work, employers seek broader profiles that combine technical, conceptual, and social capabilities (Cramer, 2012), robust professional and general language proficiency (Sarkisyants et al., 2023), and workplace-honed strengths in communication, client relations, supervision, and motivation (Steed & Schwer, 2003). Executive education responds by integrating experiential and situated learning, social learning systems,



and communities of practice to build work-aligned competencies, while tri-sector collaboration among academia, industry, and government supports innovation and leadership pipelines in sectors such as manufacturing (Datta, 2018). Program relevance, demand, and placement outcomes increase when curricula reflect these realities.

Studies on specific competency demands echo this pattern. Heldal et al. (2024), interviewing professionals in 28 IT firms across nine countries, report aspirations to embed sustainability in software processes while confronting tensions between short-term finance and long-term goals and gaps in conceptual clarity, prompting investment in in-house training, university partnerships, and external programs. Mruk-Tomczak and Jerzyk (2024) conclude that future competency sets are complex, mixing soft skills and technological fluency, with adaptability, flexibility, creativity, problem solving, ethics, and strong communication, negotiation, and collaboration, especially valuable in digital and cross-cultural settings. Puteh et al. (2016), drawing on Malaysian HR interviews, identify functional, communication, leadership, and cognitive competencies as critical to organizational value. Dierk and Dover (2013) describe how programs that prompt reflection on individual and team performance gain traction across business units, while Alenezi (2023) surveyed Malaysian employees and found that specialized, analytical, and interpersonal skills are essential and that multinationals prefer customized training for junior through middle management. Goodman and Chinowsky (1997) show that restructuring intensifies learning needs in change management, technology forecasting, and workforce dynamics, making executive education a key response to these needs. Together, these studies support market-driven, tailored offerings that track industry shifts and equip professionals for durable career success (Farris et al., 2003). Notably, quantitative evidence on these issues remains limited in Malaysia, especially in the context of executive education, underscoring the need for the present inquiry.

## **2.5. Modes of Study and Structure of Executive Education Programs**

Delivery models have diversified in response to learner needs. Early research concentrated on content and objectives, while subsequent work has probed method effectiveness. Bayntun-Lees and Schofield (2024) found that virtual environments can simulate realistic contexts for leadership practice, while Jacobson et al. (2017) showed that project-based learning integrates well with online delivery and links competencies to leadership modules. Conger and Xin (2000) document the long arc from lectures to interactive, applied designs. Amdam (2016) differentiates executive education from traditional degrees by its practical, strategy-oriented, and leadership-focused nature. Rasmussen and Callan (2016) argue for alignment with practitioner needs and public-management practices, favoring action learning and real-world faculty experience. Dover et al. (2018) illustrated that client-centric customization creates measurable value, and Amdam's comparative work underscores authenticity, reflection, and collaboration within ADDIE-informed pedagogy. Güden et al. (2024) find that advanced apprenticeships can address tourism skill shortages through workplace-based learning, and industry respondents prize practical elements.

In practice, programs run in-person, online, or hybrid, are offered as open enrollment or organization-specific customization (Kumar & Kumar, 2022). Intensifying competition among business schools has accelerated marketization, recasting students as consumers and centering their satisfaction as a strategic metric (Wong & Chapman, 2023). Preferences vary: some professionals choose fully online formats for flexibility, while others favor balanced hybrid models or traditional classrooms for richer interaction. Providers must pair industry-relevant curricula with accessible formats that accommodate demanding schedules (Van Deuren & Lhaden, 2017). Duration also matters. Executives often prefer longer arcs that allow depth without derailing the work. The MIT Executive MBA spans 20 months to balance rigor and application and healthcare executives' preference for 18–24 months for deeper engagement and manageable balance. Expectations in Malaysia remain underexplored, making local evidence on duration preferences a priority. Contemporary practice also emphasizes practitioner-led instruction and interactive cases. UM LEAD's Purposeful & Principled Leadership Programme blends Malaysian and international practitioner perspectives with discussions, evidence-based insights, and casework to build strategic thinking and decision quality (UM Lead,

2024). The International Institute of Management emphasizes seminars and experiential workshops with coaching and mentorship to move beyond traditional teaching (International Institute of Management, 2025). These trajectories point toward flexible, practitioner-taught, and interaction-rich design. The current study examined how Malaysian professionals weigh live online, classroom-based, and hands-on modalities.

## 2.6. Effective Marketing Strategies for Executive Education Programs

Universities in Malaysia are increasingly deploying executive diplomas to serve working learners, but effective outreach requires approaches that are tuned to professional decision cycles and funding realities. The literature suggests that tailored value propositions emphasizing advancement, skill development, and networking are central, especially when targeting international markets, where expectations vary across regions (Geissler, 2011; Rogers & Duening, 2013). Social platforms are pivotal for awareness, engagement, and relationship building. Wright (2015) notes their role in sustaining ties with current and prospective students, while Cordero and Lahuerta (2020) describe how Twitter's Cognitive Flexibility Hypertext environments encourage deeper interaction with content. Barus (2023) characterizes the shift from one-way messaging to interactive exchanges that can sway choice, and shares insights from international courses that amplify institutional reputation and reach.

Empirical studies specify how institutions compete for resources. Riccomini et al. (2024) report that Brazilian HEIs tailor marketing innovations to market needs, use technology to attract students, analyze dropout drivers, and rely on social media and internal events to engage stakeholders, with strategies calibrated to mission. Stukalina (2019) documents a sector-wide move from reactive to proactive marketing as massification, internationalization, modernization, and diversification intensify, prompting brand-building and targeted positioning with clear metrics. Geissler (2011) finds that EMBA alumni prioritize advancement, compensation gains, expanded opportunities, confidence, improved business acumen, faculty access, and networks. Helmig et al. (2010) show that accreditation is not the decisive enrollment criterion, suggesting schools should highlight outcomes and alumni trajectories. Lewis and Schoell (1990) emphasize short duration, networking, and word-of-mouth as influential considerations. Building on these insights, the present study examines which channels, messages, and proofs of value resonate most with Malaysian private workers and how providers can adapt strategies to local preferences. See Figure 1

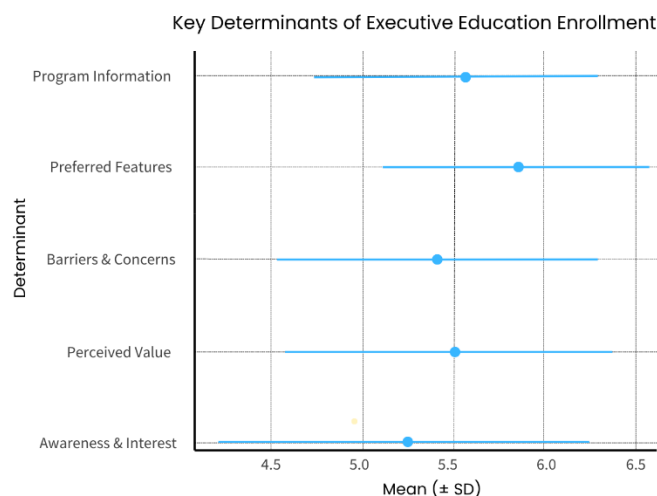


Figure 1. Key Determinants of Enrollment

The literature positions executive education as a practice-oriented, career-accelerating complement to traditional degrees, increasingly delivered through flexible, technology-enabled formats and justified as an

organizational investment. Enrollment is driven by the pursuit of current, applicable skills, strategic capability, and credible networks, while programs that align with industry demands and provide supportive structures show stronger impact (Figure 1). Competency needs are broadening toward blended technical and soft skills, and marketing effectiveness rests on tailored value propositions, social engagement, and demonstrable outcomes. Evidence specific to Malaysian private-sector professionals remains limited, particularly on motivations, preferred formats and durations, and support needs. The next section outlines the methodology adopted to address these gaps.

### **3. METHOD**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

The study employs a descriptive, quantitative design using a survey as the primary method, an approach well established for capturing patterns across large respondent pools and supporting wider generalization (Babbie, 2020; Hair et al., 2014). Surveys are suitable for examining behaviours, beliefs, attitudes, opinions, expectations, and self-perceptions in a structured and scalable way (Neuman, 2014). A self-administered questionnaire was implemented at a single point in time to ensure efficiency, consistency, and comparability across responses.

#### **3.2. Sampling Design**

The unit of analysis is the individual, specifically Malaysian private sector employees spanning senior managers, mid-level managers, executives, administrative staff, and support personnel (Yurdusev, 1993). The Labour Force Survey reported approximately 16.56 million employed persons in April 2024, with 75.1 percent or about 12.44 million in the private sector, underscoring the relevance of this population for understanding executive education perceptions (HR Asia, 2024). A target sample of 200 respondents was set, consistent with guidance that such a size is adequate for descriptive surveys and enables meaningful variability while maintaining feasibility (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich participants aligned with the study's focus (Palinkas et al., 2015; Parahoo, 2014). Inclusion criteria concentrated on employees in medium and large enterprises to reflect environments where upskilling and structured development are more prevalent, while public sector workers and employees from small enterprises were excluded. Prior applications of purposive sampling in Malaysian professional development contexts support its suitability for this inquiry (Etikan, 2016).

#### **3.3. Data Collection**

Data were gathered from medium and large firms across sectors that contribute significantly to Malaysia's economy and emphasize professional development, including finance, information technology, manufacturing, retail, telecommunications, education, real estate, construction, and logistics. Two complementary procedures were used. The drop-and-collect approach enabled direct distribution and scheduled retrieval of questionnaires to improve completeness and response quality. The mail survey extended geographical reach and reduced logistical barriers. Company representatives facilitated distribution after agreeing to participate. Follow-up reminders were issued at one, two, and three weeks to bolster returns. A filter question identified organizational type, and respondents indicating public sector employment were screened out to preserve focus on private sector perspectives.

#### **3.4. Research Instrument**

The questionnaire comprised three parts. The first captured key determinants of participation in executive education, including motivation, awareness, interest, perceived value, barriers, and preferred features, measured on a 7-point Likert scale for clarity and analytic suitability (Robinson, 2018). The second elicited open-ended reflections on anticipated benefits, in-demand skills, preferred program types, and effective



marketing approaches. The third gathered demographics to contextualize responses. All items were developed to align tightly with the study objectives.

### **3.5. Data Analysis**

Descriptive quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS Version 27 to summarize distributions, reveal patterns, and support clear interpretation of respondent characteristics and perceptions (Jacob, 1984; Pallant, 2020; Trochim, 2006). Descriptive statistics provided the foundation for understanding motivations, preferences, and constraints among Malaysian private sector employees and for drawing inferences consistent with the research questions (Hair et al., 2010).

## **4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1. Result**

#### **4.1.1. Response Rate**

Data collection took place from 19 September 2024 to 10 November 2024 using drop-and-collect and mail surveys. As summarized in Table 4.1, 300 questionnaires were distributed and 221 were returned. After screening, 210 were usable, which yields a valid response rate of 70 percent. Eleven questionnaires were discarded for substantial missing data. A minimum of 30 percent acceptable for survey research, so the achieved rate substantially exceeds common benchmarks and supports the adequacy of the dataset for analysis.

#### **4.1.2. Demographic Profile**

The sample comprises 210 private-sector employees, 59.5 percent female and 40.5 percent male. The modal age band is 28 to 37 years at 48.1 percent, followed by 38 to 47 at 25.7 percent, with lower representation at the youngest and oldest bands. Most respondents are married at 67.6 percent, with 31.9 percent single. The ethnic distribution is predominantly Malay at 81.9 percent, with Chinese at 9.5 percent, Indian at 7.1 percent, and others at 1.4 percent. Educational attainment is led by Bachelor's degree at 41.0 percent, followed by Diploma at 24.8 percent, SPM at 20.5 percent, STPM at 4.8 percent, and Master's degree at 9.0 percent. Geographically, the largest clusters come from Selangor and Kedah, each at 25.7 percent, followed by Perak at 12.4 percent, with the remainder distributed across other states in smaller shares. In organizational roles, Executives and Officers constitute 41.9 percent, administrative staff 26.7 percent, supervisors and team leaders 12.4 percent, managers 5.7 percent, senior managers 1.9 percent, and business owners 0.5 percent, with others at 11.0 percent. Tenure skews toward early and mid-career, with 31.4 percent in the one to five year range and 31.4 percent in the six to ten year range, followed by 19.0 percent in ten to fifteen years, 10.5 percent over fifteen years, and 7.6 percent under one year. Sector representation is highest in finance and banking at 31.0 percent and retail and consumer goods at 13.8 percent, with smaller proportions across other industries. Incomes concentrate between RM 2,500 and RM 4,499 at 25.7 percent, with only 3.3 percent at RM 7,000 and above, suggesting that executive programs will likely draw interest from mid-income professionals seeking advancement.

#### **4.1.3. Data Screening**

All returned questionnaires were coded, entered, and reviewed in SPSS. Following established guidelines, cases with more than 20 percent missing responses were excluded, which eliminated 11 returns and left 210 cases for analysis (Hair et al., 2010; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). SPSS descriptive checks identified no missing data among the retained cases, as illustrated in Table 4.3 for the awareness and interest construct. The dataset is therefore complete and suitable for descriptive analysis.

#### **4.1.4. Statistical Analysis**

SPSS version 27.0 produced frequency distributions, histograms, and descriptive statistics for the constructs central to the study. The narrative below synthesizes the key findings.

The analysis of motivations to pursue executive academic programs indicates robust awareness and interest. Awareness and interest register a mean of 5.24 with a standard deviation of 1.004, which implies that most respondents know about executive offerings and show intent to enroll, with moderate dispersion that likely reflects differences in exposure by industry and experience. Perceived value is high, with a mean of 5.50 and a standard deviation of 0.933. Respondents widely believe executive education improves promotion prospects, enhances competencies, and keeps them current with industry practices. A small share reports lower perceived value near the mid-scale. Their reservations likely relate to cost, time, limited employer support, or uncertainty about program relevance, which signals room for targeted communication and support to broaden appeal.

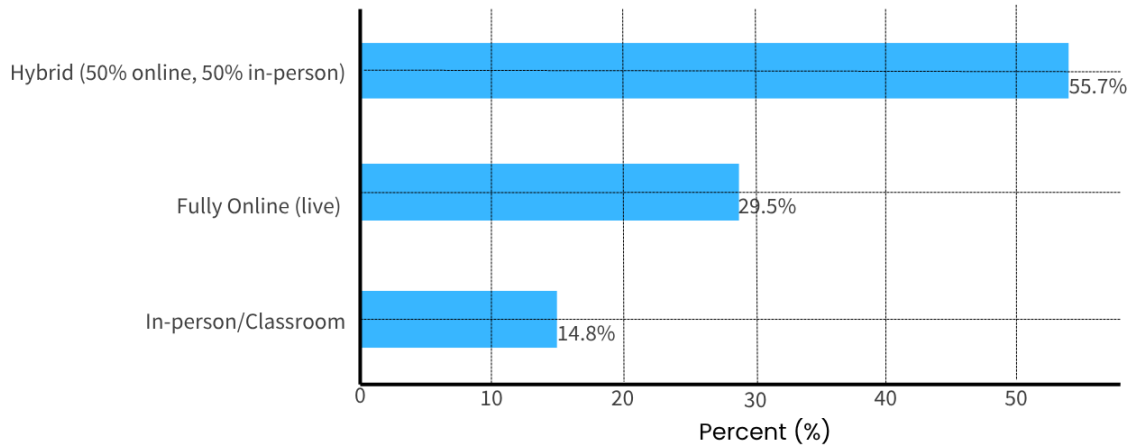
Perceived barriers are also salient. The barriers and concerns construct records a mean of 5.45 with a standard deviation of 0.936. Respondents emphasize the difficulty of balancing work obligations, family responsibilities, and coursework, and they stress the importance of finding programs aligned with career goals and sector needs. Preferences for program features are clear and consistent. The preferred features construct has a mean of 5.84 with a standard deviation of 0.733, pointing to strong convergence around flexible scheduling, industry-relevant curricula, hybrid or online options, credible recognition, and financial support mechanisms such as aid or sponsorship.

Respondents place significant importance on program information before committing to enroll. The program information construct has a mean of 5.53 with a standard deviation of 0.804, indicating appetite for detailed, transparent materials. Institutions that use digital outreach, social media engagement, and interactive content, together with occasional promotions, are better positioned to meet this demand and convert interest into applications.

Beyond construct-level perceptions, the study examined expected benefits and supports. Regarding career outcomes, 35.2 percent prioritize promotion prospects and 31.4 percent emphasize skill development. Another 23.8 percent value the potential for role or industry transitions, while 9.0 percent focus on recognition or credibility. These responses show that participants weight tangible, near-term outcomes more heavily than symbolic benefits. On financial incentives, 65.2 percent report no employer support, and 34.8 percent do receive some form of tuition reimbursement or scholarship. When asked what type of support would matter, 51.9 percent prefer tuition reimbursement or scholarships, 18.1 percent prefer paid study leave, and 14.3 percent prefer zero-interest loans. This distribution helps explain participation barriers and underscores how funding policy can shape enrollment behavior.

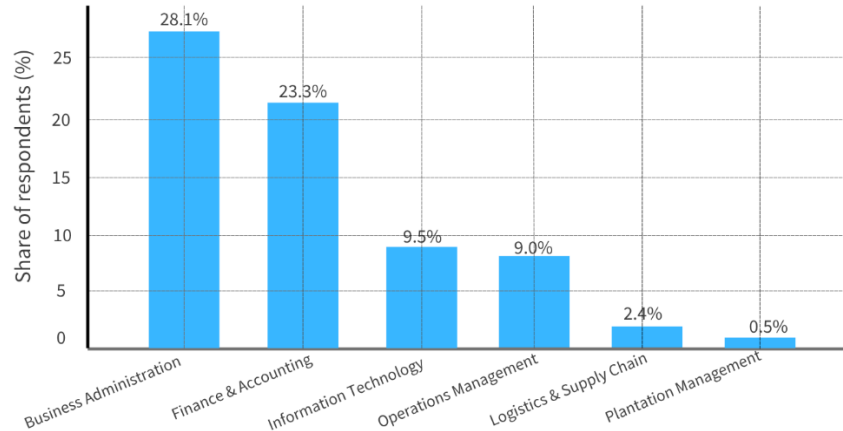
Non-financial supports are also decisive. Flexible working arrangements are by far the most desired support at 83.8 percent, while access to company resources and mentorship trail at 11.0 percent and 4.8 percent. The signal for higher education institutions and employers is unambiguous. Reducing scheduling friction through flexible timetables and remote options will likely raise completion odds and reduce stress among working learners.

Findings on preferred learning modes and structure reflect a strong tilt toward flexibility (Figure 2). A hybrid format at an even split between in-person and online is the top choice at 55.7 percent, fully online ranks second at 29.5 percent, and fully in-person attracts 14.8 percent. Regarding program duration, 47.1 percent prefer six to twelve months, and 27.1 percent prefer less than six months. Only 3.8 percent favor two to three years. These preferences show demand for compact formats that preserve academic rigor while respecting the constraints of full-time employment. In delivery methods, live online classes that provide real-time interaction are preferred by 47.1 percent, followed by in-person classroom sessions at 22.9 percent. Self-paced online modules and hands-on workshops draw smaller shares, at 14.8 percent and 12.4 percent. The emphasis on real-time engagement suggests that synchronous interaction, even online, is valued for accountability, feedback, and peer learning. See [Figure 2](#).



**Figure 2. Preferred Delivery Format**

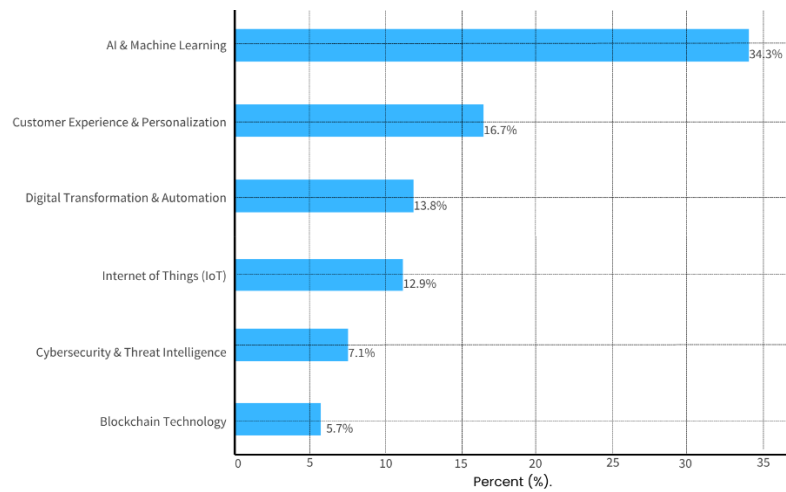
The study also examined what drives enrollment decisions. Financial support or incentives from employers are identified as the most important factor at 60 percent. Personal interest and professional goals account for 30 percent. Support from family at 6.2 percent, employer requirements at 2.9 percent, and other factors at 1.0 percent play minor roles. The implication is that cost sharing and sponsorships are central levers for institutions and firms that want to expand participation.



**Figure 3. Preferred Field of Study**

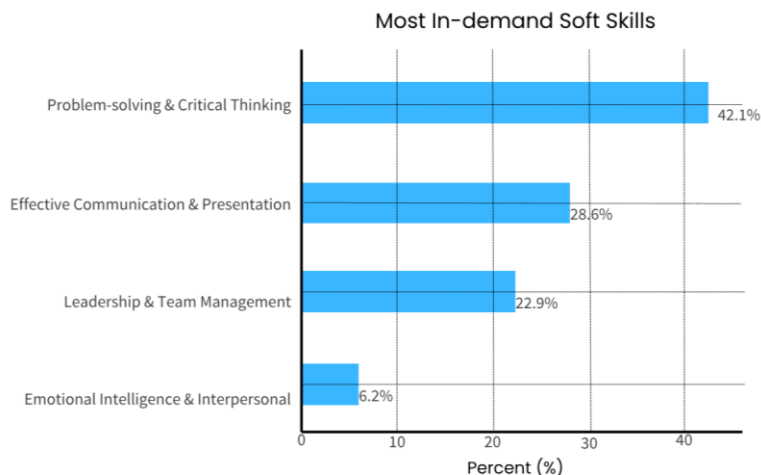
With respect to in-demand competencies, respondents favor fields of study that align with management and finance (Figure 3). Business Administration is selected by 28.1 percent and Finance and Accounting by 23.3 percent, followed by Information Technology at 9.5 percent and Operations Management at 9.0 percent. Plantation Management and Logistics and Supply Chain Management draw very limited interest, which suggests that program portfolios should emphasize broadly applicable domains while maintaining selective offerings for niche interests. On expected skills, 36.7 percent emphasize leadership and management, 21.4 percent stress advanced problem solving and analytics, and 15.2 percent prioritize strategic planning and decision making. Project management and industry-focused technical skills attract smaller proportions. These

priorities indicate that executive programs should concentrate on leadership, analytical capability, and strategy to match participant goals, while allowing targeted technical tracks for specific sectors.



**Figure 4. Emerging Technical Skills**

Technical skills in highest demand reinforce these priorities (Figure 4). Data analysis and statistics lead at 31.0 percent, with financial management at 16.7 percent and project management at 10.5 percent. Digital content creation and supply chain optimization rank low, which likely reflects narrower role relevance. Emerging technical needs center on artificial intelligence and machine learning at 34.3 percent, customer experience management and personalization at 16.7 percent, digital transformation and automation at 13.8 percent, and the Internet of Things at 12.9 percent. Blockchain at 5.7 percent and cybersecurity at 7.1 percent are less prominent but remain pertinent for select roles.

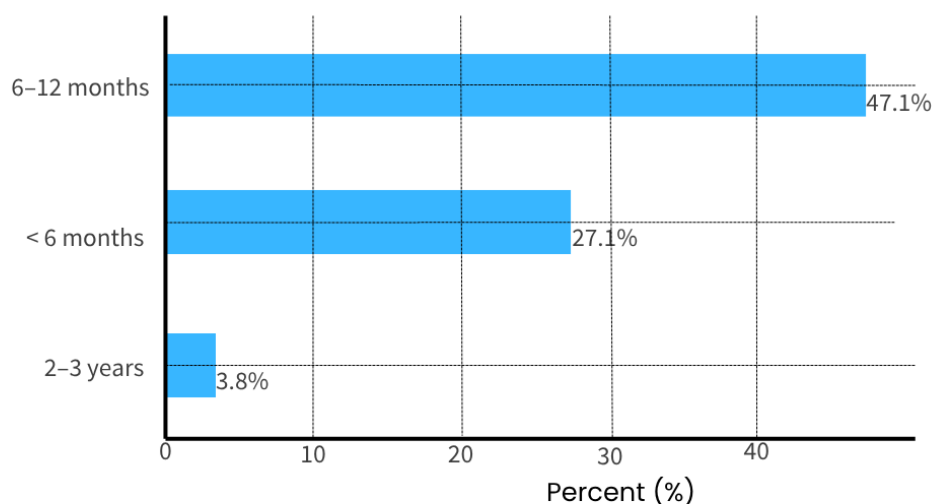


**Figure 5. Most In-Demand Soft Skills**

Soft skills are led by problem solving and critical thinking at 42.1 percent, effective communication and presentation at 28.6 percent, and leadership and team management at 22.9 percent, with emotional

intelligence and interpersonal skills at 6.2 percent (Figure 5). The pattern across skills suggests that programs should anchor curricula in analytics, finance, and projects, overlayed with leadership, communication, and strategic thinking, while offering flexible modules in AI, CX, IoT, and automation.

Marketing-related findings point to an increasingly digital pathway to enrollment. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram, are the preferred channels at 59 percent. Official websites attract 13.3 percent, and direct mail 9.5 percent. Print media and broadcast channels are least favored. In marketing content, the most important information is detailed course structure and curriculum at 39 percent, followed by program duration and flexibility at 25.2 percent, and career opportunities after completion at 20 percent. Tuition fees and financial aid at 12.9 percent and reputation or accreditation at 2.9 percent matter to smaller segments. Prospective students therefore want substance about what they will learn and how they will manage the time commitment, together with evidence of career outcomes. In preferred marketing approaches, engaging social content at 27.1 percent and one-to-one consultations with program advisors at 26.2 percent are most effective, with targeted email, online Q and A, and webinars occupying a middle tier, and education fairs less influential. This combination of public engagement and personalized guidance appears best suited to move candidates from awareness to application.



**Figure 6. Preferred Program Duration**

Enrollment timing provides additional context (Figure 6). The largest share, 39.5 percent, has no immediate plans to enroll, which points to barriers or competing priorities that institutions will need to address. Short-term intent is substantial, with 29.5 percent planning to enroll within six months. Intent diminishes as the horizon extends, with 18.1 percent within one year and 12.9 percent within two years. These figures suggest that timely outreach, flexible schedules, and visible funding options could convert near-term interest while gradually reducing hesitancy among those who defer.

The analysis shows a respondent group that is well aware of executive education and perceives high value, while simultaneously reporting notable barriers that revolve around time, flexibility, and funding. Preferences concentrate on hybrid formats, live online interaction, and compact durations of six to twelve months. Leadership, analytics, and strategy emerge as core skill priorities, with growing interest in AI and customer experience among emerging technical fields and strong emphasis on problem solving, communication, and team leadership among soft skills. Marketing effectiveness rests on social platforms, detailed curriculum information, demonstrable flexibility, and personalized advising. Financial sponsorship and flexible work arrangements appear to be the strongest levers for enrollment. These findings frame the implications, limitations, and recommendations that are discussed in the next section.



## **4.2. Discussion**

### **4.2.1. Recapitulation of the Study**

The study examined factors shaping demand for executive academic programs among Malaysian private-sector employees. It identified motivations, expected benefits, industry-relevant skills and competencies, preferred modes and program structures, and effective marketing strategies. Program information emerged as the strongest driver of interest, underscoring the need for clear, detailed, and accessible materials. Employees prioritize tangible outcomes such as promotions, skill enhancement, and mobility across roles or industries. Most organizations do not provide funding, yet tuition reimbursement or scholarships are the most desired incentives, followed by paid study leave and zero-interest loans. Flexible work arrangements are the most valued non-financial support, particularly reduced hours and remote work options. In delivery, respondents favor a 50–50 hybrid format, live online classes with real-time interaction, and concise program durations of six to twelve months. Business Administration and Finance and Accounting are the preferred fields of study; leadership, advanced problem solving, and analytics are the top skill priorities. Data analysis and statistics, financial management, and project management dominate technical needs, while AI and machine learning and customer experience management are key emerging areas. Problem solving, critical thinking, communication, and team leadership lead among soft skills. Marketing insights show a strong preference for Executive Master's programs, digital outreach via Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram, and content that explains curriculum, duration, flexibility, and career outcomes. Despite strong interest, many have no immediate plans to enroll, implying barriers related to cost, time, or competing obligations.

### **4.2.2. Discussion of the Findings**

Awareness and interest are high, reflecting the ascendance of executive education as a strategic investment in leadership capability, specialized knowledge, and professional networks that accelerate advancement and organizational impact. Perceived value is likewise strong and aligns with Malaysia's emphasis on upskilling for a future-ready workforce, with executive programs functioning as channels for reskilling and advancement in a competitive, fast-changing economy ([Human Resource Development Corporation, 2023](#)). Salient barriers remain, particularly workload, work-life balance, and fit with career goals. Anxiety about skill redundancy also appears, amplifying the need for flexible, industry-relevant formats that sustain employability in a shifting environment ([Disprz, 2024](#)).

Preferred features coalesce around flexibility, relevance, credible recognition, and financing. The financial dimension is pivotal: scholarship mechanisms, sponsorships, and employer co-funding meaningfully reduce friction. Malaysia offers aid primarily for traditional learners, leaving a gap for working adults in executive tracks ([MyGOV, 2023](#)). Closing that gap with targeted schemes and employer partnerships would expand access. Transparent program information is decisive and should be delivered through dynamic digital channels. With internet penetration at 96.4 percent of households and mobile broadband the dominant access mode, digital engagement is indispensable for reach and conversion ([Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024b](#)).

The benefits and supports profile confirms that promotion prospects and skill deepening drive demand, consistent with national human capital goals set in the Twelfth Malaysia Plan ([Economic Planning Unit, 2021](#)). Where employers cannot extend full sponsorship, partial subsidies and access to cost-effective learning tools still ease participation and improve retention and performance ([Morhan, 2023](#)). Tuition reimbursement remains the preferred instrument, while paid study leave, as defined by the ILO framework, is highly valued for enabling focus without income loss ([UNESCO, 2021](#)). Corporate exemplars such as Deloitte illustrate how structured support for advanced degrees and certifications aligns workforce development with firm strategy ([Deloitte, 2025](#)).

Support preferences concentrate on flexible working arrangements, reflecting the intensity and variability of private-sector schedules relative to the public sector ([A Job Thing, 2025](#)). FWAs correlate with retention and productivity and facilitate participation in development initiatives; Malaysian employers

adopting flexible policies show how professional learning can proceed without degrading performance (Microsoft, 2025).

Modes and structures that succeed are hybrid, compact, and interactive. Hybrid learning suits full-time professionals and blends accessibility with engagement, a shift accelerated by pandemic-era adoption (Jeevita, 2024). Evidence links hybrid formats to improved outcomes and customizable experiences for adult learners navigating rapid industry change. Preferences for six to twelve month durations mirror global trends toward time-efficient, career-aligned study. Malaysian institutions already reflect this demand with weekend or evening schedules and fully online executive options that complete in about a year, such as UTM's Professional Master in Construction Project Management and OUM's EMBA (Open University Malaysia, 2025; Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2022). Live online delivery with real-time interaction is especially attractive, supported by policy instruments like APEL and ODL that expand flexible pathways. In a tight labor market with skill gaps, synchronous online formats combine immediacy, accountability, and scale (Free Malaysia Today, 2025).

Competency patterns align with national blueprints. Leadership and analytical thinking map directly to the Malaysia Education Blueprint's emphasis on higher-order skills and to the Twelfth Plan's call for future-ready talent (Economic Planning Unit, 2021; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The prominence of analytics and finance reflects policy signals favoring data-driven management and financial literacy for a knowledge economy, echoed in TalentCorp's prioritization of digital and financial competencies (Economic Planning Unit, 2021; TalentCorp Malaysia, 2023). Emerging needs in AI and machine learning and in customer experience are consistent with digital transformation priorities and with evidence that personalization and CX capabilities drive loyalty and growth in Malaysian markets (Oracle, 2025). These findings argue for curricula that anchor in analytics, finance, and projects, overlaid with leadership, communication, and strategy, and augmented by modular upskilling in AI, automation, IoT, and CX.

Marketing implications are clear. Executive Master's programs resonate with degree-holders seeking mobility, while bachelor-level executive tracks can serve experienced professionals without prior degrees (Graduate Management Admission Council, 2024; New America, 2022). Social media is the primary discovery and engagement channel, with direct mail retaining niche value for tangible reinforcement and recall (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012). Prospects want specificity about curriculum, duration, flexibility, and outcomes, which suggests showcasing syllabi, assessment modes, time commitments, and alumni trajectories (Prøitz, 2023). High-touch tactics matter: one-to-one advising and targeted email nurture conversion, while strategic, high-quality social content measurably influences decisions in Malaysian HEIs (Sherief et al., 2024). Enrollment intent clusters in the short term for a sizable minority but is deferred by finances, family, and workload, mirroring barriers found among adult distance learners. Persistent, personalized communication and clear value propositions on flexible formats and funding can move prospects from interest to action (Wilkins & Huisman, 2019).

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study examines how higher education institutions, employers, and policymakers can more effectively support workforce development initiatives through executive education by understanding participation motivations, support needs, preferred learning structures, and trusted communication channels among private sector employees. The findings show that career advancement, competency enhancement, and staying current with industry practices are central to participation decisions. Financial support is highly valued, including tuition reimbursement, paid study leave, and interest-free study loans, while flexible working arrangements are viewed as essential to successful engagement. In format and structure, respondents prefer hybrid delivery that blends in-person and online learning, with concise program lengths of 6 to 12 months to balance rigor with demanding schedules. Business Administration, Finance, and Accounting are the most sought-after fields, reflecting organizational demand for managerial and financial expertise.

Effective promotion requires a targeted, market-driven approach that pairs high-quality digital outreach with complementary traditional methods such as direct mail. Prospective students want clear, detailed information about curriculum, time commitments, flexibility, and career outcomes, delivered through channels they use daily and reinforced with personalized guidance. Taken together, these insights provide a practical roadmap for institutions to design relevant offerings, lower access barriers through funding and workplace flexibility, and communicate with precision. By aligning programs and messaging with the needs of working professionals, Malaysian higher education providers can improve engagement, strengthen competitiveness, and expand participation in executive education.

### **Ethical Approval**

Not Applicable

### **Informed Consent Statement**

Not Applicable

### **Authors' Contributions**

FA contributed to the conceptualization of the study, formulation of research objectives, and development of the research framework. He also played a key role in data collection and the interpretation of findings related to executive academic program demand among private sector employees. HH was responsible for designing the research methodology, including survey instruments and sampling techniques. She conducted the main data analysis and drafted the manuscript, particularly the sections on results, discussion, and practical implications for higher education institutions. RO provided critical review and validation of the research findings, contributed to the discussion on marketing strategies and program design, and supported the final revision of the manuscript to ensure clarity, coherence, and academic rigor. RBI contributed to the theoretical review and analysis of industry-relevant skills and competency demands. He also assisted in refining the discussion and aligning the findings with current trends in executive education and workforce development.

### **Disclosure statement**

Throughout the research process and writing of this journal article, the research team affirms that none of the researchers had any personal interest in the research, data collection, data analysis, or publication. This study was conducted to ensure that the journal article produced by the research team would have an impact, particularly on the management of sustainable tourism, with the goal of increasing local revenue from the tourism sector and improving the welfare of the surrounding community.

### **Data Availability Statement**

The primary data in this study is sourced from the direct results of the research, while the secondary data is sourced from several research publications. If any researcher wishes to conduct further research on the same topic, the researcher is willing to share the data.

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